

SS. PETER AND PAUL'S CHURCH
ROCHESTER, N. Y.

by William J. Brien

1953

SS. PETER AND PAUL C. CHURCH

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In October 1907, the Reverend J. Emil Gefell, Ph.D. succeeded the Reverend F. H. Sinclair, D.D. as pastor of SS. Peter and Paul's Church in Rochester, N. Y. At that time the church was located at the corner of Maple and King Streets.¹ It was under Father Gefell's direction that the present building located on West Main Street was constructed.²

Northern Romanesque is the style which was chosen by Father Gefell for the new building. This type, more ornate than the other Romanesque styles, is called stilo Lombardesco. Father Gefell employed the firm of Gordon and Madden of Rochester as the architects for the new church. Requesting photographs of churches that were built in the selected style, he received 120 photographs from Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. These photos were then studied by the architects, their associates, and the draftsmen, who met with Father Gefell for four hours. Photographs were eliminated until the number was reduced to about fifty. Another session reduced them to twenty-five; at a third meeting more details were determined. At Father Gefell's request the six men of the staff made sketches of the front which were submitted to him after two weeks. Of these six sketches one was retained and was worked on for a period of nine months.

It was decided that the new building be constructed of tapestry brick. This type of brick was little used in Rochester before. It is a clay which is mined. That which was used for SS. Peter and Paul's was mined in the vicinity of Erie, Pennsylvania. The use of

this material in the parish buildings was the biggest tapestry brick project in the United States at that time.

The contractor for the new church was Hiram H. Edgerton who was later mayor of Rochester.³ When excavating for the foundation, it was discovered that the edifice would rest on solid rock two feet below the surface of the ground.

On October 1, 1911, the Right Reverend Thomas F. Hickey, Bishop of Rochester, laid the cornerstone.⁴ The church, which has a frontage of 285 feet and a depth of 450 feet, was dedicated on June 30, 1912 by the same Bishop Hickey.⁵ The cost of the building was \$100, 000.⁶

A shallow arched ceiling was originally planned for the church. Since the church's organ would not fit in the organ loft with such a ceiling, a barrel vault ceiling, which forms a deeper arch, was decided upon. This is one of the few such ceilings in the United States; it is more expensive than the shallow arched ceiling. The windows, designed by the architects, are made of "Old Renaissance Glass." This gold glass was imported from London, England. In the United States there was not enough of this glass for one window. The floor of the church is slightly inclined in order that the altar may be seen from any place in the church. There is a drop of two feet in the floor, and there are five steps at the altar. For this reason a person in the last pew has his eyes in a direct line with the feet of the Celebrant at the altar.

SS. Peter and Paul's Church was the first church in Rochester to install indirect lighting. The church was originally undecorated in the interior; it was calcimined in gray. Ornamental plastering

was not contemplated originally. Later it was discovered that it could be obtained for a reasonable price. Seventeen years after it was built, the Romanesque edifice was decorated by Professor Gonippo Raggi. Mr. Raggi had previously decorated the Church of Our Lady of Victory in Lackawanna, New York. Concerning his paintings in SS. Peter and Paul's Church Mr. Raggi wrote the following:

In general, the mural paintings were selected from originals by classical artists. In executing these paintings, some modifications were made to have them harmonize with consideration to their location, available space, and light.⁷

The main oil painting over the main altar is an adaptation of a painting of the Last Supper by Titian. Over one confessional is a faithful copy of the Liberation of Peter from the Prison by Domenichino; over the other confessional is a picture of the Apostle Paul standing trial before Festus. The face of Christ in the main arch of the church is a copy of that in the famous Disputa of Raphael. Over the Shrine of the Agony is a painting of the Resurrection; the figure of Christ is a copy of Christ in the Transfiguration by Raphael.

Live models were used in some cases, [writes Professor Raggi,] to obtain better facial expressions and correct anatomy, especially for the painting of "The Last Supper" in the Sanctuary, for which models posed also on the scaffolding.

The mural painting representing St. Paul before the Roman Consul is an original composition of mine. This was done with all living models costumed as they are represented.⁸

This picture of St. Paul before Festus is a copy of the painting by which the artist obtained his master's degree in the Academy of St. Luke in Rome. The ornamental decoration in the church was all executed freehand, without the use of stencils. The decoration, according to Mr. Raggi, is original and conforms to the architectural style.⁹

SS. Peter and Paul's Church bears resemblances to certain famous Italian churches. The front is similar to Annunziata in Florence. The tower of the church is almost a replica of the tower of the Cathedral in Lucca, Italy, according to Father Gefell. The interior of the building resembles the interior of the Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome. (This resemblance is in the formation of the pillars and the fact that there is no break in the transept).¹⁰

The new church edifice was also to have appointments from the old church at Maple and King Streets. The statues, as well as the main altar and the two front side altars, are from the old church. These are all built of wood. The high altar was built in 1859 by Mr. Newbauer, who also built the main altar in St. Joseph's Church in Rochester. At this altar, which is still the scene of the Sacrifice of the Mass every day, the present Pastor-Emeritus, Father Gefell, served Mass as an altar boy and received his First Holy Communion.

In conclusion it would be well to quote the words written by Professor Raggi in tribute to the artistic appreciation of Father Gefell:

Father Gefell has special taste and art appreciation. He has no difficulty in distinguishing between fine art and architecture from the ordinary thing. His guidance during the execution of this interior decoration stimulated me and helped me to perfect my work.¹¹

William J. Brian

1. "SS. Peter & Paul's," Historical-Pictorial Edition of The Catholic Journal (Rochester, 1914), p.49.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all the material used in this paper is taken from a personal interview which the writer had with Father Gefell, the Pastor-Emeritus of SS. Peter & Paul's Church, on January 9, 1953.
3. Historical-Pictorial Edition, p.49.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Letter from Prof. Gonippo Raggi to William J. Brien, Orange, N.J., February 15, 1953.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Historical-Pictorial Edition, p.49.
11. Same letter from Prof. Raggi.

Catholic Journal, (Rochester, N.Y.).

Gefell, Rev. J. Emil, interview with William J. Brien, Rochester, N.Y.,
January 9, 1953.

Official Catholic Directory, (New York).

Raggi, Prof. Gonippo, letter to William J. Brien, Orange, N.J.,
February 15, 1953.

"SS. Peter & Paul's," in The Historical-Pictorial Edition of The
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Union and Advertiser, (Rochester, N.Y.).