

CENTENARY OF THE FOUNDATION OF SAINT DOMINIC'S PARISH

Washington, D. C.

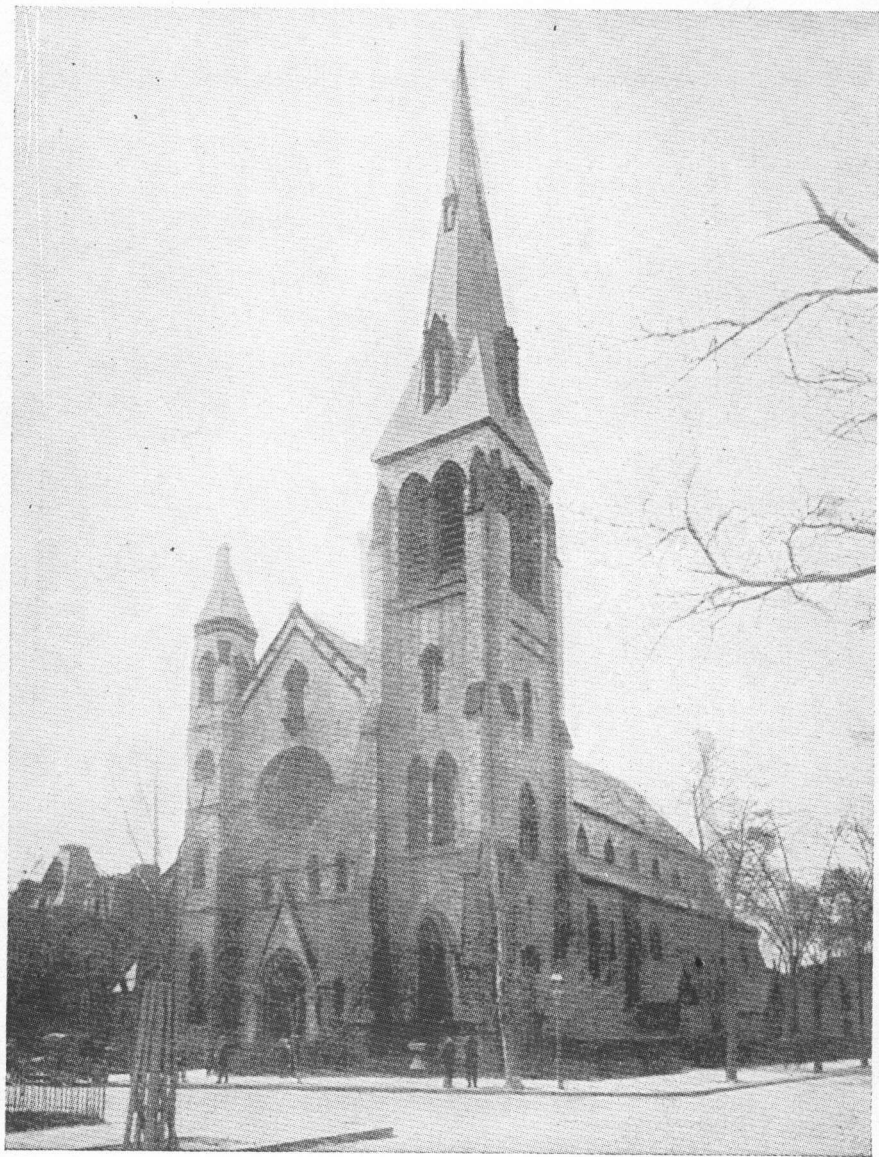
1852 - 1952



T. DOMINIC'S PARISH, Washington, D. C., observed the centenary of its foundation with a three-day celebration on November 9, 10, and 11. On Sunday, November 9, His Excellency, the Most Reverend Patrick A. O'Boyle, D.D., Archbishop of Washington, presided at a Solemn Pontifical Mass of thanksgiving celebrated by His Excellency, the Most Reverend Edward C. Daly, O.P., S.T.M., Bishop of Des Moines. The centennial sermon was preached by the Reverend Ignatius Smith, O.P., Dean of the School of Philosophy of the Catholic University of America.

On Monday, November 10, His Excellency, the Most Reverend John M. McNamara, D.D., Auxiliary Bishop of Washington, celebrated a Solemn Pontifical Mass for the parishioners of St. Dominic's, during which the Right Reverend Monsignor Edward P. McAdams, Pastor of St. Joseph's Church, Washington, delivered the sermon. A Solemn Mass for the children of the parish was offered on Tuesday, November 11, by the Franciscan Fathers of Holy Name College, Washington. The preacher at Tuesday's ceremonies was the Reverend Alfred F. Kienle, S.J., Pastor of St. Aloysius' Church, Washington. On all three days the Masses were sung by the theological students of the Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D. C. The centenary celebration drew a large representation of Dominicans from St. Joseph's and St. Albert's Provinces, many of whom had served at St. Dominic's in former years. Also present for the festivities was a great number of Dominican Fathers who are sons of St. Dominic's Parish, as well as a large congregation of present and former parishioners.

