The number of priests in the Diocese of Detroit grew substantially in the Foley years. The bishop inherited 131 priests when he came to Detroit in 1888; when he died, early in 1918, his clergy numbered 318. It was during this episcopate too that the diocesan clergy ceased to be a mostly foreign-born population. Fully 75 percent of the priests ordained in the Foley years had been born in the United States or in English-speaking Canada. Episcopal policy was generally geared to the creation of an "indigenous" clergy: the bishop recruited only a relative handful of priests from abroad. And although Foley permitted nine men's religious orders to establish foundations in the Diocese, he may have tried to limit their size. For the ranks of religious order priests, who were the more likely to be foreign-born, grew more slowly in the Foley years than did the diocesan clergy. Religious order priests made up nearly 25 percent of the local clergy in 1887, but just under 20 percent in 1917—this despite a major expansion of the Jesuit university in Detroit in the years after 1910.\textsuperscript{1}

The increasingly American cast to the diocesan clergy had several consequences. It almost certainly helped to ease tensions between Catholics and Protestants in the Diocese, perhaps especially in the small towns. It probably disposed the clergy to an instinctive sympathy for assimilationist policies with regard to liturgical reform and parochial education. And it meant that priests in the Diocese were better able than ever before to create something close to a cohesive subculture. More and more of them seem to have inhabited an emotional and intellectual world that not only differed in important ways from the world of even the pious laity but was a world where priests alone were fully welcome and at ease.

To some extent, of course, the priests of the Diocese had always inhabited a separate emotional world. Their celibacy in itself virtually insured this. But until the 1880s, the priests in the Diocese were too few in number and too deeply divided by ethnicity to feel that they belonged to a genuine clerical community. There was certainly friendship between individual priests, and every priest had been taught, and doubtless believed, that "the priest is separated from the mass of men by the Divine office of Holy Orders"—as Bishop Foley told his ordinandi
in 1889. Under what were essentially missionary conditions, however, many priests, especially outside Detroit, found it hard to have regular contact with their fellows. Whether they lived mainly to themselves or moved with ease among the laity depended largely on individual temperament.2

It was during the Foley years that this situation changed fundamentally. By the time of Foley's death, most priests in the Diocese belonged in fact as well as theory to a separate clerical world. (The Polish clergy were sufficiently numerous by the early twentieth century that they maintained a largely exclusive community of their own.) The lives of the diocesan clergy were by this time more similar than ever before. Their training was more uniform than it had hitherto been, and young men came to ordination with a greater store of common experiences and expectations than had their missionary predecessors. Their lives after ordination still varied enormously, but the priest in Detroit was no longer as far removed from the world of the country pastor as had once been the case, for rural parishes grew progressively less isolated in the Foley years. The growing ease of travel—and the growing number of priests—meant that the clergy were increasingly able to socialize among themselves. And priests throughout the Diocese were bound together by the discipline that was integral to their calling. The American-born clergy, especially, had internalized the norms that certain of their predecessors had resisted, and this simply confirmed, for themselves and for others, their status as men set apart.

The changes of the Foley years, however, represent only the beginning of a longer period of transition in the lives of the clergy. By the middle decades of the twentieth century, the clergy in the Diocese were characterized by a greater uniformity in experience, outlook and discipline than had ever prevailed in the Foley era. Indeed, by the standards of Cardinal Edward Mooney, who came to Detroit in 1937, the priests of the Foley years look like a dangerously atomized lot—capriciously governed by an inept Chancery, riven by resentments and rivalries, lacking in esprit de corps. But if great changes lay in the future, the Foley years still form a critical chapter in the history of the diocesan clergy. To more fully understand why this was so, we must examine the varieties of priestly experience that lie at the heart of this transitional period.

"AN INWARD CALL": RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Although the number of priests in the Diocese increased by nearly two and a half times between 1888 and 1918, the Catholic population grew even more rapidly. There was probably about 1 priest for every 900 Catholics in 1888; thirty years later the ratio stood at something like 1 to 1,200. The imbalance developed largely after 1900, for it was then that ordinations failed in a signal way to keep pace with growth in the Catholic population. The class of 1899, with thirteen members, was Bishop Foley's largest group of ordinandi. Between 1900 and 1918, classes ranged in size from two (in 1905) to twelve (in 1909 and again in 1912), averaging just under eight members each. (Classes between 1889 and 1899
had averaged just under seven members.) Moderate population growth in the 1890s, however, was succeeded after 1900 by explosive growth in Detroit and its hinterland.

The *Michigan Catholic* was worried even in the 1890s by what it believed was an incipient crisis in native vocations. "If spirituality glowed more brightly here we should have more vocations to the sacred ministry," ran an 1895 editorial, "and our prelates would not be obliged to seek volunteers to serve at the altar from the Catholic countries of Europe." Population growth after 1900 introduced a strident note to the paper’s analysis of the problem. It was the fault of Catholic mothers, an editorialist argued in 1901, that so few young men in America were drawn to the priesthood. "In this country, and we speak plainly and truthfully when we say it, Catholic mothers spend too much of their time affecting the airs and graces of their Protestant neighbors to look after the spiritual welfare of their offspring." By 1916, fathers too had come under indictment: "The blame for this dereliction may be laid to the money-grasping, society-loving fathers and mothers, who give scant attention to the fostering of vocations in the hearts of their little ones and too much time to frivolity."

A good many Catholics probably found this a persuasive line of argument. But the shortage of vocations during the latter years of the Foley episcopate had more to do with the nature of Detroit’s population growth than with a decline in the integrity of Catholic family life. The heavily immigrant population that flooded Detroit and other manufacturing cities in Michigan after 1900 contained relatively few young men with the education—or the means to the education—necessary to enter seminary. But at the same time, the influx of this largely Catholic population created an alarming shortage of priests, especially in Detroit. Once the members of this vast migration had achieved a modest degree of security, however, the situation changed. Their sons swelled the large ordination classes of the late 1920s and the 1930s. Since the population of the Diocese actually declined during the early years of the Depression, what the Chancery regarded as an acceptable ratio of priests to Catholic population was achieved before that decade was out.

We know little about most of the men who were ordained in the Foley years. As ordinandi, they were a youthful group: of the 197 whose birthdates are known, only 24 were thirty or older at the time of their ordination. The median age of the Foley ordinandi was twenty-six; their modal age was twenty-five. Most had apparently set their sights on the priesthood when they were boys. Indeed, for most of these young men an early decision had been nearly essential, for relatively few came from families where extended schooling for boys was a matter of course. And it was widely assumed that a vocation to the priesthood was something that was normally recognized in childhood—a conviction held by many Catholics as late as the 1960s. Priests in the Foley years were certainly disposed to speak of their own vocations in this way. "In his early boyhood he receives an inward call from God, to set himself apart to His service," explained Father Francis Van Antwerp in 1894 of what he apparently regarded as a typical priest’s career.

