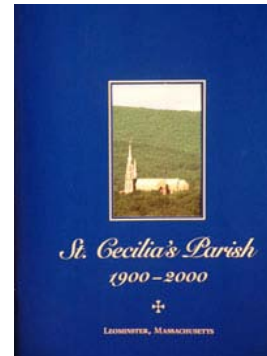


This web page is compiled from excerpts from the 100th anniversary book "Portrait of a Parish" by Robert Cormier

Robert Cormier is a son of the parish. Born on French Hill, he was baptized, confirmed, and married to Constance Senay, also a parishioner; in St. Cecilia's Church. Internationally acclaimed, he is the author of 18 books, translated into more than a dozen languages.



Long before the turn of the century, many Canadians of the Province of Quebec left behind the farmlands and parishes near the St. Lawrence River for a new life south of the border. They were joined by the Acadians who left their own villages and parishes of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. All of them brought their hopes and aspirations to a new country of dreams and possibilities.

Life on the farms and in the villages of Canada held no great future in those days. Families were large and prospects were small. The throbbing factories and mills of New England - and in particular a city like Leominster in central New England -beckoned with promises.

Jobs could be found in the comb and shirt shops here. Leominster was known then as "The Comb City of the World" shipping millions of combs and brushes of all shapes and sizes and colors to the far comers of the globe.

Here a man could find work twelve hours a day, six days a week -for wages that would feed and clothe his family and send his children to school. Even girls, wives and mothers could find jobs in the factories or do "homework" in their tenements, paid by the number of "pieces" they turned out at the kitchen table.

And so the Canadians and Acadians came, with their religion and traditions, their legends and songs, their Quebec stories of the loup garou, their appetite for tourtiere and poutine rapee, and their larger appetite for a new life and all the wonders of a new world.

There were no spires reaching toward the sky when the first Canadians reached Leominster. In 1870, there were only ten families here and they attended services at St. Leo's Church on Main Street. Many others soon followed, however.

Although they had a place to follow their religion at St. Leo's Church, they found themselves struggling with a language they were trying to speak and understand, and traditions that were very different from the rituals of the old ways in Canada. Yet, they were grateful for being taken in by Leominster's first Catholic parish and for the efforts of a curate, the Reverend Caisse, who helped them adjust to the new ways.

As the years grew closer to a new century, men and women with names like Frechette and Cloutier and Dargis found themselves in a dilemma, caught between the exciting possibilities of their new country, and the desire to keep alive a part of the past. They longed to hear sermons, make their confessions, hear their babies baptized and their young people married in the French language that was music to their ears.

In the late years of the 19th century and beyond, the Catholics in Leominster were under the jurisdiction of the Springfield Diocese and Bishop Thomas D. Beaven. In 1890, the population of Franco-Americans in Leominster having steadily grown, a delegation went to Springfield to ask for the establishment of a French-speaking parish in Leominster. Mr. Cloutier and Mr. Dargis -history does not record their first names presented the case to the bishop. He decided that the time had not yet arrived for such a step. History also does not record the reason for his decision.

Meanwhile, Franco-Americans continued to stream into New England cities. Factory owners had learned that the new immigrants were steady and diligent workers. They sent representatives to Canada to induce men and women to cross the border into a new way of living. A great number of Canadians found their way to Leominster, to the east side of the town where new houses, most of them three-deckers, were being erected on numbered streets to provide living places for the newcomers.

Many of them moved in with relatives and friends, crowding into the five- and six-room tenements until they earned enough to become independent.

The district on the east side quickly became known as French Hill, although not really a hill. Perhaps it was given its name because of the slight inclination of the land as it sloped east of the Boston & Maine railroad tracks.

French Hill looked down on the grassy plains of Whitney Field, through which Monoosnock Brook snaked its way. Next door was the area settled by the newcomers from Italy, while the Irish immigrants settled on the Plains toward North Leominster. In the center of Leominster, the town hall, the police and fire stations and the various stores were focused on Monument Square. Beyond, to the west, were the homes of the Yankee families who founded Leominster back in Indian days and forged a bustling, growing town eager to meet the challenges of a new century .

Thus was the stage set in the waning years of the 19th century for the French-Canadians to step forward and realize their dream of a parish to call their own.



