

## The First Bishop of Iowa, 1837-1858

In 1837 the Third Provincial Council of the Roman Catholic Bishops in the United States met for deliberations at Baltimore. These bishops were all pioneers, and their dioceses were new and pioneer dioceses, too. They looked at the map, and chose three new episcopal centers — Nashville, Natchez, and Dubuque. Thus were Tennessee, Mississippi, and Wisconsin Territory brought beneath the influence of episcopal rule.

There is nothing more fascinating in American history than the frontier's place in our national development. The story of Catholicism's victory over frontier conditions in its march past the Alleghenies, up through the prairies of the Old Northwest, on to the Mississippi, and beyond that to the Rockies and the Pacific coast, is an epic in itself.

Of the three new sees, created at Baltimore, Dubuque was at the time of its creation the one farthest removed from the centers of American civilization, and was by far the largest in area in the young nation. It comprised roughly all the territory between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers: the present states of Iowa, Minnesota, and two-thirds of the Dakotas. Previous to this vast area's incorporation into the diocese of Dubuque,

it had been under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction, first, of Quebec when Canada was French; then when Louisiana was ceded to Spain in 1763, it was under the spiritual rule of Havana, Cuba; later, after the Louisiana Purchase, it was under Baltimore, then New Orleans, and finally under the bishop of St. Louis. Of course, this spiritual rule over Dubuque was vague and merely academic in those years, since no missionary until 1832 had penetrated to the wilderness that then was Iowa.

On April 18, 1839, a Mississippi river packet brought the first bishop of Iowa to Dubuque from the deep South. An Alabamian by adoption, he was first, beyond all that, a scion of the *ancien régime* of France.

Bishop Mathias Loras had been born at Lyons just as the Revolution in France was rushing to its climax. He was but an infant in his mother's arms when she pleaded with the tyrant Couthon for the life of her husband, a wealthy aristocrat and counsellor of Lyons. But Loras *père* was in the very first group to be guillotined, and a few days later the same fate overtook two of his sisters and two brothers, one of the latter being mayor of St. Cyr. In all, seventeen persons of the Loras family lost their lives for their political and religious convictions.

After his ordination to the priesthood, Mathias Loras became a professor and then president of the large diocesan seminary of Lyons. Abandon-

ing what promised to be a brilliant church career in France, he came to the diocese of Mobile to labor as a missionary in the forests and everglades of Alabama and Florida. (His was not the first Loras name known in America, for his father's cousin had served under the Marquis de Lafayette during the War of Independence.) In Mobile Loras had served as rector of the cathedral and had become the president of the first college of Alabama — Spring Hill College, still flourishing today.

How little Bishop Loras knew of Iowa before his arrival may be gathered from the letter he had previously written to Bishop Rosati of St. Louis from Alabama after receiving the news of his appointment by Rome. Among the questions he asked in this missive are these: "What are the people, Irish, American, French, savages? Is there any other village besides Dubuque? Is the climate because of the latitude cold? Are there some Catholic Indians? Do they speak English? At what distance is Dubuque from the Mississippi? How does one reach there?"

When the new bishop entered the little stone cathedral of St. Raphael's at Dubuque, built by Father Mazzuchelli, he was doubtless unconscious of the impress he was to leave for a century on the Catholic Church of Iowa. It is true that he was of aristocratic lineage; that he was a slaveholder while in Mobile; that his political and cultural

sympathies were strongly with the pre-Civil War South, and that he was a man of wealth. But before he died every cent of that wealth, and of all that he could beg from his family in France, was to be spent in Iowa on churches, schools, and other institutions; all of his broad missionary experiences learned in the Southland were to be used to advantage in this vast new missionary territory; and all of his previous feelings and inclinations were to be submerged in his heroic effort to establish the Catholic Church in the Northwest.

Hardly had he breathed the air of Iowa when, with Father Mazzuchelli, he built and launched his new college, which he named St. Raphael's Seminary, and which, humble as it was in its beginnings, was still the first institution of higher learning to succeed in Iowa. By educating here the sons of Iowa, Bishop Loras hoped ultimately to have a native clergy for his diocese. From his fruitful experience as president of Spring Hill College at Mobile, the new bishop knew that in this frontier college he could not expect an exclusive theological seminary as in France, nor a strictly maintained college as in the older and more settled sections of the country. He expected — and he was not disappointed — to find that his students would be of all ages, of all grades of education — a *melange* of theologians, seminarians, collegians, and high school students.

