

This is a work of historical fiction.

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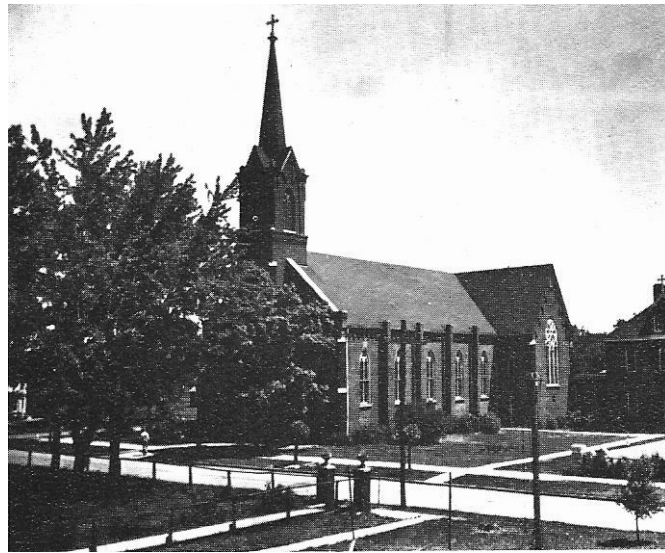
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A Duty Sanctioned

Building St. Columban Church

1879



By

Brenda Anderson O'Halloran

This book is historical fiction based on actual events and dates in the history of St. Columban Church in Chillicothe, Missouri. The story is true and full of facts.

Preface

The characters are based on actual people who were members of the church, the community, and the diocese at that time. Those of you who descend from members of the church in 1879 may be surprised to find your ancestors as characters here. What few records and notes still exist from that time were used as references, but most of the dialog and many of the details were simply created with logic and much historical and genealogical research by the author.

The setting and events of the book are true to the history and traditions of the Catholic Church at that time. The scriptures quoted were taken from the Douay-Rheims Bible, the version most used as personal Bibles by Catholics in 1879.

As you read this book, try to imagine yourself as part of the parish back then. Imagine how you would have taken part in the building of the church in 1879. Believe it or not, the people then were thinking ahead to those of us in the parish today. What a legacy they left us! We owe them much for their hard work and sacrifice in building a strong church and a strong church family. If they could look down on us today and see the way we are caring for the church they built, they would be pleased that we have all done our duty in the restoration of St. Columban Catholic Church.

Brenda Anderson O'Halloran 2017



CHAPTER 1

Father Francis Moenning

Christmas was only two days away. Fr. Francis woke up worried. He had slept only a little. He had prayed endlessly throughout the cold, dark night, petitioning God, the angels, and the saints for help with his problem. Now it was almost dawn. One thought kept pounding in his head. “It’s up to you, Francis, my faithful servant.” Was that the voice of God?

Fr. Francis had been at the church only two months. While serving at Wien, Missouri, as pastor and superior of the Franciscan Friary there, he had been surprised to receive a letter from the Bishop of St. Joseph, John J. Hogan. Bishop Hogan asked the Franciscan fathers to take over St. Columban Parish in Chillicothe, Missouri, including its missions at

Utica, Springhill, Bedford, and Hogan's Settlement, along with the churches at Breckenridge in Caldwell County, and at Brunswick, an easy trip southeast by railroad. The Sisters of St. Joseph serving in Chillicothe had repeatedly requested that the Bishop bring in the Franciscans. With God's will and all things working out, the plan was made. Father Francis and his assistants, Fr. Bonaventure and Fr. Theodore, had arrived in Chillicothe in October 1878.

Fr. Francis sighed as he approached the altar of the small white frame church to light the candles. A freight train rumbled loudly down the nearby tracks. The number of faithful parishioners who gathered in the small nave seemed larger than usual for a Monday morning. Every time the church doors opened, the pews were filled. Today was December 23, 1878. As Fr. Francis stepped forward, he made the sign of the cross and uttered, "In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti." The morning Mass had begun.

