

## **In the Heartland**

### **Celebrating Our History**

August 11, 2011 will mark the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the establishment of the Diocese of Des Moines by Pope St. Pius X.

A competent and energetic Centennial committee chaired by Monsignor Frank Bognanno has identified the theme for the year long commemoration as “Celebrating Evangelization, Past – Present – Future, The Diocese of Des Moines, 1911-2011.” This theme is highly appropriate insofar as Pope Paul VI in his landmark document, Evangelium Nuntiandi stated simply: “The Church exists to Evangelize.”

Recording the history of our diocesan community has become a principal project in marking the centennial insofar as it will highlight “Past evangelization.” The early history of the diocese was contained in a hand-written document by Father John F. Kemper which he presented to the Diocese’s first bishop, Austin Dowling. A subsequent book was sponsored by the Des Moines Council of Catholic Women and was compiled by Mrs. Bernard Mertes, Historian, and Mrs. Dick Loschen, Assistant Historian of the Council of Catholic women. This is a compilation of local parish histories and information derived from the official newspapers of the Diocese. It was published in 1970. In the mid-1980’s, Monsignor Larry Beeson wrote a brief overview of the history of the Diocese based on information taken from Father Kemper’s handwritten account.

In 2006, Tom Schmitt, publisher of the Daily Nonpareil, in Council Bluffs produced a beautiful “coffee table” publication entitled: Places of Prayer and Celebration, The Diocese of Des Moines. Describing the contents of the book is the cover inscription: “A pictorial and historical perspective on the Catholic Churches in the Diocese of Des Moines.”

The author provides a succinct history of each of the 82 active Catholic parishes of the diocese serving the 23 counties of Southwest Iowa. This narrative is accompanied by attractive photographs depicting exterior and interior highlights of the church buildings which house the communities of faith. The book captures the investment, devotions, and sacrifice that characterized those who created the history that serves as the sturdy foundation of our present day diocesan community.

In reflecting on what type of historical contribution would be most appropriate to mark our centennial, the determination was reached that a scholarly yet readable, well researched publication would be timely. Such a book would provide a factual perspective and establish a foundation going forward as a local church. Hopefully, it would also detect the hand of God, aka, divine providence at work through human agency in all of its many manifestations.

Quite fortunately, a competent author, Father Steven M. Avella, a priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and Professor of History at Marquette University was identified as an ideal candidate for the task at hand. Father Avella's doctorate is from the University of Notre Dame. In his professional work as a historian, he has written a number of books, articles and essays on the Catholic church from the standpoint of American religious history. Some of the titles include: Capitol City: The Catholic Church and the Shaping of Sacramento, In the Richness of the Earth: The History of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee; Catholicism: Chicago Style, This Confident Church: Chicago Catholicism 1940-1965.

Father Avella has graciously agreed to write the centennial history for the Diocese of Des Moines. Father's mentor was Monsignor John Tracy Ellis, the dean of American Catholic historians. Following the path of Monsignor Ellis, Father Avella's book promises to be historically accurate and credible but at the same time highly interesting. Father Avella enjoys the respect of his peers as is evidenced by his currently serving as President of the American Catholic Historical Association.

Father plans to derive a significant portion of his material from the diocesan archives. His research could well necessitate a trip to Rome to study Vatican Archives. He looks forward to oral interviews with many of the players in the Diocese who bridge different generations. At this point, he intends to organize his material according to the tenure of the Des Moines bishops beginning with Bishop Austin Dowling and concluding with the service of Bishop Maurice Dingman.

Father Avella and I agreed that he should follow the evidence wherever it leads him thus ensuring the outcome of a credible and scholarly work. I anticipate that it will also be a valuable addition to the historical record of the State of Iowa for this region of Iowa since the church has been influential during this period.

I join many others in eagerly looking forward to Father Avella's study which in illuminating the past will serve as a valuable guide to our future.