The first year of the twentieth century - 1900 -was an exciting year for the Franco-Americans of Leominster. The events were foreshadowed late in 1899 when a delegation headed by Dr. Clement Frechette went to Springfield to present yet another plea to Bishop Beaven to establish a parish for French-speaking people. They were informed by the bishop's private secretary that the matter was under consideration by the bishop and a decision would be made through the usual channels of information. The delegation was disappointed at not receiving an immediate decision but, after ten years of waiting, hoped for a positive reaction in the near future.

Their patience was rewarded At the 10:30 am mass at St. Leo's Church on Sunday, January 7, 1900, Rev. Thomas C. O'Connor announced that Bishop Beaven had given official permission for French-speaking Catholics of Leominster to establish their own parish. The bishop also announced that Rev. Wilfrid Balthasard of West Boylston would be the pastor of the new congregation. Father Balthasard had found himself without a parish in the Oakdale section of West Boylston because parts of the town were scheduled to be flooded by the construction of the massive Wachuset Reservoir.

Rev. Wilfrid Balthasard's fourteen years as pastor of St. Cecilia's Church were years of unparalleled growth and progress during which the parish grew from a small group of French-speaking pioneers, who attended their first masses in a rented hall in downtown Leominster, to a thriving community with its own church, school and convent.

Born in 1861 in St. John, New Brunswick, Father Balthasard received his early education there and was later graduated from the classical college and seminary in St. Hyacinthe, Quebec.

His first parochial assignment took place in 1886 when he became a curate at Notre Dame Church in Worcester, followed by service in Shelburne Falls beginning in 1893 where he remained until he was sent to St. Anthony's parish in the Oakdale section of West Boylston. It was from this parish that Father Balthasard came to Leominster.

Father Balthasard died at ten minutes past ten on the morning of November 4, 1914. Although his passing was described as unexpected, the pastor had suffered from a liver disease for two-and-a-half years. He was 53 years old.

The regard in which he was held by so many was apparent at his funeral when more than four thousand people attended the series of funeral services.



Countless people from all sections of the city passed through the rectory where his body lay in state. with the sketch of a The procession to the church was lengthy, headed by leading members of the parish, six hundred school children, a delegation of Daughters of the Holy Ghost, candle-bearing altar boys, members of the Ladies of St. Anne, and 80 fellow priests, including a contingent from his alma mater in St. Hyacinthe. Bishop Beaven officiated at the funeral mass. Father Balthasard's body was taken to St. Hyacinthe for burial in the cemetery of the seminary there.

His memory lingered long in the hearts of his parishioners.

A pastor departs. A pastor arrives.

And a parish goes on in toil and ultimate triumph.

The death of Rev. Wilfrid Balthasard cast a pall of sorrow over the parish of St. Cecilia's in that grim November of 1914.

Less than a month later, however, that vacancy was filled when a soft-spoken priest arrived from St. Anthony's parish in Worcester, Rev. Joseph E. Chicoine.

This gentle and music-loving priest was blessed with resolve and determination as sturdy as the magnificent church he would someday build.

For almost fifty years, nearly half the lifetime of the parish, only two pastors led St. Cecilia's. They were years of struggle and growth, during which two world wars and a devastating depression occurred, but years during which the parish flourished and became a vivid and vital presence, in both the diocese and the city .



A priest for sixty-one years. The pastor of St. Cecilia's Church for almost thirty-four years.

Such was the religious lifetime of Father Chicoine, who won the love and respect of his parishioners their affection for him was boundless and also earned the high regard of people in all walks of life in Leominster. His friends in the city were legion and he was beloved by people of every denomination, the Leominster Enterprise once noted in tribute to his popularity .

Father Chicoine spoke softly but his words echoed the courage and vision of his priesthood. That courage and vision came to vivid life when the magnificent Gothic cathedral-like church was erected at the corner of Mechanic and Third Streets in the depths of the Depression, a tribute to his faith in the people of his parish. In turn, that visionary project gave work to men who found themselves jobless at a time of national desperation. And the financial support, through the years, of parishioners who made the building of the church possible was a testimony of Father Chicoine's ability to inspire the people he served as pastor.