These scholars were not numerous in the earlier

years. Very few of the advanced pupils were Americans; the greater number of these came from abroad — from France, Germany, Ireland, and Luxembourg — to the Dubuque diocese to complete their college and theological courses before being ordained into the priesthood. The Americans formed the majority of the nonclerical students and of the younger lads.

Indeed, of the students of the preparatory department, practically all were American born. In fact, two of them were aboriginal Americans — two Sioux Indian youths from near Fort Snelling, Minnesota, whom Loras thought he might some day educate for the priesthood and use as missionaries among their savage kinfolk. They were also to teach the Sioux language to seminarians preparing for the Indian missions. Of students of mixed Indian and white blood there were several at various times: Alexander Faribault and several others of the sons of Jean Baptiste and Oliver Faribault — the founders of the Minnesota city that bears their name today — were students at the old St. Raphael's Seminary. So was Napoleon Brisbois, the son of Joseph Brisbois of the old Brisbois family of Prairie du Chien.

The Faribaults, it may be mentioned here, did not remain long. M. Faribault wrote that he was withdrawing his sons as he feared they had too much liberty at the Dubuque college, and he was sending them to the Jesuit college at St. Louis (St.

Louis University today) where they would be under stricter surveillance.

For the new immigrants in his widely scattered missions Bishop Loras at first secured priests from France, and later from Ireland and Germany. He himself made herculean journeys to visit his thinly-spread-out flock. On one occasion he went 275 miles by steamboat to the Falls of St. Anthony and to Fort Snelling where he baptized fifty-six persons and administered confirmation and gave communion to many others. He returned the entire distance on the Mississippi by canoe with a young priest and a solitary Indian guide, stopping at Indian villages and white settlements on the way, and plying the paddle as lustily as his more youthful companions. On another occasion, having gone by way of the river to St. Louis, he took a steamboat from there up the Missouri River and visited Council Bluffs and the western shore of Iowa. He traveled through his huge diocese by horseback, by oxcart, by wagon, and by carriage. With horse and buggy he once visited the stations all the way to Fort Dodge and circuitously back to Dubuque.

Under Loras' inspiring leadership some of his foreign-born priests became prodigious workers in the western vineyard of the Lord. Father Lucien Galtier, a Frenchman, was the founder of the city of St. Paul, the capital of Iowa's northern neighbor. Later he built up the parish of Prairie du

Chien. Today his remains lie there in front of the church of St. Gabriel — built by Mazzuchelli — in the tomb erected to his memory.

Another remarkable man was the German Dominican, Father John George Allemann, educated in Kentucky, who for years attended Burlington and the stations in Lee, Van Buren, and other counties in southeastern Iowa. The giant stature of this missionary impressed the chiefs and half-breeds of the Sauk and Fox tribes, many of whom were still in this part of the territory. His generous services for them, together with his human dealings, impelled the Indians to offer him the northern half of what is now the city of Keokuk. "From Fort Madison he usually travelled on foot," wrote one of his parishioners, "as I saw him for years, under his arm a pair of saddle-bags which contained all his church — all a missionary's conveniences to celebrate Mass. Being of huge stature and splendid health, he could cover in a morning on foot, without great fatigue, as much ground as an average horse."

As Father Allemann frequently crossed over into Illinois to care for the scattered Catholics there, and thus met Joseph Smith, the Mormon leader, on various occasions, a friendship gradually sprang up between the two men. It is evident that Smith greatly admired the tall Dominican. When Catholics from distant points in Illinois came to Nauvoo on their way to Fort Madison to

fetch the Iowa priest to attend sudden sick calls in their families, they usually found no means of crossing. Smith invariably sent his barge, manned with strong men, as the crossing was at the head of the rapids, to bring Father Allemann over. One wonders, then, whether it was with the consent of the departed Mormons, tacit, implied, or expressed, that in 1846, when Father Allemann began to build his church in Fort Madison, he used stones from the old Mormon quarries at Nauvoo and from the now abandoned Mormon temple. In the winters of 1846 and 1847 the priest brought over hundreds of loads of cut stones on the ice.