During its hundred years of life, St. Dominic's parish has had a glorious history. St. Dominic's was founded in 1852, when the Dominican Provincial, the Very Rev. Matthew A. O'Brien, O.P., sent Rev. George A. J. Wilson, O.P., to organize the parish. Earlier in the year, Archbishop Kenrick of Baltimore, who had come to know the work of the Dominicans during the early years of his priestly life in Kentucky, invited them to make a permanent foundation in his See. While awaiting the official documents from Rome, the residents of southwestern Washington



ST. DOMINIC'S CHURCH, WASHINGTON, D. C.

sent a plea to the Archbishop to establish a Church in their section of the city. Southwest Washington was then known as "The Island" because it was completely bounded by water in those days; the old Washington Canal ran its course along what is now Constitution Avenue, connecting the Potomac and the Anacostia Rivers. The Archbishop responded to the request by giving that part of Washington to the Dominicans for the erection of a parish.

Parochial ministrations began at once, since there are parish records dating from the early months of 1853. Ground for the new Church, school, and convent was purchased from Georgetown College, and sod was broken for the project on July 1, 1853. While the Church and rectory were under construction, the home of George Mattingly, a wealthy and active parishioner, was used for divine services. The house still stands at 477 F Street.

The Church and rectory were small, plain brick structures ready for occupancy in the early spring of 1854. Father Wilson opened the new Church on March 19, 1854, dedicating it to the service of God under the patronage of St. Dominic. In point of age it was the sixth parish to be founded in the city of Washington. It was a day of great rejoicing for the Catholics of southwestern Washington; the Dominican Fathers could rejoice with them for this was their first foundation east of the Alleghany Mountains. A letter of the time describes the first Church, a simple structure of Gothic design: "A neat and beautiful building. . . . Its site is handsome, standing as it does about the center of the Island, in full view of the Capitol. . . . The dimensions of the church are about seventy by forty feet. The interior has been finished in handsome style, with a rich cornice and ceiling." The Church was so planned that the basement could be used as a school, which was opened together with the opening of the Church.

The influx of Catholics into the Island increased now that a Church was present, and it soon became obvious that a new Church would be needed to accommodate the swiftly growing congregation. Twelve years after the original Church had been built, it was found to be inadequate, and in 1865, the Fathers decided to undertake the erection of a new Church. Archbishop Spalding of Baltimore and the Dominican Provincial readily gave their approval and the preparations for the fund-raising endeavors commenced. The original plans called for a brick

structure 190 x 81 feet, with side chapels and a 200-foot tower; later the plans were changed to enlarge the dimensions to 200 x 95 feet, and extend the tower to 250 feet. Mr. P. C. Keeley, a noted architect from Brooklyn, drew the plans and directed the construction.

Ground was broken for the enterprise by the pastor, Rev. John A. Bokel, O.P., on November 9, 1865, and ten days later, Rev. Nicholas D. Young, O.P., blessed and laid the cornerstone. Work on the superstructure continued until the walls were twenty-five feet high, but was then suspended owing to the depression which set in after the Civil War. The intervening years were spent in raising funds, but times were still hard, and it was not until 1872 that work was actually resumed.

On Sunday, June 13, 1875, the magnificent new St. Dominic's Church was dedicated with impressive ceremony by the Most Rev. James Roosevelt Bayley, Archbishop of Baltimore, who sang the Solemn Pontifical Mass; the sermon was preached by the Most Rev. Thomas A. Becker, Bishop of Wilmington. On that same evening, Solemn Vespers were sung at which the Most Rev. Thomas L. Grace, O.P., Bishop of St. Paul, officiated, and His Eminence, James Cardinal Gibbons, then Bishop of Richmond, preached.

During the next decade the parish continued its rapid expansion. When the new Church was completed, the school occupied the entire old Church building until it was torn down in 1886 and the present school and parish hall was erected. The parochial school was taught first by lay teachers, and later by a group of Dominican Sisters from Somerset, Ohio, and St. Catherine's, Kentucky, who intended to establish a new community in Washington. In 1882, they affiliated themselves with the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, who still have charge of St. Dominic's School.

