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The end of an era: Jesuits to leave city after 128 years

By Sandy Vold

In a sense, the Jesuit presence in Prairie du Chien began way back in 1673 with the arrival of Father Jacques Marquette, a Jesuit priest, in his historic exploration of the Mississippi River.

It was 1880, however, when the Jesuits arrived to stay. In that year, they came to establish Campion college and take over St. Gabriel's parish from the Benedictines, who had served in Prairie du Chien since 1875.

Whatever the date one uses, the Jesuits have been in Prairie du Chien for at least 128 years, but come October 20, the Jesuit presence in the city will end. The two Jesuit priests remaining, Father Hubert Boschert and Father Jim Warosh, will move on to duties elsewhere, and a diocesan priest will replace them.

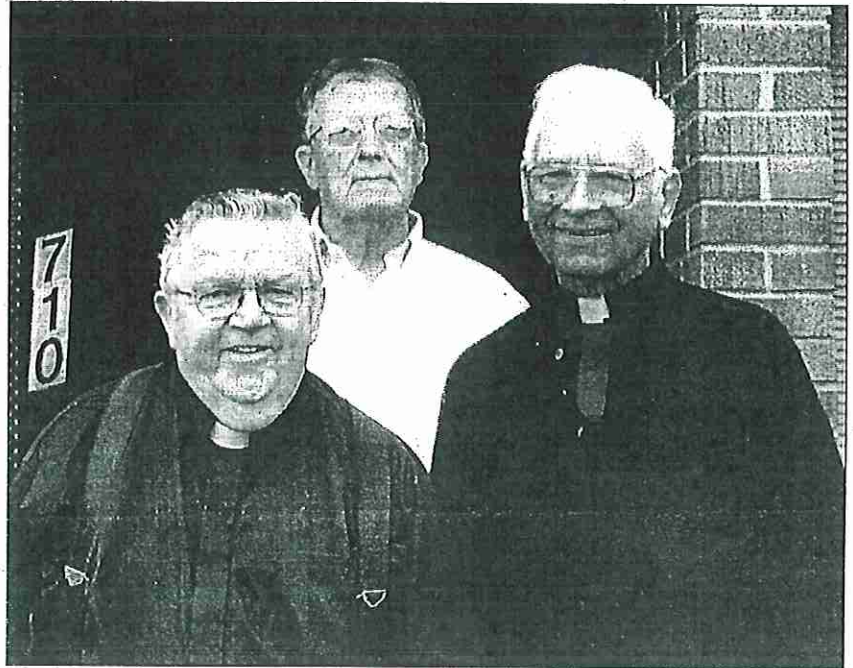
Fr. Boschert said the details have not yet been worked out, but as of October 20, the parishes of St. John's and St. Gabriel's will be handed back to the diocese.

Fr. Boschert provided a brief history of the Jesuits in

the city. The German Jesuits, he said, were driven out of Prussia in 1870 or 1871. They came to the United States and established a mission in Buffalo, New York. They moved across the northern tier of states, establishing colleges such as the University of Detroit, University of Marquette and, of course, Campion College, in Prairie du Chien, which opened in 1880 as College of the Sacred Heart and closed in 1888.

In 1880, when the Benedictines left Prairie du Chien, the Jesuits were asked to take over St. Gabriel's parish. They served St. Gabriel's until 1890, when the diocese took it over. There is nothing in the records, said Fr. Boschert, to indicate why they did that, and in 1916, the Jesuits were once again asked to take over St. Gabriel's. In the meantime, St. John's Church had opened in 1891 at the request of Catholics who wanted a priest who could speak the Bohemian (Czech) language. In 1989, the diocese asked the Jesuits to take over St. John's as well,

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Father Hubert Boschert, Father Jim Warosh, and Father John Wambach stand outside St. John's rectory at 710 S. Wacouta, their home in Prairie du Chien for many years. St. John's and St. Gabriel's will be served by diocesan priests in the future.

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freeing diocesan priests to go elsewhere.

Asked to identify some of the highlights of the Jesuit presence in Prairie du Chien, Fr. Boschert named four items:

- Campion High School, which operated from 1898 to 1975 and had a worldwide reputation. Fr. Boschert remembers seeing an ad for Campion High School in a Paris subway.

- The daily experience of sharing the faith and building up the faith in the people, who then mirror what they have received.

- Merging the two separate schools of St. Gabriel's and St. Johns into Prairie Catholic Schools. "At the beginning," he said, "people were uncomfortable. They very quickly came to realize it was a real blessing. The school became much more proficient."

- Helping the schools make the transition from a religious to a lay faculty. The School Sisters of Notre Dame had served the school from 1865 to 1985.

When the diocese takes over, Father Boschert said he will probably be assigned to Creighton University in Omaha as associate pastor at the college parish. Fr. Boschert was pastor at St. Gabe's from 1991 to 1993; then returned

in 2002.

Father Waroush, he said, will likely be in Milwaukee at Marquette University, serving in that college parish. Father Waroush, associate pastor, has been in Prairie du Chien for 10 years.

Father John Wambach, who had served the city for approximately 25 years, left in June to move to a retirement center due to health problems.

Fr. Boschert said that because the Jesuits are a religious order and live in community, there has always been more than one priest in the city, so that parishioners have not experienced the reality of the priest shortage.

According to Monsignor Richard Gilles, Vicar General of the Diocese of La Crosse, the priest shortage affects both the diocesan and religious clergy, and it was the decision of the Jesuit Superior to withdraw the Jesuit priests from Prairie du Chien based on their own needs and situation.

Monsignor Gilles said it is the Bishop's intention at first to provide pastoral care of the parishes by asking a retired priest (yet to be determined) to assist on the weekends. Later, he said, "the Bishop intends to put into place a more definite, stable pastoral presence by assigning, for example, an international priest.

The intention is that this priest would not be shared with another parish, but would be responsible for the two in the city of Prairie du Chien."

Monsignor Gilles said daily Masses will be offered once a definite priest is assigned. They may take place with a retired priest helping out at the beginning if he has residence in the city. "If he is a priest from La Crosse who commutes on the weekend," he added, "then it would not obviously be possible." He said there is no plan to consolidate the two parishes at this time.

The transition will not be without fanfare. On Oct. 8, Fr. Boschert said, the bishop and the Jesuit provincial will come for an evening supper with clergy of the diocese and Jesuits who formerly served at either parish or at Campion. This will be followed by a Mass of Appreciation with the bishop officiating. A reception for the public will follow. All events will take place at St. Gabriel's.

In summing up his feelings about his tenure in Prairie du Chien, Fr. Boschert said, "I've been a pastor for 18 years and have thoroughly appreciated the faith and activity of many wonderful parishioners, and I would like to express my gratitude for all their support throughout those years."