His years as pastor were years of unprecedented growth and devotion. St. Cecilia's School flourished, with enrollments of one thousand pupils, many of whom went on to higher education. Parishioners thronged the Sunday masses and attendance was high at the daily masses. The Sunday high mass at ten-thirty was notable for its rituals: the glorious sounds of the Casavant organ; the voices of the adult choir mingling with the sounds of the white-robed boys' choir; the scent of incense rising in the sunlight; and all of this filtered through the amber- tinted windows awaiting the installation of stained glass in later years.

The Heart of the Depression

Men out of work, factories shuttered or operating on short hours. Breadlines in many cities as jobless people seek food and shelter.

A federal program by which people could receive assistance from the government is instituted. However, there are those who try to make ends meet without resorting to this "relief" program. Pride is still worn like a badge on the frayed spirits of many citizens.

Leominster shares the darkness of the Depression with the rest of the country .The factories that are the lifeblood of the city have either closed their doors or shortened the work week as orders failed to come in. Workers have been laid off; some have lost their jobs.

By 1931, the Depression has reached deep into the heart of America - but here on French Hill, the Depression has not penetrated the soul of St. Cecilia's Parish. For it is at this moment and at this crucial time that Father Chicoine reveals his vision - the building of a church, a church that is the stuff of dreams, the echo of the magnificent edifices he has observed on visits to Europe, a church that will rise from the bleakness of an empty lot on the corner of Mechanic and Third Streets, and reach to a beckoning sky.



Did he somehow know that the people in his parish and perhaps the city itself needed such a gesture, such a project at this dark moment?

No one can answer that question, but no one can doubt the foresight and courage it took to launch such a venture.

A symbol of the esteem in which Father Chicoine was held, not only in the hearts of his parishioners but in the city as a whole; was noted when the chimes of St. Leo's Church were tolled as news of his death traveled throughout Leominster upon his death at ten minutes before six on the morning of October 27, 1948.

His thirty-four years of service to his parish was legendary, his honors well deserved, from the "Palme d'Academic" conferred by the French government for the pastor's outstanding work with Franco-Americans in Leominster to the Papal Blessing he received when he celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of his ordination the

year before he died.



The greatest honor, however, was the love and devotion of St. Cecilia's parishioners, both young and old. In fact, a special mass for the children and members of the parish, who were unable to attend the Pontifical funeral mass celebrated by Bishop O'Leary, was held the following morning.

His body lay in state at the rectory during afternoon and evening hours for two days and the procession to the church for the funeral was unparalleled for its length and somberness as the parishioners, city officials, and countless priests and religious mourned the passing of this gentle, courageous priest.

The death of Father Chicoine in 1948 left a void in the parish. He had always been an endearing figure in the church and on the streets of French Hill. For many parishioners, he had been the only pastor they had ever known. But life at St. Cecilia's had to go on.

Rev. Leon Sauvageau, a curate, was named temporary administrator until a successor was named and he served until January of 1949 when Rev. Joseph H. Boutin, a former curate at St. Cecilia's, was appointed pastor.



Although Father Boutin's tenure would only last twenty months, he led the parish into the second half of the century. During that brief stay, he continued renovations to the church, including the removal of many finials from the roof-line. The church was also re-plastered and repainted. He instituted the new collection system of Sunday envelopes.

In 1950, a major change occurred that would affect the religious life in Worcester County. The Diocese of Worcester was established, ending the county's long association with the Springfield diocese. Most Rev. John J. Wright of the Boston archdiocese was named Bishop.

In September of that same year, Rev. Arthur J. Gravel was named by Bishop Wright as pastor of St. Cecilia's. The golden anniversary of the parish occurred in January of that year but no official observance was held because the parish was in a transitional stage.



Father Gravel headed the parish during a time of major projects. The first was the construction of a new rectory to replace the original rectory that had been in use since 1901. Work on the new building began on July 16, 1954 and was completed on June 27, 1955, a two-story brick rectory next door to the church that "still provides a home for priests as well as offices" for parish business.

That same year, on October 28, Father Gravel was named a Monsignor by Bishop Wright. Investiture ceremonies were held at St. Paul's Cathedral in Worcester with the bishop officiating. Jubilant parishioners held a reception for the new Monsignor in the parish hall on January 19, 1956 and were pleased when Bishop Wright attended to express his congratulations.

The other major project undertaken by Msgr. Gravel was the building of a new convent. The old wooden convent, at least eighty years old, had served the nuns since 1901, having been converted to a convent from a former inn. The building was in a deplorable condition, having long outlived its usefulness.