As the Mass progressed, Fr. Francis prayed for Divine guidance that he might find the wisdom to meet the needs of his flock. His heart felt heavy and his head pounded. One thought kept repeating in his head. "You can solve the problems, Francis. Act wisely."

After the benediction, Fr. Francis went to the church door to greet the departing faithful. Joseph Pierson, a local businessman now retired, shook Fr. Francis' hand and invited him to walk uptown for breakfast. Fr. Francis went for his coat and hat, then the two men trudged across the railroad tracks. The wind seemed to whistle through their coats as they headed north six blocks toward the center of town and entered Mr. Pierson's favorite restaurant.

They talked of the Pierson family business east of Chillicothe, now in the capable hands of Joseph's son, Frank. From other parishioners, Fr. Francis had learned that Joseph had always been a kind and generous man, both to his employees and to his neighbors. The Pierson family seemed ever ready to contribute to good causes that would promote the town they had lived in since 1871. Fr. Francis

wondered if Mr. Pierson might be the right man to help him convince the people of the parish of the need for a new church building.

Inside the warm restaurant, over plates of fried ham and eggs and mugs of steaming coffee, the men talked about the growing size of the congregation. “They tell me this town started growing after the War Between the States ended,” Mr. Pierson explained. “I believe we have nearly 4000 people here now. The railroad has helped with that. Bishop Hogan counted just 12 families at the time he started our church here. Why, his first Mass in Mrs. Bell’s house had a congregation of only two. How many families do we have now, Father?”

“We have close to 150 families,” replied Fr. Francis. And he started to feel a bit of relief. But his problem was still right there in the front of his thoughts.

Mr. Pierson smiled. “I believe our congregation will continue to grow. I’ve heard for years that Catholics come through Chillicothe, looking for a place to settle, and decide to stay here because of our thriving parish. They are happy to be in a place with a daily Mass, Fr. Francis. They feel secure with the fact that we have three Franciscan priests here. Religious instruction is available for their children. They enjoy being part of our parish.”

“Yes,” said Fr. Francis. “The Lord is at work here in Chillicothe.”

“Father,” interrupted Mr. Pierson, “We do have a problem here at the church.”

Fr. Francis looked up from his breakfast and spoke, “What? Why do you think there is a problem?”

“Fr. Francis, it should be obvious. We all know that even though you have two masses each Sunday, there aren’t enough seats. Families rush to arrive early, so they don’t have to stand. Father, the church is too small. It is too crowded. We have all been talking about it. We think you need to consider enlarging the church.”

“You are right, Mr. Pierson. I agree. Can you answer a question for me? If you were going to build a new church here in Chillicothe, just where would you put it?”

“That’s an easy question, Father. I would build a new church toward the north end of town. All the new businesses are going that direction. I’ve noticed that most of the new houses are going up on the north side. The walk to St. Columban is too far for many. And the train noise is disrupting, with the church being next to the railroad tracks. Father, are you thinking about building a new church?”

“Yes,” said Fr. Francis emphatically. “Yes, I believe I am. Definitely.” And for the first time that day, he felt sure of his plan and said a silent prayer of thanksgiving.

When Mr. Pierson left the restaurant, Fr. Francis walked north. He felt a little warmer as he looked about him and thought about building lots. He walked back and forth from street to street, searching for the right location. Then he remembered that the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet were conducting a school for young ladies at the Academy of St. Joseph in the northeast part of Chillicothe.

Directly across the street from the sisters’ property was an entire square block sitting empty. He soon reached the place and stood on the corner, studying the land. Streets were laid out on all four sides. How promising this looked as a church site. A strong feeling came to Fr. Francis. “This is the place,” he whispered to himself. “It’s up to you, Francis. Act wisely.”

With that thought in mind, Fr. Francis walked back to the town square. He needed to speak to someone about the property at Ninth and Trenton Streets. He thought of Adam Saale, one of the very first parishioners of St. Columban parish. Adam and his brother Michael had a cobbler’s shop nearby, on the south side of the square. Fr. Francis directed his feet there.

When he entered Saale's shop, he noticed three more of his parishioners inside. They all turned and greeted him cheerfully. The brothers, John, Emil, and Henry Gier, were discussing new work boots with Adam and Michael. Fr. Francis made a quick decision to consult them all.