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*ordinandi* would be the correct form for the plural of *ordinand*.
Just what disposed a boy to this “inward call” is a question that is almost never addressed in the historical record. A family history of piety and devotion to the Church was clearly important. Few priests at any time in the history of the Diocese have been the offspring of mixed marriages. And there have always been families that have produced priests and religious in much the same way that other families have produced generations of doctors or lawyers or teachers. That “vocations run in families” was surely borne out in the Foley years, when the phenomenon was probably more pronounced than it was at any other time in the history of the Diocese. Bishop Foley ordained eight pairs of brothers during his episcopate, as well as a pair of twins and their younger brother, two men whose brothers were religious order priests, one man whose brother had been ordained by Bishop Borgess, and two men whose brothers would later be ordained by Bishop Michael Gallagher. 5

For the exemplary family life that nurtured these vocations—and indeed nearly all vocations—we must give particular credit to mothers, at least according to popular wisdom. “How many of us would be in darkness today,” Cardinal Gibbons asked the graduating class at St. Mary’s Academy in Monroe in 1911, “in how many hearts would not the grace of faith have died, if it had not been kept alive by the flame of piety enkindled in the home. This is the work of daughters and wives and mothers.” The pious mother provided her child with his first religious training, fostered a devotional atmosphere in the home, and ensured that he received a Catholic education. It was her tender vigilance that preserved the aspiring seminarian in purity and rectitude while he was in her care. And if she finally surrendered her son to the closed male world of the seminary, his ordination day was still her day of triumph. The first Mass of Father Michael Bourke at Detroit’s Holy Trinity Church in 1914 occasioned a poetic effusion on just this theme. Although the verses are called “The First Mass,” it is the mother and not her newly ordained son who is the subject. She, like her son, has been “separated from the mass of men” by virtue of his ordination; she is a vicarious participant in his priesthood. For all its cloying sentimentality, “The First Mass” captures something of the emotional world in which many vocations were nurtured. It reminds us too that this world was not without compensations for women.

She kneels in the aisle, the mother,
Head high, tho’ her lips move in prayer,
With eyes fast fixed on the altar
For a priest, her baby, is there.
How far away seem the voices
That are singing the Kyrie;
E’en at the gate of high Heaven
Seems the heart of the mother today.

Lights blaze from the cross to the table
They flash between flower and palm,
Some tremble and bend in devotion
Some burn in the holiest calm.  
Her eyes have seen through the darkness  
Of many a silent night.  
She could see the priest, her baby,  
Wore there never an altar light.

"Sanctus" they sing, and the music  
Dies away on the trembling air,  
In the hush his voice sounds triumphant,  
A word, and the Godhead is there.  
Dear Christ! Save the heart of the Mother.  
It must break in this moment of joy;  
She is tasting the first sweets of Heaven  
Brought down to the earth by her boy.

Father Bourke had worked as an attorney before deciding to become a priest—his was a "late vocation"—and he surely did not choose the priesthood in order to assure himself a secure and comfortable life. But were other aspirants to the priesthood in these years as evidently free of material motivation? We know little about the families from which the Foley ordinandi came, but what evidence we have indicates that many of them were raised in working-class homes. And even in the upper reaches of the working class at the turn of the century, life was a cramped and precarious affair. Most working-class boys looked ahead to long years of hard work—beginning, generally, in their midteens—and to the same chronic economic insecurity that plagued their fathers. The priesthood, by contrast, offered not just security and freedom from manual labor but the respect of the community and even, perhaps, the spice of adventure. For many boys, the journey to Baltimore or Milwaukee or Cincinnati for major seminary was the longest of their young lives.

This is not to say that escape from the working class was ever the sole—or even the major—motivation for choosing to become a priest. The years of preparation were too long, the regime of the seminary too irksome to be borne by a young man who did not possess a generous vision of his calling. But for a working-class boy, the choice of the priesthood was a decision for social mobility, and this could not help but affect the way a boy thought about the prospect of becoming a priest. It affected as well the expectations that the newly ordained brought to their careers. Most priests in the Foley years, it seems, expected to live comfortably, and they were inclined, at least among themselves, to speak of their lives in terms of a struggle for place—for good assignments, generous perquisites, the recognition of their peers. There were those among them, to be sure, who willingly embraced hardship, much in the spirit of the earliest missionaries in the Diocese, and there was genuine admiration for the charitable priest. But there was little inclination on the part of most priests to see poverty as a priestly virtue or to see in their comfortable rectories any challenge to the priestly calling. Very occasionally this troubled a sensitive observer. Father—later Bishop—Francis Kelley, who served in the Diocese of Detroit from 1893
until 1908, gave a controversial speech in Chicago in 1908 in his capacity as president and founder of the Catholic Church Extension Society, an organization that sponsored mission work in those parts of the United States where there were few Catholics. Father Kelley worried about what he saw as a lack of “missionary spirit” among American seminarians. “Someone has said that young men in our seminaries are too prone to speak of good places and prosperous dioceses. . . . Let the bishop of a missionary diocese appeal for students, and here and there amongst his hearers a hard young face looks up at him with the query ‘How much?’ written plainly upon it.” By way of corrective, Father Kelley urged upon his audience a broader vision of seminary education and indeed of the priesthood itself. Our students, he noted, “are taught the value of prayers and of knowledge. I fear, however, there is not sufficient training given to that unselfish spirit which makes the great missionaries upon whom the Church relies for great results.”

If the typical seminarian hoped eventually to live comfortably and to bask in the admiration of the community, he was surely taught that the meaning of his priesthood lay elsewhere. His was above all else a sacramental ministry. The average Catholic in Foley’s day was probably ill-equipped to argue the details of sacramental theology. But even the most indifferent Catholic understood that the role of the priest was to make God quite literally present among men. “He can command the Eternal Son of the Eternal God to come down from His high throne in heaven and to be present on the altar, to become food and drink for the faithful,” Bishop Foley told the congregation at an ordination in 1889. “More than this, that same power that Jesus exercised when He forgave the sins of Magdalen, does the duly authorised and empowered priest exercise when he frees souls from the chains of mortal sin, a cure which is a greater miracle than the restoration of the lepers at the wayside by the hands of Jesus.” By virtue of his ordination, then, the priest became “another Christ.” And at the heart of nearly all vocations, it is reasonable to say, was the sometimes inarticulate but very real desire to stand “prominent between God and man”—in the words of the newly ordained Father Frank Kennedy. “The priest is God’s representative in our midst,” Father Kennedy told a Dearborn congregation in 1891. “On the altar and in the confessional, he is simply omnipotent, simply divine.”

Language like this is rarely heard today, nor has it been since the Second Vatican Council. But pre-conciliar Catholics inhabited a world where custom and rhetoric made plain that the priest possessed what Bishop Foley called a “stupendous dignity.” And during the Foley years, this vision of the priesthood took on an increasingly personal meaning for many Catholics. For it was during the Foley years that frequent communion and frequent confession were urged on the mass of American Catholics for the first time—and with impressive results. The frequency with which many, probably most, Catholics approached the sacraments increased noticeably in the Foley years, and continued to increase thereafter. This growth in what was essentially a priest-centered piety was an important source of the confidence and vitality that characterized the priestly ranks,
and filled the seminaries, between the late nineteenth century and the early 1960s. The young priests of the Foley years, in short, began their careers at an auspicious time.

The certainties of their lives as priests were rooted in part in the closed and static intellectual world of the seminary. With no seminary in the Diocese itself, the aspiring priests of the Foley era were educated at a number of different institutions. But the seminary experience differed rather little from one institution to the next. Having completed the better part of a college course—often at the Jesuits' Detroit College or the Basilians' Assumption College in Windsor—the aspirant was sent to a major seminary, usually outside Michigan. The largest number in the Foley years—seventy-four of those ordinandi whose seminary is known—were trained by the Sulpicians at St. Mary's in Baltimore. Bishop Foley himself had been a student there. Forty-eight are known to have attended Mt. St. Mary's in Norwood, Ohio—the seminary of the Cincinnati Archdiocese. Seventeen of the men whom Foley ordained for his diocese were from SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary, the "Polish Seminary" located in Detroit and then, after 1910, in Orchard Lake, Michigan. Fifteen had attended St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee, which had apparently lost by the early twentieth century some of its Germanic aura. Bishop Foley sent students there who were not, to all appearances, of German descent. And seventeen of Foley's priests were alumni of the archdiocesan seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, an institution especially favored by Bishop Foley during the last years of his episcopate. An occasional student was trained elsewhere—in Montreal, Toronto, Dunwoodie (N.Y.), Rochester (N.Y.), St. Louis, even Denver. Despite Foley's own Roman training, however, he sent only four of his seminarians to study in Rome.

