

A HISTORY OF THE REGINA ARCHDIOCESE

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Saskatchewan was barely five years a province of the Dominion of Canada when Pope Pius X established the Diocese in 1910 as a Suffragan See in the District of Assiniboia. It was a time of heady growth in the west that began even before Saskatchewan became a province in 1905. Immigrants arrived by the trainful into what an early author had dubbed *The Great Lone Land* hoping to grab a prime quarter section of and as promised by the federal government. If they cleared the land and had some sort of domicile in which to live, the quarter section was theirs.

Some used the freshly turned sod as construction material and layered them together into one and two room houses. Others, dug a hole in the ground and for a time lived under an overturned wagon until such time as they could build a more permanent structure. Many were Catholics and in building towns and villages the first structure that broke the prairie endless horizon was a church steeple. Some were built on land donated by a local farmer and instead of being built in the community it rose on the prairie, in a central location for better access by those living on the land or in surrounding communities. A few of those structures survive to this day restored as a reminder of what was. Descendants of the early pioneers often return to them for weddings or funerals.

Growth was rapid. Five years after being formed it became the Regina Archdiocese and the first bishop, Olivier Elzear Mathieu, became Archbishop and almost immediately began building his cathedral. When he arrived there were 60 priests serving 58,771 Catholics. Sod turning took place June 1, 1912 a month before the occurrence of what still stands as the country's worst weather related disaster, the Regina Cyclone. It roared through downtown not quite a kilometer from the Cathedral site, destroying hundreds of buildings and killing 28 people.

The first mass was celebrated December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, in the basement of the partially completed church. It took another four years to 1917 before it was completed. A Casavant organ was installed in 1931 and its sound is such that it is often used for visiting organists to perform recitals.

The twin-spired cathedral, the mother church of the archdiocese, dominates the west central area of the city in what is now known as the Cathedral District. When Mathieu died, October 26, 1929, he left behind 130 priests, in eight communities and the communities of Sisters had increased from 60 in six communities to 320 in 15 communities. (History of the Archdiocese. Archdiocese archives). Catholic parishes, schools and hospitals dotted the entire Archdiocese.

The future looked bright, not just for the growing number of Catholic churches, hospitals, schools and other institutions. Glowing accounts of the fertile prairie filled newspapers of the day. The southern prairie was quickly labelled the breadbasket of the world because of the major crop of wheat. General Motors saw a business opportunity and built a huge, even by today's standards, automobile assembly plant in 1931 what was then north east Regina.

The population grew so rapidly there were optimistic predictions of Saskatchewan becoming the dominant western province; then came the market crash of 1929 followed by almost 10 years of what became known as the Dirty Thirties. The sky dried up and the winds howled and some of the hottest days on record, some of which still stand, turned the southern prairies into a veritable dust bowl. Grasshoppers almost of biblical proportions chewed their way through of what was left of the crops.

Despair reigned. People began leaving their farms; the infamous Bennett Buggy a combination of horse and automobile, made its appearance piled high with the remains of farm households as they made their way out of the province. The situation was so desperate that Ontario began sending trains west loaded with potatoes. The Archdiocese piled up a debt of \$1.14-million. The Archbishop's residence was sold and converted to a Franciscan Monastery, Regina Cleri. (History of the Archdiocese, Archdiocese Archives). But there was still some growth.

Several parishes for immigrant communities were established in Regina; St. Mary and Little Flower for the Germans, St. Anthony for the Polish and St. Stephen for the Hungarians. Canadian Martyrs was opened in 1931 and St. Charles in 1934. (History of the Archdiocese. Archdiocese Archives) St. Mary, Little Flower and St. Anthony continue to serve parishioners although their populations, except for St. Anthony which remains Polish served by Polish priests from the Society of Christ community, are much more diverse.

In total 28 new parishes were established in the latter half of the Dirty thirties. The Sisters of Service had 5,000 children receiving Catechism through correspondence; there were 150 priests and 340 Sisters serving a population of 238,000 Catholics.

Then came 1939 and the start of WWII. Prairie boys volunteered in droves or were conscripted draining the archdiocese of its future manpower. But those that were left persisted. The weather turned and with the war fueling some growth farms began to grow. The vast, open, land was ideal for flight training and the famous British Commonwealth Air Training Plan established flight schools for Allied Pilots across the Archdiocese. They came from all lands and after the war many returned again nourishing the southern prairie.

The Church continued to grow and by the early 1960s there were 101 parishes with 156 mission parishes, nine Catholic hospitals, 114 diocesan priests and 85 religious priests. The Archdiocese celebrated its 50th anniversary in June 1961 with a huge celebration in Exhibition Stadium. (History of the Archdiocese, Archdiocese Archives).

The second Vatican Council (1962-65) ushered in many changes and while it modernized the church, encouraged ecumenism and became more engaged in secular society, it also led to many clergy and religious leaving their vocation. Conservative Roman Catholics found the changes difficult; young people embraced a more liberal lifestyle, fewer attended and church attendance began to decline.

It wasn't until the turn of the 21st Century when the Church began a resurgence. The Regina Archdiocese began a long consultation process that authored the Pastoral Plan which is still in progress. Some parish communities amalgamated into larger more viable organizations. Foreign born priests were recruited as missionaries and one new parish, Resurrection Parish, was established in one of Regina's growth areas. Prayers for vocations were instituted in all parishes and God listened calling 10 seminarians to study for the priesthood, the largest group in anyone's memory.

The Archdiocesan Diaconate program under the direction of Archdiocesan Theologian Dr. Brett Salkeld, in September began its third year of a four-year program with all 10 original candidates continuing their studies.

The Regina Archdiocese covers most of southern Saskatchewan. It has 147 parishes including mission churches and First Nation reserves and 97 priests serving about 120,000 Roman Catholics.