The Catholic Church in New Jersey by Rev. Joseph Flynn

Second installment of serial reprint

Rev. Joseph Flynn’s The Catholic Church in New Jersey recently reached 110 years since its original publication. In recognition of this milestone, The Recorder is reprinting passages from this book. We hope that you will enjoy this foray into New Jersey Catholic historical inquiry of the early twentieth century.

St. Joseph's [Old St. Joseph’s, Philadelphia] was the first parish house of Catholicity in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York for at least fourscore years. This was the centre whence radiated the living streams of grace to wherever a faithful child of the Church was found, and by its faithful, saintly priests was fostered and nourished the little mustard seed now grown into so noble and stately a tree. The old church is a shrine worthy of our veneration, for underneath its altars are buried the earthly remains of those "who sowed in tears, that we might reap with joy." Father Greaton remained at his lo

Father Harding "is the first priest to have visited New Jersey, whose labors could not have been prior to 1762" (De Courcey-Shea). This is hardly accurate, for we have seen that other priests had visited and exercised their sacred ministry in Elizabethtown and Woodbridge at the close of the seventeenth century, and very likely at a much later period. Father Harding died September 2d, 1772, in the seventieth year of his age, and is buried under the altar of St. Mary's.

The priest of that venerable sanctuary most closely identified with Catholicity in New Jersey was the Rev. Ferdinand Farmer, whose family name was Steinmeyer. This truly apostolic man and devoted and indefatigable missionary was born at Swabia, Germany, October 13th, 1720. He entered the Company of Jesus at Landerperge, September 26th, 1743, and was selected for the China Mission; but the "finger of God" intervened and the young priest was sent to this country. No picture of him is extant; but we are told that he was "of slender form, having a countenance mild, gentle, and bearing an expression almost seraphic."

It appears that he arrived in Philadelphia in 1758, and from that time until he was called to his reward, August 17th, 1786, he was untiring in his labors for the salvation of souls. Every spring and every autumn saw him starting off on his journey along the Delaware River, across country to Long Pond (now Greenwood Lake), Mount Hope, Macopin, New York City, Basking Ridge, Trenton, and Salem.

While good Father Farmer was one of the first apostles who spent himself in carrying the comforts of religion to the little communities scattered over New Jersey, he was by no means the first missionary priest, nor, after his death, were the Catholics totally abandoned. The names of these zealous, godly men are blotted out with their heroic deeds, but they are graven in the Book of Life. It is nigh impossible for us to realize the perils, discomforts, and risks they encountered in their journeyings.

The roads, at best, were only paths and Indian trails, of which one led from Philadelphia to Delaware Falls, now Trenton, north-easterly to Indian's Ferry, now New Brunswick, thence to Elizabethtown, where wayfarers were carried by boat to New York, From a point near Rahway another trail, starting from Navesink, on the Shrewsbury River, led to Minisink Island, in the extreme north, in the Delaware River. In West Jersey a road extended from Trenton to Crosswicks, thence to Burlington, to Trenton, to Salem, and later to Cohanzy Bridge, now Bridgeton. But between New Brunswick and Trenton lay a
narrow waste of thirty miles of country, which, owing to the unpleasant relations between the two sections, remained for a long time a barrier which barred communication. Through this wilderness was an Indian trail, along or near which the Legislature of 1795 ordered a road to be constructed. Picture, then, these men of God, sometimes on horseback, sometimes afoot, with their sack strapped across their back, containing the altar-stone, vestments, chalice, and wine for the Sacrifice, trudging through the forests, over mountains, crossing streams and rivers in the rude "dugouts," picking their way through the swamps, at times wet to the skin by the tempests which overtook them, again almost prostrated by the intolerable heats, resting under the shelter of the trees or in some rude cabin, perhaps of one hostile to their faith, or in the humble home of an exiled child of the Church, who welcomed them as an angel sent from God.