The curriculum of the major seminary, generally spanning five or six years, was by the late nineteenth century nearly identical in most institutions throughout the United States. The Third Plenary Council in 1884 had instructed American seminaries to abide strictly by the terms of Pope Leo's recent encyclical on the revival of Thomistic philosophy. The seminary course was to be conducted in Latin, from textbooks approved by the bishop of the diocese in which the seminary was located, and to adhere faithfully to the methods and principles of Thomism. The effect of this, as John Tracy Ellis has noted, was to make even more rigid what was already a mode of education that discouraged flexibility in teaching and experiment in thought. And if it can be said that a handful of American seminaries were briefly marked at the turn of the century by something like intellectual liveliness, they were not among the seminaries to which Detroit's students were normally sent. Those students arrived at ordination, we can reasonably assume, at least competent in dogma and moral theology, but with almost no knowledge of their wider intellectual inheritance as Catholics or of the intellectual ferment that characterized their age. "I was brought up in a system where the teachers neither directed the energy of the student, nor solved his difficulties by force of reason," a priest told Henry Brownson, a prominent Detroit layman, in 1904. As a consequence, he concluded—certainly too pessi-
mistically—"I know almost nothing." As for Roman seminary education, meant then—as now—for an intellectual elite, it was as hostile to most contemporary thought as it was to intellectual independence. "Here they go on the plan that the less clear their matter is the better exercise it gives the student while he is untangling the web," a student at the American College wrote in 1890 to Detroit's future bishop Michael Gallagher. "A brilliant idea, is it not?"

It was not the purpose of the seminary, of course, to produce intellectuals. The seminary was intended primarily to instill in its students a habitual self-discipline, a regular piety, and a firm loyalty to the Church and to their fellow priests. And this the American seminary did admirably well. Its rigid discipline both accustomed the student to a minutely regulated life—which, it was hoped, would become second nature by the time of ordination—and provided in its very irksomeness a bond to one's suffering fellows. Seminary discipline was a prolonged rite of passage, and if there was attrition along the way, so much stronger was the sense of solidarity among those who endured. But the seminary also encouraged a boyish camaraderie that defused the tensions of close living, and served to induct the students into what their mentors hoped would become, after ordination, an exclusively clerical social world. Another of Michael Gallagher's friends at the American College in Rome conveyed to him in 1890 something of the vitality of student sociability there, although what he had to say was probably true, in essence, of life in all but the strictest American seminaries. The young man wrote specifically about the College summer villa in the Alban hills, where, as he noted, "there is greater liberty in everything":

There is a much livelier set of boys here, out of about 50 who are here at present, I believe there are only three, who don't play ball. The evenings are very pleasant—we have singing by anybody who's called upon, dancing—Virginia Reel and the Quadrille and general rough and tumble. The general tone is not as high as I had imagined, great familiarity among all the boys prevails. You hear as much slang here as at Innsbruck and in recreation it's not Mer-Mer-etc-but Pat, Mike, Jack, etc. A very good spirit prevails among the boys. I felt at home here the very first evening, though a perfect stranger. That eve I made or rather was kindly forced to make my debut as a Tyrolese warbler and the following as the champion third baseman from Innsbruck. Last week I enjoyed a fine swim in Lake Albano. I joined an excursion to Montebano to see the sunrise mentioned in Wiseman's Fabiola, it was, indeed, the finest I've ever seen. Last week the Scotch College came over for a game of cricket, in which your friend Horan distinguished himself. By the way Pat and I are great friends, our tastes in the line of a smoke and a good glass of wine perfectly agree. . . . You remember that I left Innsbruck not without some slight touch of regret—but I must say it was only an agreeable transition of from one room to the other in the same house.  

If priestly formation was concerned in part with establishing a student's ties to his own generation of priests, it was concerned as well with establishing the authority of experienced priests over those about to be ordained. The discipline enforced by the seminary faculty helped to accomplish this, as did the practice of assigning to the parish priests of vacationing seminarians the task of supervis-
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The Diocesan Clergy

ing them over the summer. Father—later Bishop—William Stang, author of a widely read manual of pastoral theology first published in 1896, warned pastors in his book about the gravity of this particular responsibility and listed its special difficulties. "Many temptations beset the young candidate during vacation," Stang cautioned. "He is loved and admired by all; he is the pride of the congregation, and the promising boast of friends and relatives." The seminarian was almost bound to think too well of himself as a consequence. "There is a period in his student's life when he is liable to be haughty, carrying his head high, not exactly inflated with philosophy, but with harmless dreams and foolish flattery. . . . The priest must patiently bear with his apparent insolence until the transition is finished and the young man finds his level." The seminarian must be carefully watched for any "weakness toward female charms or . . . intoxicating liquors" and should not be permitted "to give himself up to absolute inactivity." He must attend Mass every day and visit the Blessed Sacrament, read selected books and assist in teaching the catechism—but only to boys. "Frequently invite him to your table, where you can observe his manners and perhaps correct them. Make an occasional excursion with him." We catch a glimpse locally of such an excursion in the summer of 1893, when three vacationing seminarians accompanied as many priests and the entire Young Ladies' Sodality of Detroit's St. Vincent's parish on a trip to Lake Erie's Put-in-Bay. One hundred and thirty-five young ladies was perhaps more temptation than the conservative Father Stang would have thought prudent, but the three seminarians were safely ordained over the next four years.11

With ordination, the rigors of the seminary were at an end and the promising expanse of the priesthood opened before the young candidate. On the day of his ordination and at his first Mass, he was more than ever "the pride of the congregation" and of his family. The first Mass of Father Theodore Lindemann at Detroit's St. Boniface parish in 1900 conveys the excitement that typically surrounded the ordination of a parish boy. "Long before the Mass crowds flocked the streets around the church in an effort to get a glimpse of the privileged priest," the Michigan Catholic reported. "Early in the morning the young men of the parish presented him with a golden chalice and the women with a beautiful sick-call outfit." The most senior of Detroit's German priests preached at the mass on the "Duties and Hardships of the Life of a Priest," and while the text of his sermon has not survived, he apparently painted the priesthood in bold and heroic strokes. "No doubt his efforts will inspire all who heard him to a greater respect and devotion to so sacrificing a state," the Michigan Catholic noted with evident satisfaction.12

Young Father Lindemann left Detroit shortly thereafter to take up his first assignment—as an assistant at St. Augustine's parish in Kalamazoo. Whether his experiences there and in later assignments fulfilled the hopes of his ordination day we do not know. But if the correspondence that has survived from Foley's day is any guide, at least some priests found in their work a fair measure of frustration. Not all the laity, they discovered, were promising material when
it came to the spiritual life. And the highly public nature of the priestly role could take its toll as well. "The discomfiture of the first months of ministry will soon pass away," Father Frank O'Brien assured a newly-ordained friend in the summer of 1886. "We have all felt them. Be earnest. Take things easy. Don't fret. Trust in God and it will come out right." Father O'Brien would presumably have offered the same advice to a man whose distress was rooted in the disappointments of his middle years or the fatigue and discouragement of old age.13

THE PRIEST'S CAREER

The course of a typical priest's career underwent an important change during the Foley years. The priests who were ordained in the Diocese between 1889 and 1899 became pastors nearly as quickly as their predecessors had done. Of the sixty-four priests ordained in this decade whose assignments are known, more than half became pastors within eighteen months of ordination. But of those priests ordained between 1900 and 1917, only 17 percent became pastors in so short a time. In this period the median number of years spent as an assistant rose to just under 4.5. The lengthening years of assistantship—still brief by the standards of later generations—spelled a gradual end to the kind of independence young priests had known in the nineteenth century and, despite the conflicts endemic to rectory life, strengthened the bonds that defined priests as members of an exclusive social group.