The new convent was constructed diagonally on the site of the old convent, facing Mechanic Street at the corner of Fourth Street. Built of granite and limestone with a tan face brick, it accommodated the sixteen sisters who staffed the parochial school: The construction began in 1966 and the building was ready for occupancy by the nuns on August 15, 1967.

The sisters continued to teach the children and efforts to keep the school building up to date were constant. The parish hall in the building was the scene of parish activities, from bingo nights to the annual fair and other events. Major work was undertaken in 1960 when the basement was refurbished with the installation of a new kitchen and cafeteria.

Msgr. Gravel ended his eighteen years as pastor on June 15, 1968 when illness forced his retirement. He had guided the parish into modern times and left as his monuments, not only the parish rectory and new convent, but also the affection of his parishioners.

1968

The life of a parish is continuous the chain remains unbroken - thus, in the early summer of 1968, Rev. Gerard A. Lucier was appointed to succeed Msgr. Arthur J. Gravel.



Father Lucier was a native of Adams and attended the Grand Seminary in Montreal. He was ordained on June 6, 1936. Prior to his pastorate at St. Cecilia's, he served as pastor of St. Theresa's Parish in East Blackstone.

His eight years as pastor of St. Cecilia's were pivotal years. The parish celebrated its 75th anniversary during his tenure. But the years immediately preceding that celebration were years of troubling developments. The parish was burdened with financial problems and the debt began to mount toward \$500,000. The high cost of maintaining and repairing the forty-two year old church was a growing concern of both the pastor and the parishioners. As if to dramatize the financial plight of the parish, lightning struck the church steeple in 1975, causing damage that would cost an estimated \$125,000 alone to repair. At a meeting of parishioners, the demolition of the church suddenly became a possibility when 250 parishioners voted to raze the structure to payoff the debt and to build a more modest and modern building.

Another drastic problem was the parish elementary school should it continue to operate? This issue was solved, at least temporarily, when the parish council set up an independent school board to oversee the financial and academic necessities of the school. Under the direction of the new board, the school would work toward financial independence, with the board and parents of the 300 students raising funds from tuitions and fund-raising activities.

Father Lucier acknowledged that this development would ease the financial pressure on the parish although he said the parish would continue to contribute to the school's operation. And he also hoped that the parish would be able to do some work in "piece-meal fashion" on the church. Some doubted whether this type of approach would be enough to save the church, however.

The damaged steeple hovered over the parish, as if it were a symbol of all its problems. But it was this same steeple that provided a solution. J. Douglas Quinn, president of Skyline Engineering Co. of Fitchburg volunteered to repair the steeple at no cost to the parish. His gesture "saved the church," as one parishioner said.

I grew up in Leominster and saw that church being built," Mr. Quinn told the Leominster Sentinel and Enterprise. "It is a magnificent temple built for the glory of God, at a great expense to the French-Canadian people who were making less in a week than many of us were making in an hour. I felt it wrong to tear it down."

Mr. Quinn, his wife, Lorraine, and his sons made the decision, he said, after praying as a family. "We know from past experience that whatever we give to God isn't lost. It will come back to us," he said.

Father Lucier quickly expressed his appreciation to Mr. Quinn, calling the offer "a great display of Christian charity." Father Lucier continued to serve St. Cecilia's until November 1976, when he was named pastor of St. Joseph's Parish in North Brookfield. He died on January 17, 1983.

1976

When lightning struck the main steeple of the church in 1975, the damage to the cross became a symbol of the parish's troubles a \$500,000 debt, a costly parochial school with dwindling enrollment, a church building in drastic need of repairs, plus a movement to demolish the hallowed structure.



This was the situation Rev. George E. Denomme faced when he arrived at St. Cecilia's parish on November 4, 1976 as the new pastor.

Douglas Quinn had offered to have his company repair the steeple without charge, the work was scheduled for the following spring. Father Denomme asked Mr. Quinn to begin preliminary work immediately so that parishioners could look up and see that action was being taken to steer the parish to a new direction.

Thus did the ruined cross and steeple suddenly become different symbols, heralding a new era in the parish's history.