"Gentlemen, may I have a word with you?" Fr. Francis asked the men. "I have a problem. I need some advice."

"Of course, Father. Let's step into the back room," agreed Adam Saale. "Michael, will you watch the front?"

Fr. Francis, Adam, and the Gier brothers stepped into the back room of the shop. Fr. Francis began to speak. "I am wondering who owns the land across the street east of the sisters' Academy. I have a problem I am trying to solve and that property might be the answer. I know it is near your property, John. Do any of you know who owns it?"

"What is your problem, Father? Have you finally noticed that we need a bigger church?" inquired John Gier with a jolly laugh.

Fr. Francis was surprised, but the lump in his throat eased a little. He stammered, "How did you know? And yes, I am considering whether we should build a larger church and where we should put it. I have only spoken with one other person about this. But that block on Trenton Street looks promising. My question is, who owns it?"

Emil Gier joined in with the answer. "Father, that land is owned by S. Fisher Johnson and his wife Sarah. And it happens to be for sale."

Adam Saale interrupted. "Fr. Francis, several men of the parish have been discussing the need to build a new church and we have already begun contributing to a building fund. You need to go speak to Fisher Johnson. I believe he will be fair with the price. And the location

couldn't be better. What do you say, Henry? Can you take Fr. Francis to see the Johnsons right now?"

Henry Gier and Fr. Francis went out the door and started walking down Jackson Street. Emil, John, and Adam joined Michael Saale, Adam's brother, in the front room of the cobbler shop.

"Well, gentlemen," Adam announced, "it didn't take Fr. Francis long to figure out what this parish needs. It is time to get to work. Building a church will take much cooperation from all of us and every family in the parish. We will need to share in the expense and the work. We will all have to give of our time, our talents, and our money for the common good of the parish. This will be a big project. What do you say?"

"Praise be to God!" shouted John Gier.

And the others answered with "Amen!"

That night Fr. Francis told the other Franciscans of his plan to build a new church and showed them the preliminary bill of sale from Fisher Johnson. He had bought the entire city block for \$550, subject to the approval of the Diocese of St. Joseph. Father Bonaventure and Fr. Theodore sat with him discussing ideas and praying together for the success of the project. Fr. Bonaventure encouraged Father Francis to present his plan to the people at the Christmas Masses. "Your news will be welcomed as a Christmas gift," he said with a smile.

The next day was Christmas Eve. At midnight Mass and at the Christmas morning Mass, Fr. Francis would announce the plan. Of course, he would need to secure permission from the Most Reverend John J. Hogan, Bishop of St. Joseph, before the work could begin. Bishop Hogan had a special place in his heart for St. Columban parish. He would surely understand the needs here in Chillicothe and agree to the plan. Fr. Francis hoped his parish members would be in favor. He had already started to think about how this would be financed and who

would help them build the church. The day of fasting passed quickly with much thought, discussion, and prayer until it was time for Mass.

The little white frame church shimmered in the candlelight at midnight Mass. Once again, the members of the church were elbow to elbow, filling all the pews and standing in the aisles. Babies slept in parents' arms as Fr. Francis rose for the benediction. Then he stepped forward, even closer to the people, to make his announcement.

He looked out at the congregation with a smile on his face and carefully told them about the Divine guidance that led him to solve his problem. "We are going to build a beautiful church together, right here in Chillicothe, a church to last for generations, a church for your great-great-grandchildren to call their own. They will one day in the future offer prayers of thanksgiving that all of us in 1878 were so far-sighted. They will thank God for leading us to this decision. Generations to follow us will recognize the sacrifices we made and how we worked together to accomplish the building of a fine church to stand the test of time. Children many years from now will be baptized in our church, make their first Communions here, and be married before the altar of St. Columban Church. They will remember all of us who left them such a fine church. Our plan is just the beginning."

And the people sitting in the original St. Columban Church, the little white frame church founded by Bishop Hogan, did something unheard of in church. They showed their agreement with a round of applause.