The rapidity with which a young man became a pastor in the Foley era seems to have had little to do with the promise the Chancery judged him to possess. Indeed, it appears that Bishop Foley sometimes assigned especially bright and personable young priests as assistants—sometimes for many years—in large and well-managed parishes. There they were groomed to assume, in due time, large parishes of their own. Some of the priests who became pastors immediately after ordination, on the other hand, remained for the rest of their careers in small rural parishes. Quite apart from his talents, a priest's ethnicity affected the shape of his career. Even if he were American-born, a man of Polish descent could expect to serve only in Polish parishes, for there was a shortage of Polish-speaking priests in the Diocese well into the Gallagher years. By the turn of the century, however, the German-American priest had a greater measure of freedom. Their numbers were now quite large, and a goodly portion of the German-American population had been assimilated. Hence the German-American priest could reasonably expect to pass a part of his career in a mostly English-speaking parish, although he was likely to be assigned at some point to a historically German church. Priests of French origin seem to have been more restricted in their careers, although they were not assigned exclusively to ethnic parishes. Religious order priests had charge of the two French parishes in Detroit by 1889, but of the eight priests known to be of French descent who were ordained by Bishop Foley, all but one—who died shortly after ordination—spent at least a part of their careers in the old French parishes that stretched along the eastern shore.
of Michigan from the Ohio line into the Thumb. As for those priests who were recruited into the Diocese to serve one of the growing number of new ethnic populations there, they could expect to minister only to Catholics of their own nationality, no matter how long or admirable their service might be.

Whatever their ethnic background, most priests agreed that success led in fairly short order to a prosperous city parish. The small rural parish, where a good many priests began their careers, was widely disliked for its isolation—both from one's fellow clergy and the vibrant Church life of Detroit—and for its poverty. It was the rare rural parish, by the turn of the century, that was either as remote or as poor as the typical country parish of earlier decades, but young priests naturally measured their lot by the standards of their own rather than a previous generation. And it still happened that priests in small parishes were sometimes unable to collect their full salaries, especially when times were hard. “The people are very poor in this place,” wrote the French-born Father Benedict Gery of Algonac's Catholics in 1901. “No work to do during winter, very little during summer and fall, so I understand well that I cannot collect my salary.” Father Gery did not say what his pay had actually been that year, but in 1897—a year of recovery from a devastating depression—he had received only about $300 of his $700 annual salary. (Since his housing was provided and he had no family to support, Father Gery could live—albeit very simply—on a sum that would have meant destitution for a family with two or three young children.) Father John Command was apparently living austerely too as the pastor of St. Joseph's parish in the village of Trenton. “Not a dozen men of this parish earn three dollars a day,” he explained in 1909. “The average wage when there is plenty of work is one dollar and sixty-five cents. The parish priest can hardly get much out of people who have only this small income.”

Poor as they were, Trenton's wage-earners saw more cash in the course of the year than did many small farmers, who even at the turn of the century tended to be an economically marginal population. “You, having lived in this part of the country, know by experience how much farmers do towards church and school, especially towards a new parish house,” wrote the pastor at St. Clement's in rural Centerline in 1895. “The house is as good as ours,’ etc.: You know what that means.” What it meant at St. Clement's, at least according to Father Kramer, was a rectory “much too small for its purposes. I cannot even harbor a priest overnight, much less several, as on the occasion of a mission or other special devotions. The furniture is the most ancient, unfit for the poorest laboring man.” Father William DeBever, pastor in 1895 at St. Mary's in Redford, had a different set of grievances, but they too were caused by the poverty of his rural congregation. He had been able to collect only $415 of his salary that year, and was decidedly gloomy about his future in the parish. “The revenue will not cover the expenses, unless the priest does his own chores, takes care of his horse (he cannot do without it), split[s] his own stove wood for Church and House, shovels snow, keeps the Church clean etc. etc. and bring[s] himself down to the level of a common laborer.” At the age of sixty, the Dutch-born DeBever was emphatic in his
refusal to work as the parish hired hand, but his young American-born successor actually served as sexton as well as pastor for more than six years. "No charge for painting barn and outbuildings, nor for painting roof of the wing of the house and cementing same," Father Andrew Dooling wrote in the parish accounts for 1903, "this having been done by the pastor." 15

The city parish, with its large congregation, stood in contrast to the poverty of the country pastorate, for priests in large parishes nearly always lived well, collecting their full salaries and often additional fees besides and supplied with a spacious, even luxurious, rectory. And if the work of managing the large parish was considerable, it was work appropriate to an educated man. A successful city pastor was necessarily a good administrator, proud of "his good name, business ability and reputation," in the words of Father John Dempsey. His was a way of life removed from the level of the common laborer; it fulfilled the promise of social mobility that the priesthood held out to a working-class boy. And the young assistant in the large parish shared in the glory, although he generally carried a heavy burden of work. The busy city pastor, "engaged in building . . . or fighting a heavy debt" was obliged to "throw upon the shoulders of his assistant, the visitation of the sick, and much of the labor, which, under more favorable circumstances, would devolve on the parish priest," at least according to an 1896 account of priestly life. 16

Despite his many responsibilities, the assistant priest did not generally enjoy the same independence in his work that his peers in country pastorates did. Occasionally an assistant was assigned to a pastor with whom he worked in something like equality: Father Maurice Chawke was an assistant to Father James Doherty at St. Vincent's in Detroit for more than twenty years, the two men functioning, to all appearances, almost like co-pastors in the care of that enormous parish. But even where relations were amicable, pastors seem normally to have looked on their assistants as priests-in-training. Nor did harmony always prevail. The peace of the rectory was easily disturbed, at least according to a popular manual for priests published in 1909. Pastors should take care not to "show themselves unkind, cold and unfriendly toward their curates," the manual warned. They should not "find fault with everything" nor "overburden others unduly and spare themselves most conscientiously," still less frustrate an assistant's efforts out of jealousy or "go so far as to lay down for them stringent rules of conduct, as if their curates were children in the nursery." For their part, assistants were cautioned to be discreet with outsiders, considerate of the housekeeper, conscientious in their duties, frugal, and punctual. Above all they should cultivate a spirit of willing obedience, striving to overcome "a certain haughtiness of manner which repels the offer of advice and paternal instruction." 17

The delicate relationship between pastor and assistant was apt to be complicated, according to this particular manual, by any but the most tactful of rectory housekeepers. "Self-willed and overbearing" women were especially to be avoided, for "the assistant priests will seriously complain of the haughty treatment to which they are subjected." Most housekeepers were hardly so formidable, but
a handful of rectories in the Foley years were clearly run by women. "He was dominated by his housekeeper, a young woman, who assumed management of the parish," Bishop Foley explained of a priest whose career had not fulfilled its early promise. "This displeased his congregation and though there was no moral charge, I had to remove him on account of the boycott." Foley apparently enforced no rules with regard to the age of rectory housekeepers—his successors insisted on older women only—and on occasion a priest and his housekeeper grew old together. In such circumstances, a priest might develop a strong emotional dependence on the woman who ran his household. One priest ordained late in Foley’s episcopate had lived with the same housekeeper for many years by the time he became a prominent pastor in Detroit. "She has a strong influence on the pastor and for the good," a Chancery investigator told Cardinal Mooney in the early 1950s. "If anything should happen to her he could very easily go into [an] emotional tailspin." What a close relationship between a pastor and his housekeeper meant for the assistants who lived at the rectory obviously depended on the personalities involved. But assistant priests did sometimes "seriously complain" that the housekeeper played a role in the rectory and the parish that undermined their own authority as adult males and even as priests.18

Even in an unhappy rectory, however, the assistant learned that his lot was cast with the clerical world and not with the world of the laity. Under a stricter discipline than a priest living alone, he was expected to conform to what his pastor defined as acceptable behavior, earning as recompense the approval of more senior priests and, if he was fortunate, a reputation as a promising young man. The norm to which young priests were expected to hew was not precisely an ascetic one. But it was a code of conduct that defined the priest as a member of what was essentially a closed fraternity. The gregarious Bishop Foley might endorse for his priests a more genial public presence than Bishop Borgess had ever done, but Foley, like his predecessor, believed that a priest’s relations with the laity should be characterized by a fundamental emotional reserve. Nor should one’s manner of life in any way betray the dignity of the priestly calling. The prudent priest confined his friendships to the circle of his fellow clergy, met the laity on clearly defined grounds, and avoided the more obviously worldly pastimes. If Bishop Foley was not, on the surviving evidence, the ascetic his predecessor had been, his priests were still wise to avoid drinking in public and attendance at most popular amusements.