Disaster struck the parish on the morning of March 12, 1885, when fire broke out and made such headway that it was impossible to extinguish it. With the assistance of the great crowd which gathered, most of the fixtures such as the stations, statues, vestments and sacred vessels were saved. The solid granite walls were undamaged, but the interior was badly gutted. The destruction was a serious blow to the heavily indebted parish, but the parishioners began at once to rebuild. The old Church was used again until October 4, 1885, Rosary Sunday, when the restored Church was reopened with great rejoicing.

At the Provincial Chapter held in October, 1885, the Master General of the Order was petitioned to raise the status of St. Dominic's to that of a formal house, a canonical convent or priory. Rev. Edward D. Donnelly, O.P., who was then pastor, was appointed its first prior.

On October 10, 1919, after the Church was finally cleared of debt, St. Dominic's was consecrated by the Most Rev. John T. McNicholas, O.P, Bishop of Duluth, later Archbishop of Cincinnati. On Sunday, October 12, with Cardinal Gibbons presiding, the Most Rev. Thomas J. Shahan, Rector of Catholic University, celebrated a Pontifical Mass of thanksgiving. The Very Rev. Raymond Meagher, O.P., then Provincial, and former pastor of St. Dominic's, who still resides at the priory, preached the sermon for the festive occasion.

After the consecration of the Church, progress and development continued until St. Dominic's became one of the most active and frequented parishes in the city. But another disaster was to mar this record after only ten years. On the morning of February 24, 1929, another fire was discovered under the roof, and by the time the fire department arrived, the entire roof was ablaze. The parishioners had to undertake the tremendous task of rebuilding for the fourth time. As had been the case forty-four years before, no time was lost in the reconstruction. An account in the Washington Post of March 31, 1930, reported:

"Renovation work was viewed for the first time yesterday at reoccupation ceremonies. The only church of Gothic design in Washington, St. Dominic's has a seating capacity of 1400 and is said to be the largest in the District. The organ was entirely reconstructed, a marble floor supplants the old wooden one, and new frescoes have been made."

At these ceremonies, the Most Rev. Michael J. Curley, Archbishop of Baltimore, presided and Bishop Shahan of the Catholic University was present in the sanctuary.

It was at this time that the high altar was moved far back into the sanctuary to give ample room for the many future ordinations of Dominican priests which were to follow in succeeding years. For the past twenty-two years St. Dominic's has had the extraordinary distinction of being the ordination place for the Dominicans of St. Joseph's Province who complete their theological studies at the Dominican House of Studies across the city in northeast Washington. Hundreds of Dominicans look back with warm and blessed memories upon St. Dominic's sanc-

tuary where they were raised to the exalted dignity of the priesthood.

During the last score of years, St. Dominic's has continued to serve the Catholics of southwest Washington under the pastorates of Fathers Raphael M. Burke, O.P., Robert P. Carroll, O.P., William D. Marrin, O.P., Raymond J. Dewdney, O.P., and Bernard P. Shaffer, O.P. The Very Rev. Andrew M. Whelan, O.P., is the prior and pastor as the parish celebrates its centennial.

Like the older sections of most cities, southwest Washington, once a flourishing residential district, has steadily deteriorated in recent years. As business interests gradually took possession of the area, and homes grew fewer, St. Dominic's parish has continued to shrink in size so that now it is only a shadow of what it was fifty or even twenty-five years ago. Thousands of Washingtonians residing in other neighborhoods fondly recall St. Dominic's as their mother Church, but there are few who live in the parish any more.

The centenary of a dying parish is a bitter thing to celebrate. But St. Dominic's, far from dying, is preparing for a "second spring" in the glorious promise of certain and swift renaissance on the threshold of its second century. In the past few years plans have been made for a thorough restoration of southwest Washington. As if to add to the joy of the event, during the very week of the centennial celebration the Washington daily papers carried big headlines and front-page pictures of the imminent clearance and housing project which will transform the section into a revitalized area. Within the next few years, great apartment buildings will rise along the banks of Washington Channel, and St. Dominic's will again be one of the foremost parishes in the city. As the centennial preacher announced, the Dominican Fathers stand ready to serve the new southwest Washington for another hundred years, just as they have served it for the past hundred years. St. Dominic's Church will stand in noble antiquity as modern structures rise around it; its graceful spire, which shares Washington's southern skyline with the dome of the nation's Capitol, will continue as the sign to all who come into America's first city that God is here.

Dominicana congratulates the pastor, the parish staff, the Dominican Sisters, and the parishioners of St. Dominic's on this grand occasion of the parish centenary, and expresses best wishes for a second century of progress.