Loras' most successful Indian missionary in the 1840's was, singularly enough, a rather elderly priest, a "Bachelier" in letters from the University of France and a graduate of famed St. Sulpice at Paris — Joseph Cretin. Cretin's uncle had been guillotined in 1793 on the same platform that received the blood of Loras' father, and a year later his mother had been imprisoned by the revolutionists. His prodigious accomplishments at Prairie du Chien and especially on the Turkey River in Iowa near the Fort Atkinson reservation among the Winnebago tribe had won for him from James MacGregor, Jr., the United States Indian agent — and from other influential men as well — the enthusiastic endorsement of the position of superintendent of the "Winnebago School." In 1845, however, Governor John Chambers of the Iowa

Territory not only refused him this appointment but forbade him to open up a missionary school in the Neutral Ground.

The Abbé Cretin was then appointed by Bishop Loras as president of the Dubuque college, a position he relinquished when he became bishop of St. Paul, Minnesota Territory, in 1851. In the meantime the Winnebago had been moved to Minnesota; and there, to Cretin's ultimate joy, he was assisted under government auspices in opening up several trade and agricultural schools.

Mathias Loras laid the foundations for and established the standard of institutions both educational and eleemosynary which the Catholic Church in Iowa has since developed. In the 1850's he expanded his diocesan college into the ambitious Mount St. Bernard's College and Seminary south of the city of Dubuque. He brought the first nuns into Iowa; he induced the Sisters of Charity, B. V. M., to transfer their order from Philadelphia to Dubuque, with the intention of employing some of them in the Indian schools along the frontier. This teaching order has had a marvelous growth, with schools not only in Iowa, but extending today from Chicago to California. Among its colleges the celebrated Clarke College for Women at Dubuque is named for Mother Mary Francis Clarke, the foundress of the order who so daringly led her band of eastern ladies across the Mississippi into the Iowa wilderness in 1843. Here were regis-

tered among the student body, daughters of generals, judges, senators, and governors prominent in the territory of what is now Iowa, Wisconsin, Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, and Minnesota. After a life of singular piety and usefulness, Mother Clarke passed away peacefully on Sunday, December 4, 1887. "Her venerable remains were borne to the chapel where the Sisters had so often knelt with her who now lay so motionless in the great sleep of death." On the day of her burial, the solemn requiem Mass was sung by the Rt. Rev. Henry Cosgrove of Davenport. Mother Clarke's memory was honored by a beautiful panegyric offered by Bishop Hennessy of Dubuque.

The Brothers of the Sacred Heart, a teaching order of men, were brought by Loras from France. They taught in the Dubuque schools and in the Mount St. Bernard College. More dramatic was his welcoming of a group of Irish Cistercian monks in 1849. To these cowled Trappist cenobites he gave five hundred acres of land a few miles from the city of Dubuque, after they had met with refusal from eastern American bishops. In recent years their foundation, the New Melleray Abbey, has grown in numbers to such proportions in their huge Gothic stone monastery that they have now established a daughter-house in the Ozark hills of southern Missouri which already has thirty-five members of its own, vowed to silence and prayer.

The alert Iowa bishop had already in the 1840's

envisioned the erection of a hospital — which was to be the first hospital in Iowa. In 1845 he purchased ground for such an institution but was unable to start its building until 1852. In May of 1854 the "Welsh General" came to the help of the "French Bishop"; Senator George W. Jones, who had already made a generous contribution toward the hospital, introduced a successful motion in the United States Congress to use the building also as a marine hospital for the river cases of sickness on the numerous federal and private steamboats that stopped at Galena and Dubuque. With the funds thus appropriated, the hospital was enlarged and completed, and the Dubuque city council thereupon designated it as the City Hospital.

The farsighted Loras bought plots of ground in many of the infant towns of Iowa, which, scores of years after his death, were utilized for church and school sites for new Catholic parishes. In these, as well as in most of his other episcopal endeavors, he first used up his own family inheritance and then fell back on the financial help he received from the missionary societies of Europe. The three great organizations which poured their funds into the pioneer state of Iowa were the Propagation of the Faith Society of Lyons and Paris, France, the Leopoldine Society of Vienna, Austria, and the Ludwig Missionsverein of Munich, Germany.