But the Foley years were also marked by a growing concern among priests that their approved way of life was too formidable a barrier between themselves and a portion of their male parishioners. They worried especially about young men. "There is, it seems, a natural timidity on the part of youth as it grows into manhood to meet a priest," admitted Kalamazoo’s Father Francis O’Brien in 1896. "With many there is a shyness which makes them feel reluctant to be seen in the company of a priest." This was a painful experience for any priest, according to Father O’Brien, but particularly for the young one, who "feels this restraint, this shyness which causes the young men to avoid him, most keenly." The
gulf might be narrowed, Father O'Brien believed, if younger priests were to enter in a limited way into the secular male world. "Make them feel that you are made of the same material that they are," he advised. "Talk baseball, billiards, and even prize-fighting if necessary." But Father O'Brien could not countenance a wholesale abandoning of priestly dignity. "Rarely if ever join in their sports," he cautioned. "By doing so you lessen your influence." 19

Certain of O'Brien's colleagues were even in the 1890s inclined to more liberal views. Father John Schreiber, for example, did not scruple to enter—and win—an 1893 bowling tournament sponsored by Detroit's St. Boniface parish, where he had been pastor since 1890. And eventually the boyish, athletic priest became, for even conservative Catholics, a much-loved fixture of parish life. What Father O'Brien typified was the uneasiness felt by those many priests who were, in the Foley years, caught between conflicting expectations. They were, on the one hand, heirs to the successful efforts of Detroit's nineteenth-century bishops to impose a uniform discipline on their clergy. Nearly all of them had accepted a view of the priesthood—and of priestly behavior—that emphasized their status as men set apart. But at the same time, they were members of a generation with higher hopes than any before it of incorporating the mass of the laity into a disciplined religious practice. And this task seemed often to require that the priest abandon his reserve, that he meet the more alienated laity on their own ground. Thus Father O'Brien, like many of his contemporaries, was trying to balance the dignity appropriate to his exalted calling with the need to be, for pastoral reasons, all things to all men—if not necessarily to all women, whose loyalty to the Church was much less problematic. 20

Father O'Brien's candor in 1896 was possible, perhaps, because he was known to be a highly successful pastor. He had charge of St. Augustine's parish in Kalamazoo from 1883 until his death in 1921, and during that time he built not only a widely admired parochial school but was instrumental in the founding of a hospital, a college, an academy for girls, a boarding school for boys, and a school for the "feeble-minded." He had, moreover, been among the first in the Diocese to build a fully equipped clubhouse for the young men of his parish—an innovation he recommended to all priests as a means of countering the alienation of youth from the Church. Whatever discouragement he met in his long career, he was surely comforted by the support of his large congregation and the admiration of his fellow clergy. But what of those priests—the great majority—whose careers were marked by less obvious signs of success? Were their modest achievements enough to compensate for the frustrations they encountered? The Chancery archives are of little help to us here, speaking as they do almost exclusively to the grievances and disappointments that occasionally moved a priest—or his parishioners—to write in protest to the Bishop. These grievances provide a certain insight into the clerical world of Foley's day, and for that reason they merit some attention. But they tell only a portion of the story, and perhaps a very small portion at that.

The bitterness that occasionally took possession of a priest as his career
passed into its middle stages had most often to do with what he took to be the poverty or low status of his parish. His more successful contemporaries had long since moved into prosperous pastorates, and their good fortune made the austere conditions of his life all the harder to bear. Sometimes, as we have seen, priests did live in genuinely straitened circumstances. "My income here since I am in the parish is all in all about $2.00 per week and from that the housekeeper must be paid and from the rest I can buy bread no butter," Father Henri Meuffels complained during the depression of the 1890s. (He was pastor at St. John the Evangelist parish on the outskirts of Detroit, still too sparsely populated a region to give adequate support to a priest.) But the marked discrepancy in priests' incomes in the Foley years could cause resentment even where a priest could not honestly claim that his life was not reasonably comfortable. "In my service of nearly 26 years I have never been able to take a trip to Europe and around the world as some others have done more than once," the pastor of a rural parish near Detroit told Bishop Foley in 1912. Neither had any of his parishioners, in all likelihood, been world travelers, but he measured his circumstances only against those of his fellow clergy. The relative poverty of many rural clergy led in the Foley years to frequent irritation between neighboring pastors. Father Joseph Seybold, pastor in the village of Maybee, registered in 1897 what was evidently a common complaint when he accused the priest at nearby Stony Creek of baptizing, marrying, and burying Catholics who lived within the Maybee parochial limits. A priest was normally paid for these services, and Father Seybold was aggrieved at what he regarded as a violation of canon law as well as a drain on his income. "I cannot and will not any longer patiently tolerate the free-methodist church performances of Rev. Ronayne," he warned the Chancery. 21

The resentments nursed by an unhappy priest might be turned in a more general way against his fellow clergy, especially those who were foreign-born or of a different ethnic background. Father John Kramer was disturbed to hear in 1895 that a priest only recently come from Germany was to be assigned to the flourishing St. Anthony's parish on the eastern edge of Detroit. "Now I ask you, as an honest man and as an American who has always done his duty as well as he could, is this right?" he demanded of Bishop Foley. "An imported foreigner, not knowing the customs and manners of this country; not even knowing the language preferred to a priest more than nine years in the service of God without complaint from anyone? An American who spent his time and money for this diocese, a child of the diocese who took the trouble to learn the German language and that well to be of service to his bishop?" (Father Kramer tried on several subsequent occasions to be moved from his rural parish, but to no avail. He was stationed there until his death in 1929.) A German-born priest, however, accused Bishop Foley in 1914 of a long history of animosity against his German clergy. "As a German I am open, frank, truthful, fearless to tell the truth," he wrote to his bishop, presumably to justify the intemperate attack that followed, "and not deceitful like many Irish, whom I have learned to know who are so fine and nice and friendly to one's face but so treacherous as to stab one from be-
hind.” He was unhappy with the Wyandotte parish to which he had come in 1906, and from which Foley had since refused to move him. “When nearly 9 years ago, You requested me to go to St. Joseph’s Parish in Wyandotte, I asked You, riding in Your carriage with You from Your residence toward the M[ichigan] C[entral] Depot, ‘Your Lordship, is this change really a promotion for me?’ You assured me then, that it was, when really and indeed, as I found out, it was not, as those priests know well, who are acquainted with the deplorable condition St. Joseph’s parish was in when you sent me here.” Foley’s most recent refusal to appoint him to a better parish had convinced him, he wrote, that what he had heard from various disgruntled priests in the Diocese was really true: Foley disliked his German priests and did not deal equitably with them. As for those who secured the best places, they were invariably the bishop’s cronies, the “flatterers” and the “tale-bearers.” This impassioned denunciation of a corrupt Chancery can hardly be read as a sober account of Foley’s administration, although it does reflect a simmering tension between Foley and certain of his German clergy, who feared that the bishop’s “Americanist” loyalties put him out of sympathy with their own vision of the Church. And it reflects in a distorted way the less attractive realities of the clerical world, where we find the same rivalries and festering resentments that all too often characterize life in the secular professions.22