During those busy years, the parishioners were responsible for a turn of the events that wiped out their \$500,000 debt in three years. Bishop Flanagan agreed to a plan to suspend the seven percent interest in those three years and to have the diocese donate 25 cents for every 75 cents the parish provided. This plan was vital in paying off the debt, but Msgr. Denomme praises the parish members for their loyalty and generosity that made the plan successful.

One of the most difficult decisions during this period was the closing of the parochial school. The cost of lay teachers' salaries and the upkeep of the classrooms proved impossible to bear. Addressing the congregation later, Msgr. Denomme thanked the "Daughters of the Holy Spirit" for their dedication, their work and their involvement in this parish. "Together, we experienced the trauma of closing our elementary school in 1977. But the sisters have remained loyal to the parish and the parish has remained loyal to the sisters. To measure the good that they do in the parish is impossible."

The sisters continued their service to the parish after the school's closing, conducting C.C.D. classes, which Msgr. Denomme stressed had to be a necessity if classes were terminated. The sisters have also visited the sick of the parish and have been available for any tasks that presented themselves.

In 1979, a memorable event occurred, the lifting of a new twelve foot, stainless steel cross to the top of the steeple. The gold leaf exterior was brilliant in the sunlight even on cloudy days, serving as a landmark in the city, greeting those arriving in Leominster on Route 2.

With the \$500,000 debt paid off by 1980, the parish entered busy, active years as a thriving religious community, culminating between 1981 and 1983 with the installation



of stained glass windows in the church.

This major project was a display of the spirit of St. Cecilia's parishioners responding to a church they loved. The project was announced at weekend masses, and parishioners began to line up outside the rectory on Monday. All the windows were financed within two weeks and eventually replaced the ancient windows that had been installed when the church was built.



New exterior doors were installed, the bronze casting on each door portraying the many roles that Christ played during his lifetime, as Christ Child, Lamb of God, Good Shepherd and others. The doors feature carvings of Fleur-de-Lis above and below the castings.

Three additional features include the marble altar, gift of Mrs. Alexina Dionne; the Eucharistic Shrine, given by Mr. and Mrs. J. Henri Goguen, and the Baptismal Font, gift of l'Union St. Jean Baptiste Society.

A new lighting system was installed and a general upgrading of the church was carried out.

With all this work accomplished, the church was re-dedicated on May 20, 1984, with Bishop Timothy J. Harrington and retired Bishop Bernard J. Flanagan officiating.

In the spring of 1992, Msgr. Denomme brought to a close his sixteen years as pastor of St. Cecilia's. Remaining here, he assists Father Goguen who came with him as associate pastor to St. Cecilia's when Msgr. Denomme returned in 1976.

They continue as pastor, senior priest and friends in the parish which they both serve with complete devotion

1992



Rev. Francis T. Goguen arrived at St. Cecilia's Church to take up his duties as pastor on June 20, 1992, he was returning to a parish where he had enjoyed seven years as an associate pastor with Msgr. Denomme, who was pastor at that time.

The 90's were busy years at St. Cecilia's. The maintenance of a parish that consisted of major structures such as the large church, the parish center in the school building as well as the convent required constant attention.

The Fall of 1995 marked the first steps in preparing for the centennial observance of the parish. Project 2000 was launched, a capital fund drive to carry on needed repairs and renovations to the parish to ensure their excellent condition for the anniversary celebration. The response of parishioners through pledges and annual contributions to fulfill the five-year pledges made possible an almost immediate start on the project.

The first part of the renovations concerned the Parish Center. In the summer of 1996, the wooden

exterior doors of the center were replaced with insulated aluminum doors. The following winter, new restrooms were built in the center hall. The cemetery, which had been extended, was now improved with repaving of the roads and the installation of a new drainage system.

In late Spring of 1997 work began on the restoration of the church tower and steeple. Eight buttresses and eight finials were removed because extensive deterioration had taken place and the water table at that level was completely covered with lead-coated copper. Work continued through 1999 on the perimeter of the church to repair leaks that had caused some damage to the interior plaster. A few locations inside the church also were repainted.

The work on the steeple was again undertaken by Skyline Engineering Company. The firm now headed by Stephen Quinn, was formerly owned by his father J. Douglas Quinn who worked free of charge back in the 1970s to repair the steeple and, in essence, helped to save it for posterity.

Father Goguen is only the seventh pastor in the hundred- year history of the parish and has carried on a tradition of service and dedication that has been the hallmark of all St. Cecilia's pastors.