What these three societies did for the Catholics

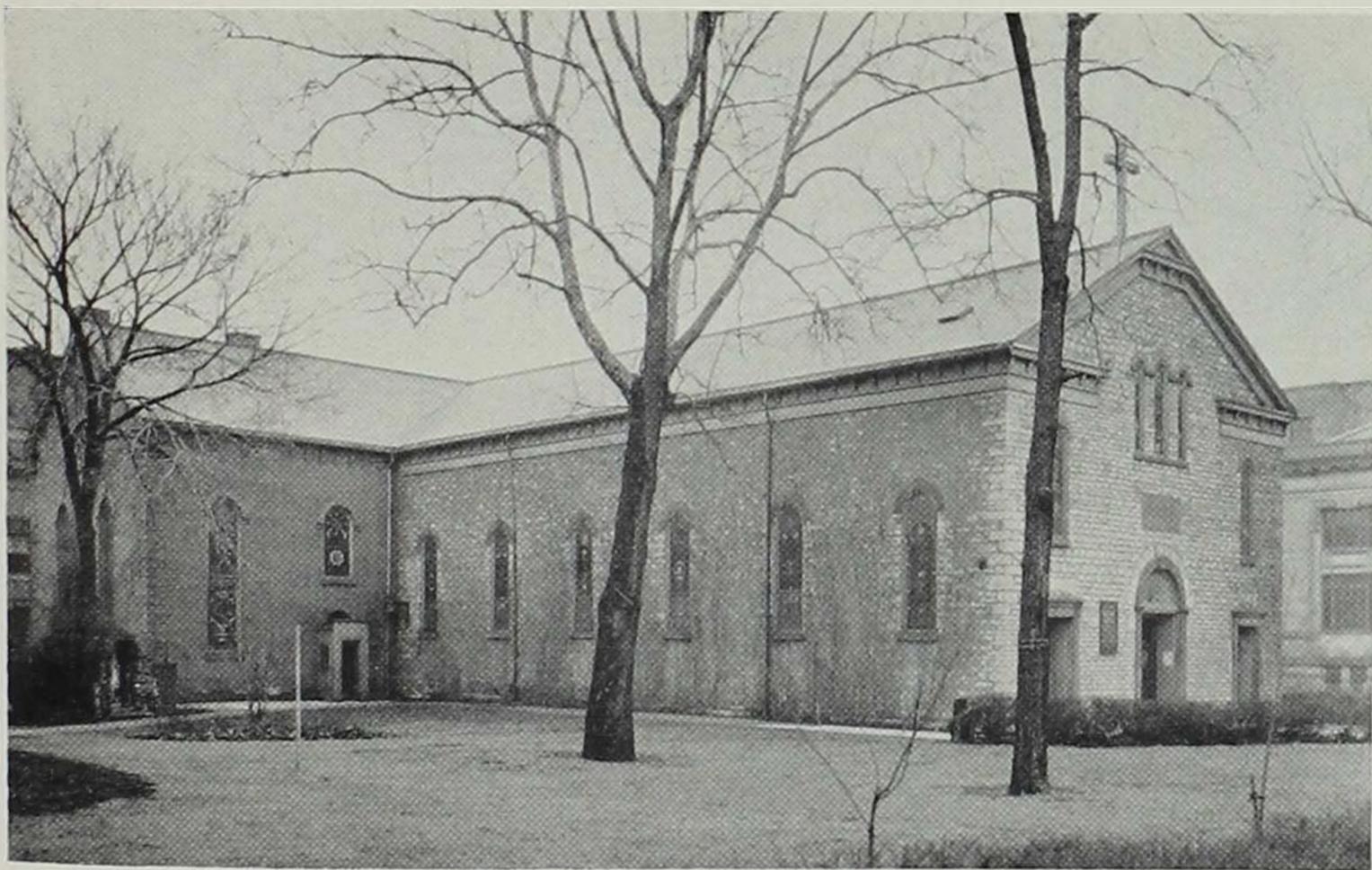
in the United States at large as well as in Iowa has never been fully told. The immensity of their charity and the wide-flung range of their cooperation has loomed so large, even in their printed *Reports* and *Annals*, that no American historian has had the opportunity to canvass all the social and religious facts that they contain for both Iowa and general church history. Millions of francs, florins, and crowns were sent to Loras and his successors for the building of the church in Iowa and Minnesota. Loras induced a settlement of Germans in Dubuque County, whose St. Boniface church was built with the help of the Leopoldine Society's funds, to honor that society by naming their town New Vienna, the title it bears today.

Mathias Loras was a tremendous agitator in behalf of Catholic colonization of the Northwest. Already in 1841, just two years after his arrival in Iowa, he established contact with the recently organized Irish Emigrant Society of New York through a committee of Dubuque Catholic laymen, who unfolded through the New York Catholic press the advantages to be found by settlers in the West. Bishop Loras himself wrote many letters during the following years on the subject of colonization to the chief Catholic papers of the country — to those in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Louisville, St. Louis, and to the German *Wahrheits-Freund* of Cincinnati. Some of these letters occasionally appeared in European newspapers.