Priests also complained about their parishioners, who were seldom as docile or as devout as the clergy would have them be. A good many parishes in the Foley years still had strong boards of trustees, and pastors sometimes found themselves in conflict with their trustees—or with a faction in the congregation—over the extent to which the laity might govern the parish. “One of my former defunct trustees had the hardihood to tell me to my face: I don’t see why a bishop or a priest would not do what the people expect him to do since they are paid by the people,” an indignant Father Alphonse Bertele told Bishop Foley in 1916. Ethnic rivalries complicated the pastoral role for many priests, especially in small town parishes where several ethnic groups were likely to belong to a single congregation. “New Baltimore people is a very particular people, especially the German element,” Father Henry DeGryse explained in 1895. “They want the priest just so! Otherwise they will criticize and fight him pretty badly.” In the parish at St. Joseph it was “a certain few polanders and Germans” who made life hard for their Irish-American pastor, whom they wanted to “work on a salary paid him at their discretion,” at least according to an irate partisan of Father James Gore. “This I consider an insult not alone to our beloved paster but to our holy religeon thereby placing us on a leval with the country cross roads Methodists.” The tensions at St. Joseph, however, were apparently slight when compared to the situation in 1895 at Detroit’s St. Joachim parish, whose French-Canadian members were unhappy with their “Franco-German” priest. “The people do not like Rev. Roth,” an anonymous parishioner informed Bishop Foley. “They do not want the Order of the Holy Ghost to have control of the Church any more. The trustees wants run the church themselves and the
people wants [a] French Canadian priest. Secret meetings are being held on the
quiet and if the church is again rented to the order of the Holy Ghost there is
going to be some serious trouble.”

Priests of unusually ascetic sensibilities were perhaps especially likely to have
difficulties with their parishioners, at least where those priests had not cultivated
the art of compromise. Father William Sinn had apparently not done so: just
one year past ordination, he spoke sternly in the regulations he published in
1890 for his parishioners at Lapeer. “It is very inconsistent to invite Our Lord
to attend and bless your marriage in the morning and ask the devil to the feast
in the evening,” Sinn warned. “If you have made up your mind that you cannot
get along at the wedding without dancing and strong drink, do not profane the
Sacrament by your hypocrisy. If you prefer the devil’s blessing to God’s blessing
please keep away from the church.” Father Sinn did not stay long at Lapeer—ill
health forced his resignation in 1892 and he died just two years later. But his
uncompromising stand against drinking and dancing almost certainly caused
the kind of resentment at Lapeer that such rules had generally caused in the
Diocese wherever and whenever they were imposed. Perhaps significantly, Fa­
ther Sinn had been unable, according to his 1890 parish report, to establish any
societies among the men and boys of the parish.

Had young Father Sinn lived longer, he might conceivably have modified his
views. But maturity and even broad-mindedness did not guarantee a priest an
amicable relationship with every group in his congregation. The Michigan Catho­
lic columnist known as “Rosaleen” was the recipient, in the early years of the
twentieth century, of many priests’ complaints about the ingratitude and intract­
bility of a troublesome minority among their parishioners. “It is the ‘progres­
sive up-to-date-know-it-all Catholic’ in a parish who is generally the head spokes­
man when it comes to meddling [with] the pastor,” she charged in 1906. “There
are a few of these cheap Catholics in every community.” Things had been dif­
ferent in the past, she believed, as ignorant of local Church history as most of
her contemporaries. “The Irish and German people of the forties and fifties, the
builders of churches in this country, were not such meddlers—they would not
criticize their pastor.”

A priest’s life, however, was not normally centered on rivalries and resent­
ments. The vast majority of his congregation were deferential to him, and many
priests enjoyed great popularity among their parishioners, who were eager to
honor their pastor on the anniversary of his ordination or the feast-day of his
patron saint and certainly at Christmas. His comings and goings were of interest
to a broad community. When Father James Doherty, pastor of St. Vincent’s par­
ish in Detroit, returned from a trip to Ireland in 1895, “a large and enthusiastic
crowd greeted him at the railroad station; he was escorted to St. Vincent rectory
by a deputation of 12 carriages.” Fully 8,000 persons were said to have been wait­
ing in the vicinity of the church, not only members of the parish but Catholics
from other parts of Detroit as well. (The band from the neighboring German
parish of St. Boniface was on hand to play Irish and American songs.) The re­
turn of Father Joseph Joos to St. Mary's parish in Monroe in 1905 was nearly as lavishly celebrated. Father Joos had gone home to Belgium for six months "in quest of health," and his parishioners were delighted that he was well enough again to resume his pastorate. "A large assemblage" of parish men met him at the depot and—together with the Monroe Cornet Band—accompanied his carriage to St. Mary's Church, where "a vast congregation had been awaiting the Father's arrival since early in the evening." Speeches of welcome followed, and then the presentation of "a basket of flowers in which was concealed a check of $723.00, a donation and thank-offering of St. Mary's congregation." The Catholics of St. Mary's parish in the village of Chelsea were too few to mount such grand demonstrations, but Father William Considine must have understood in what affection he was held there. "We parted today with our dearly beloved Father Considine," wrote young Johanna Devereaux in 1895. "He was my Sunday School teacher. When the news came to our house I did not cry as bitterly as mamma and my sisters, but . . . you know I felt just as bad, he was the best teacher the Catechism class ever had." 26

If the affection of their people was perhaps the most critical source of sustenance for many priests, their work had other compensations as well. Priests were often important as local men of affairs, as we will have occasion to see when we examine Protestant-Catholic relations in the Diocese. Those many priests who came from working-class families, especially, could hardly help but be gratified by their inclusion in the local elite. The evidently greater discipline in the religious practice of the mass of Catholics in the Foley years was a source of comfort and pride to the clergy, particularly when their own hard work and appealing personalities appeared to be a major stimulus to a new religious fervor among their parishioners. "The pastor, Rev. Father James Stapleton, who came to organize this parish seven months ago has done wonders with the material at hand," an early member of Annunciation parish in Detroit wrote in 1906. The temporary church, housed in a former public school building, "accommodates 300 people and is crowded to the very doors at each of the three Masses on Sunday. So popular has Father Stapleton become in the parish that people who have not thought of religion for years past, have become regular attendants and have rented pews." And priests were obviously sustained in their work by their own religious faith, however little evidence they have left us with regard to their interior lives. A new emphasis on an emotional Eucharistic piety in the 1890s and after was important to the spiritual lives of many priests, and it helped to confirm for them an already strong sense of the exalted nature of their calling. 27

The typical priest's career in the Foley years did not end in retirement. The majority of priests evidently served as pastors until they died. Retirement was something that a man requested only if his health was so poor that continued work was impossible, and it was apparently something that a conscientious priest sought with some reluctance. "I find myself forced against my will to ask you to retire me from all active duties," Father Charles Thomas wrote from his parish in Erie in the fall of 1897. He was then about to celebrate his seventy-
ninth birthday, but wanted to stay on in the parish through the end of the year, in order to balance the books and collect at least a portion of the salary owed him. "If it please your Lordship I should wish to remain pastor until Jan. 1st to collect back pew rent, as we are very much behind. I have been able to pay until now all ordinary expenses; but I have not received anything yet on my salary for '97."28

Father Thomas had served at Erie since 1850, and had obviously not grown rich there. He had no recourse, he told Bishop Foley, but "to hope that you will grant me a small pension on the infirm fund." This the bishop did, although we do not know whether Father Thomas drew the full $500 annual stipend that was the maximum granted a priest from the Infirn Fund in the 1890s. This fund was apparently in a perennially precarious state: $2,920 was received in 1898, for example, from the tax that was levied for this purpose on all parishes, while $2,878 was expended on pensions. For this reason, the priests who served as directors of the fund were expected to scrutinize each case that came before them, and not to assume that old age alone was sufficient cause for retirement. When Father James Wheeler, longtime pastor of Our Lady of Help parish in Detroit, asked in 1919 to be retired—on the grounds that he was "advanced in years and in feeble health"—the diocesan consultors, to whom such matters were apparently now referred, were not disposed to grant the request. Father Wheeler was just days shy of his seventy-first birthday, but this was evidently an age when a priest could still be expected to be of service. "It was thought well to get the opinion of his physician," the consultors decided. "If the doctor thinks a vacation of several months will improve his health sufficiently to resume his duties, Father Wheeler is to be asked to reconsider his resignation." Not surprisingly, perhaps, Father Wheeler was pastor at Our Lady of Help when he died in 1923.29

Still, it was necessary at times to permit priests to retire at unusually early ages, when their physical—or occasionally mental—incapacity left the Chancery no alternative. And this could be expensive. The member of the ordination class of 1901, for example, who retired for reasons of health at the age of forty-four lived until he was sixty-nine. But most priests not only remained healthy enough to work well into old age; they seem to have accepted without complaint a view of the priesthood that had no place for mandatory retirement. The very meaning of their lives was so bound up with the work they did in the parish—which was also home—that retirement may well have seemed an uneasy, even a frightening, prospect to many of them.

We know almost nothing about how those priests who did retire spent their inactive years. Only the most limited public role was apparently permitted them. "You are allowed to say Mass in your private chapel, without in any way making it a place of worship for Catholics or those living in the neighborhood of said private chapel," Bishop Foley told Father Amandus Vandendriessche, who was "honorably retired" in 1892, just before his fifty-sixth birthday. "You are moreover allowed to say Mass in any church or chapel in our diocese with the permission of the pastor or superior. But you are not allowed to preach or make
announcements in any church or chapel in our diocese without our special per-
mission.” The American-born among the retired priests probably often lived
with family members, but those who had come to the Diocese from Europe as
seminarians or as young priests might find themselves alone. Occasionally a
priest retired to his European homeland, but changes there—and in himself—
might prove to have been so great that he was in many ways a foreigner in his
native place. This happened to Father George Laugel, born in Alsace in 1843,
who came to the Diocese of Detroit about four years after his ordination in Paris
in 1875. Father Laugel had returned to France when he retired, and was living
at the Seminaire Colonial in Paris in the early 1920s. But he found little in the
way of happiness there, at least of an earthly sort: “There are 20 holy Masses
said every morning in the Chapel and I attend them all. I have nothing else to
do—My existence is sad enough here: Cold, Solitude, inactivity, nostalgy of
friends of dear America.” The spiritual condition of France, moreover, caused
him no end of distress, especially when compared to what he remembered as
the spiritual health of his former American diocese. “O happy and dear Amer-
ica!!” he wrote to a friend in Detroit, apparently on the Feast of St. Blaise.
“Surely you have been giving the blessing of Saint ‘Blaise’ from your first holy
mass till late. Here, alas! in the whole of France, it is unknown, except in Alsace.
There is a great deal of piety in Paris, but, too sad to behold, only one third
of the people practices their religion—the laborers are mostly Socialists.”
Father Laugel’s mind was lively, and he maintained an interest in French and American
politics, as well as in the theological politics that were so much a part of Euro-
pean ecclesiastical life. (The recent condemnation of Brossac’s commentaries on
scripture, he noted, had “created a sensation in France,” adding wryly, “is it not
astonishing that so many learned and deep Sulpicians, the great Tanquerey ‘en
tete’ should not find out those errors in 25 years? Sed Roma locuta est—”) But
for all his interest in the European scene, his heart was still in the United States,
where the active days of his priestly life had been spent—days that he remem-
bered with a wistful nostalgia. “America is now the most beautiful land to live
in, after the Kingdom of Heaven,” he told his Detroit correspondent.30

Priests in trouble

In every generation of priests who have served in the Diocese, there have been
a few men whose careers have been notably troubled. Most often the problem
has been alcoholism. Sexual scandals, traditional grist for the anti-Catholic mill,
have been surprisingly infrequent, at least if we credit the records that have sur-
vived in the Chancery archives. And there were only a handful of men in the
generations before Vatican II who are known to have left the priesthood, either
by applying for laicization or simply abandoning their careers. We know almost
nothing about those who did, save that drink was a factor in many of the cases.31

Perhaps the single most notorious instance of a troubled career in the late
nineteenth century was that of Father John Busche, who came to the Diocese
in 1864 from the American College at Louvain and served as pastor at Lapeer until 1890. Father Busche apparently lost his faith as he became progressively more preoccupied with what a worried Bishop Borgess described as “intricate and difficult questions of science and philosophy,” questions that Father Busche was by the early 1880s attempting to explore in his sermons. “It is not only false, that Herbert Spencer, Tindall, Darwin, etc., etc. are the great thinkers and philosophers of this century,” Borgess warned him in 1883, “but it is wrong to laud the leaders of the rankest infidelity from the altar of God; for the very Catholic instinct rebels against the praise bestowed on such heroes of impiety and crime.” Father Busche should in future confine his preaching “to simple and solid explanations of Catholic faith and morals,” the bishop continued. “In so doing, all hazardous expressions must be scrupulously avoided, such as ‘it has been my aim these three or four last years to make religion less galling and burdensome as may have been noticed.’” Any subsequent reformation on the priest’s part was short-lived, for Bishop Foley felt compelled to suspend Busche from all priestly duties in 1890. He was never reconciled with the Church, but subsequently married—in a civil ceremony—and apparently lived in the vicinity of Lapeer until his death in 1905, giving occasional vent to his rationalist views in the local press.32

Colorful though he was, Father Busche was hardly typical of the troubled priests who made life difficult for their bishops, and, often enough, for their parishioners. (“Recently on two occasions he has been unable to officiate at funerals when the corpse was brought to church and people had assembled at church,” an aggrieved parishioner told Bishop Foley about his pastor, who had a history of heavy drinking. “We have had no lenten services this yr after announcing he would hold such services weekly.”) We have already seen that alcoholic priests were a serious problem in the early days of the Diocese, when bishops Rese and Lefevere were forced to recruit their clergy from whatever quarter they could, and to accept priests on the slenderest of recommendations. Once Bishop Lefevere had established avenues of recruitment in his native Belgium, however, the incidence of alcoholism among the diocesan clergy seems to have declined markedly. Lefevere, like his successors, inquired closely after the character of those seminarians being trained for the Diocese, and was quick to withdraw support from any young man who evinced a weakness for liquor. But even the most intrusive episcopal vigilance could not prevent the ordination of an occasional man who had, perhaps still unbeknownst to himself, a disposition to alcoholism. A mere handful of alcoholic priests in his diocese could create such problems for a bishop that it was hard for him to see that the problems he faced in this regard were probably much less severe than those encountered by his predecessors in frontier days. “So many young priests in this country have become a disgrace to themselves and to the Church by the excessive use of liquor,” an unhappy Bishop Borgess told a priest whom he suspected of heavy drinking, “that the possibility of another victim horrifies us.”33

Bishop Borgess dealt with the alcoholics among his clergy much as his prede-
cessor had done and much as Bishop Foley would later do. Each bishop was con-
stantly alert to rumors that certain priests were suspected of heavy drinking, and
each was quick to warn the priest in question to mend his ways. “When you met
us at the depot in Jackson on the 11th ult., your face had the appearance of a
confirmed drunkard,” Bishop Borgess wrote to one of his priests. “No doubt, you
may have a satisfactory explanation for that, but that unfortunately does not
remove the public ‘signboard.’ We were, moreover, told last year by a priest, that
‘before long you would be on the drunkard’s list—that the opinion of priests on
the line.’ We beg of you, therefore, for the sake of your own soul and the honor
of religion, ‘ut sobrinis sis.’ We ask for no explanations.”