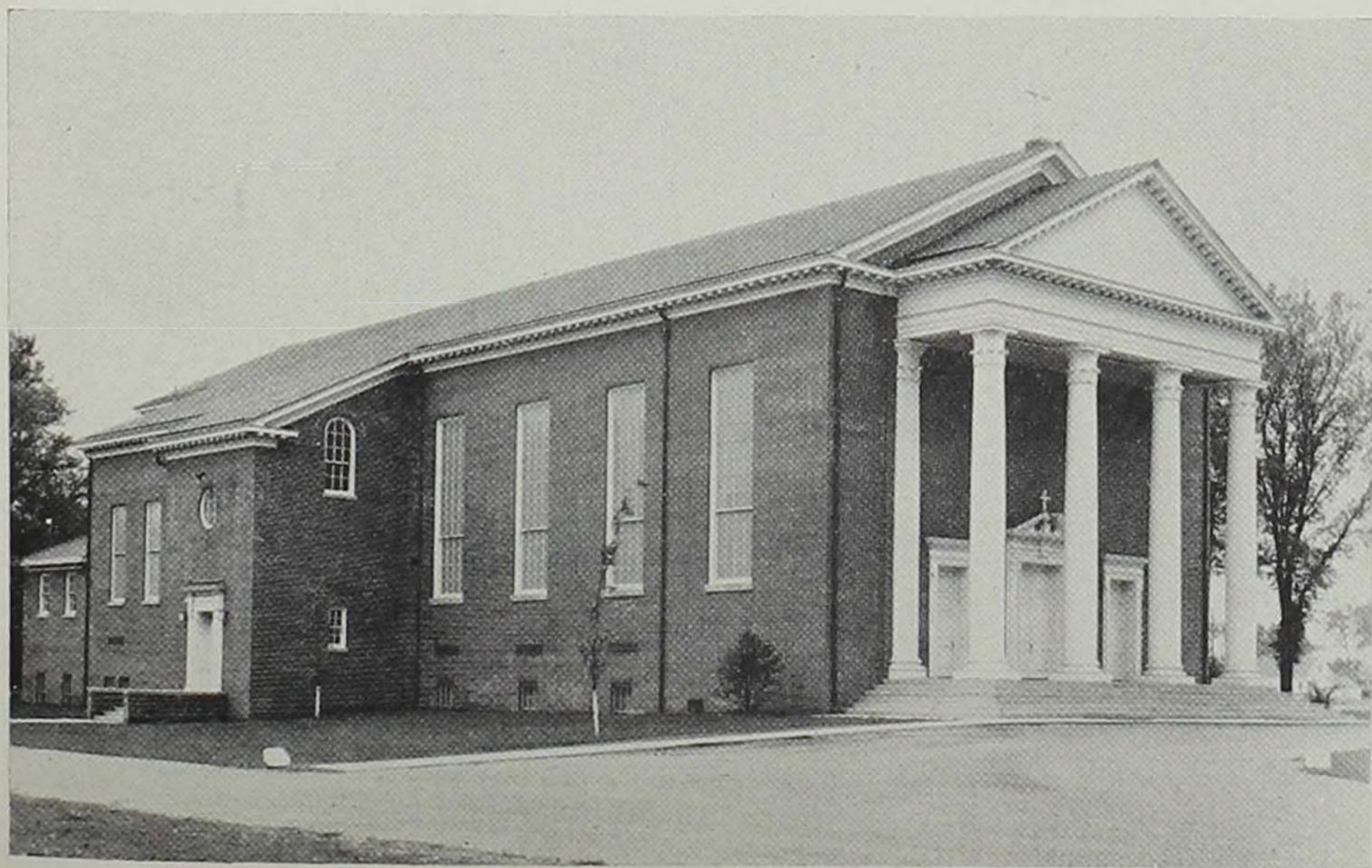
The Iowa bishop visioned the great West peopled with the Catholic immigrants flocking to America. He wished to draw them from the slums of the eastern cities where they were hewers of wood and drawers of water, and make them self-reliant and intelligent farmers of the generous Northwest where lands were cheap and natural resources were unlimited. But alas! The narrow-visioned prelates of the Atlantic seaboard frowned on his efforts among their peoples, and the fair promise of his colonization plans was considerably blighted. A committee of three Dubuque gentlemen, headed by Judge Charles Corkery, sent by Loras to carry propaganda into the large eastern cities, was refused permission to address meetings in parish halls and church basements by one of the prelates.