Should a priest ignore his bishop’s admonitions and particularly if he were
to be drunk in public, his bishop would almost certainly remove him from his
parish, although in some cases—most notably in a large Detroit parish in the
1880s—that removal came only after repeated offenses. What to do with a priest
once he had been removed was problematic. A period of penance was nearly
always required—perhaps a retreat of several weeks’ duration at a secluded mon-
astery—and the offending priest had to pledge that he would never drink again.
If he seemed penitent and determined to reform, he was generally assigned to
a new parish, sometimes as an assistant to a mature and respected priest but
more often—at least in the Borgess years—as the pastor of a country church.
(Several of the smallest and poorest of the rural parishes in the Diocese were host
in the nineteenth century to considerably more than their share of alcoholic
priests.) In a rural parish, the Chancery apparently calculated, any future mis-
conduct on the part of the priest would scandalize the fewest people, and the
priest himself understood that his new post—poor in revenues and in status—
was a punishment for his prior misbehavior. Punishment was called for, at least
as far as his bishop was concerned. Lefevere, Borgess, and Foley alike believed
that excessive drinking was caused by a failure of will—that it was a sin rather
than the manifestation of deep-seated psychological or physical problems. This
was especially true of bishops Lefevere and Borgess, both of them well known
as temperance men.

Because they understood problem drinking in this way, Detroit’s bishops re-
sembled to chronic alcoholism among their priests by imposing upon the offend-
ers a round of progressively more severe and isolating penances. If an alcoholic
priest resumed drinking in his new parish, he might be sent to an even poorer
and more remote pastorate. If he failed there—as he almost invariably did—he
would probably be ordered to make yet another penitential retreat, and then
be reassigned—perhaps as an assistant, perhaps as a country pastor—but this
time in a different quarter of the Diocese. Eventually he was likely to be sent
to one of a handful of institutions run by religious orders, generally as adjuncts
to asylums for the insane, where alcoholic priests were confined and subjected
to an essentially monastic discipline. St. Joseph’s Retreat in rural Dearborn was
one possibility; St. Benoit-Joseph Asylum near Montreal, founded in 1884, was
another. “As your Lordship is aware, I am almost eleven months at Long Point,”
an unhappy priest wrote to Bishop Foley from this latter establishment late in
1896, "and I am in great dread of the approaching severe weather. . . . I most
implovingly beg and entreat you to grant me permission to come home. I trust
your Lordship is well satisfied with the long retirement and penance which I
was obliged to endure for my past transgressions." This particular priest, whose
problems with drink went back at least to 1881, was apparently kept at St. Benoit-
Joseph Asylum until 1898, when he was assigned as an assistant in a small-town
parish in the Diocese. He did not last long there, however, reverting in short
order to the behavior that had caused him so much grief over the course of his
career. Bishop Foley never assigned him to a parish again, and he seems to have
lived with relatives until his death in 1903. He had at an earlier point in his ca-
reer been sent to his relatives, for Bishop Borgess had finally despaired of him.
"Experience has repeatedly proved that the best promises and even the solemn
‘oath’ of Rev. —— cannot be relied upon, for his ‘oath’ he kept only one single
month, after he went to Dearborn," Borgess told a priest who still believed that his
hard-drinking friend was capable of reformation. "Hence, if you believe him to be
sincere in his intention of saving his soul, you ought to encourage him to free
himself from every temptation by retiring forever into a religious community."35

The point of this dispiriting narrative is not to insinuate that alcoholism was
more prevalent among the clergy than it was among the men of other profes-
sions, for this was almost certainly not the case. But it was a particularly vexing
problem for the Church, because an alcoholic priest remained a priest—and
hence the responsibility of the Diocese—no matter how seriously his drinking
interfered with the performance of his duties. He could not be laicized, or even
sent to another diocese, unless he himself consented. And although a bishop was
not obliged to assign a troubled priest to a parish, Detroit’s bishops were ap-
parently reluctant to abjure all financial responsibility for even the most con-
firmed and long-term alcoholics. The priest whose problems were such that—in
the words of an understandably unhappy parishioner—he was "no longer respon-
sible for his actions or able to perform his duties as pastor," was still some twenty
years later the financial responsibility of the Diocese as an inmate of St. Joseph’s
Retreat. (Incardinated into the Diocese from Ireland in the early 1890s, this par-
ticular priest quickly proved to be a bad bargain for Bishop Foley.) An alcoholic
priest was, for his ordinary, rather like the burden of an alcoholic in the family,
and Detroit’s bishops responded to their troubled clergy with much the same
mixture of patience and rage that often characterizes the long-suffering kin of
a chronic drinker.

Detroit’s bishops did not differ much from their episcopal contemporaries in
their response to alcoholism among the clergy. Other bishops too saw the genesis
of the problem in a want of virtue, and prescribed for it the kind of penitential
remedies that in most cases simply aggravated the deep psychological problems
of the alcoholic priest. What finally distinguished Detroit in this regard was the
attitude of Cardinal Edward Mooney, who in 1953 gave permission to Austin
Ripley to establish “Guest House” in the Archdiocese of Detroit. A lay-run in-
stitution for the treatment of alcoholic priests, Guest House operated on the assumption that alcoholism was a "disease of the whole man" and that its clients were "patients, not penitents." Its program, initially controversial, has proved over the years to be remarkably successful. We will later look in more detail at the inauguration and development of Guest House in the Archdiocese, for its history has much to say about the way in which most Catholics—and the clergy themselves—understood the priesthood and the psychology of the priest in the years immediately preceding the Second Vatican Council. Suffice it to say here that most Catholics in the mid-1950s seem to have regarded the alcoholic priest in terms that even the stern Bishop Borgess would have immediately recognized.

It would be wrong to end this chapter on a gloomy note, for the Foley years were a time of significant progress for the clergy of the Diocese. They were, by 1918, a mostly American-born population, and this alone represented a major change from the time when Bishop Borgess arrived in his new Diocese to find that fewer than 7 percent of his priests had been born in the United States. The priests of the Foley years, moreover, were a reasonably disciplined and cohesive lot, despite the personal rivalries and ethnic animosities that sometimes disturbed their relations with one another. The great majority of them were loyal to the Chancery, well conducted and hard working, and seem to have possessed a deeply spiritual vision of their calling. The "true priest" was "a sign of hope and reconciliation" in the world, Father Frank Kennedy told a congregation in 1891, and nearly all of his clerical contemporaries would surely have agreed. Indeed, if we look beyond the Foley years to the ordination classes of the 1920s and the 1930s—some of which were among the largest in the history of the Diocese—we can see that the priests whom Bishop Foley had ordained had proved to be compelling signs of "hope and reconciliation" for a good many young men. Those same priests had helped to stimulate a new religious fervor among many of the laity, whose religious practice by 1918 was more disciplined than it had ever been before. "What a blessing it is then, my dear friends, to have this priesthood among us," the Jesuit William Mitchell told a congregation at St. Vincent's Church in Detroit in 1899. "How grateful we should be to Almighty God for the blessings He gives His ministers." The occasion was the first Mass of Father Richard Grace, who had grown up in the parish and whose friends and family had turned out for the happy event. But they were not the only members of the congregation who gave their full assent to what Father Mitchell had to say in his sermon in praise of the priestly life.36
Children at St. Vincent’s Asylum, Detroit, probably in the 1890s.

Students at St. Francis Seminary, Monroe, in 1886.
Interior of Sweetest Heart of Mary Church, Detroit. The church was built between 1890 and 1893, during the pastorate of Father Dominic Kolasinski.
Bishop John Foley, seated left, with Cardinal James Gibbons, seated center.
St. Joseph's Hospital, Mt. Clemens, under construction in 1900.

The episcopal residence on Washington Boulevard, c. 1918.