In June of 1855 Bishop Loras deputed Father Jeremiah Treacy of Garryowen in Jackson County to go with seven laymen to northeastern Nebraska, just across the Missouri from the village of Sioux City, which was just then emerging into being, to select a good site for a colony. Father Treacy offered up Mass in the Sioux City district in the home of a Frenchman on the Floyd River. The first missionary who had visited the present site of Sioux City, Father Christian Hoecken, S. J., a companion of the illustrious Father De Smet, had preceded Father Treacy by five years. In 1850, during the three days he tarried there in Novem-

SOME IOWA ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCHES

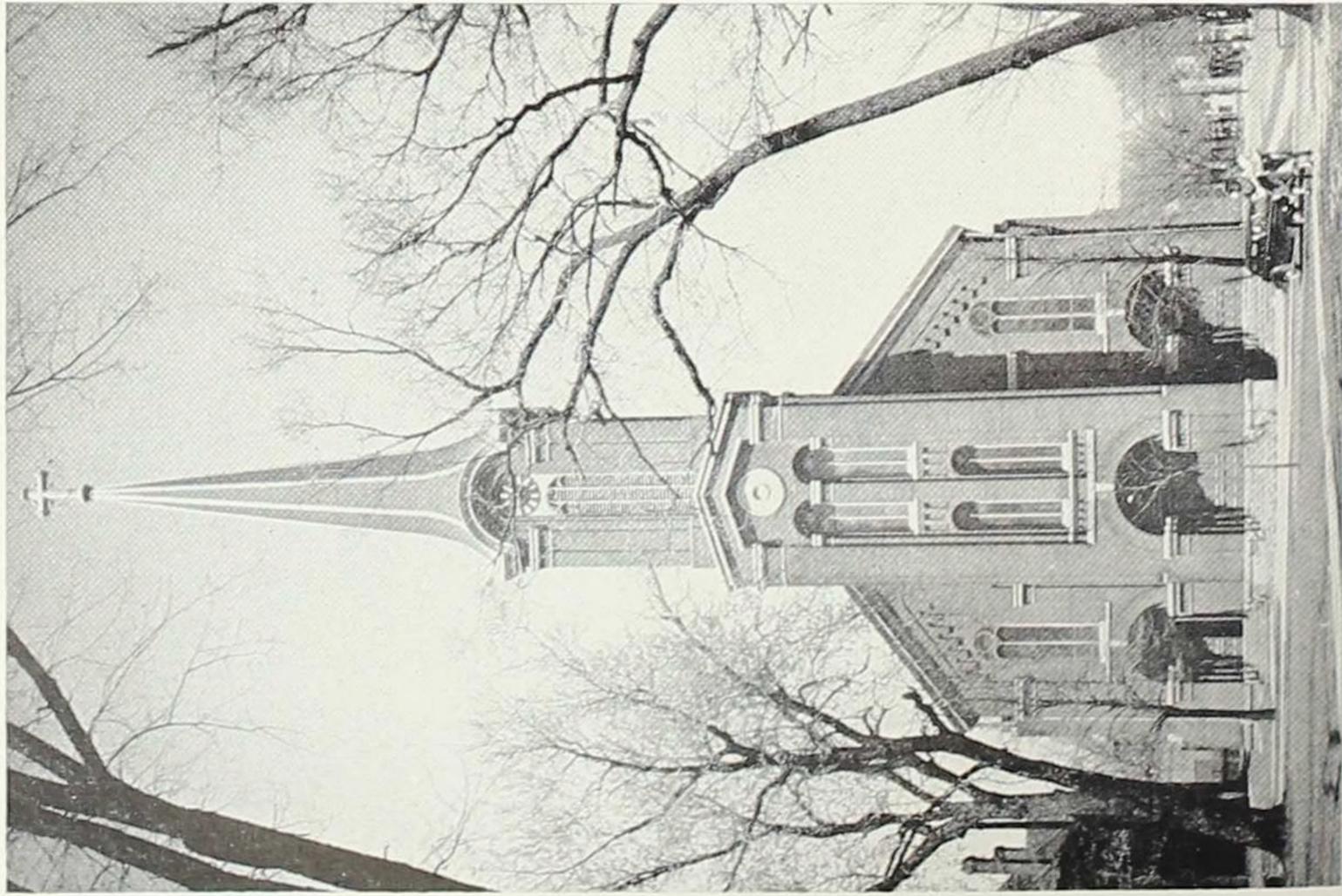


St. Anthony's Church — Davenport  
Oldest Church Building in Iowa, Built in 1837

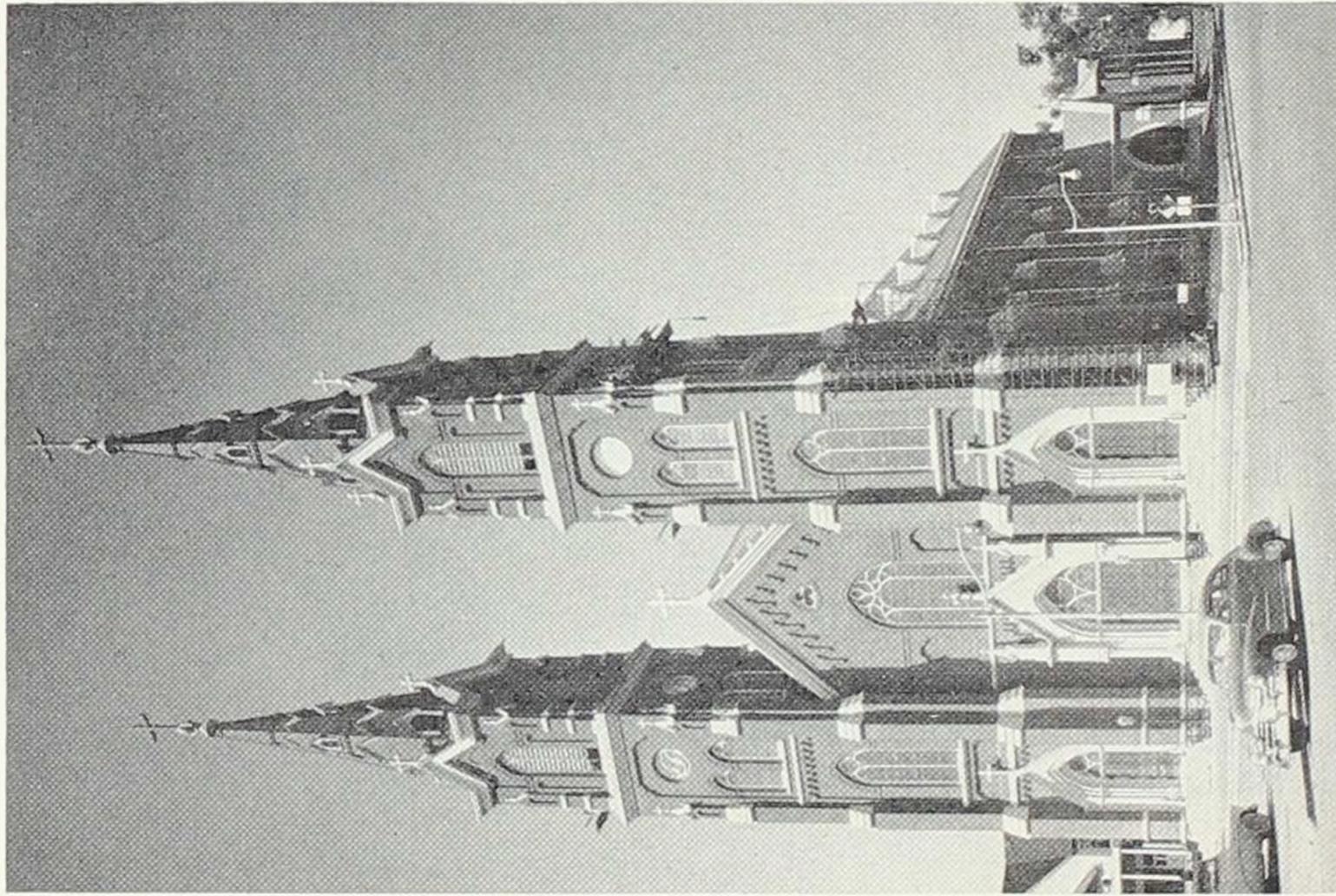


St. Edward's Church — Waterloo

SOME REPRESENTATIVE IOWA CATHOLIC CHURCHES

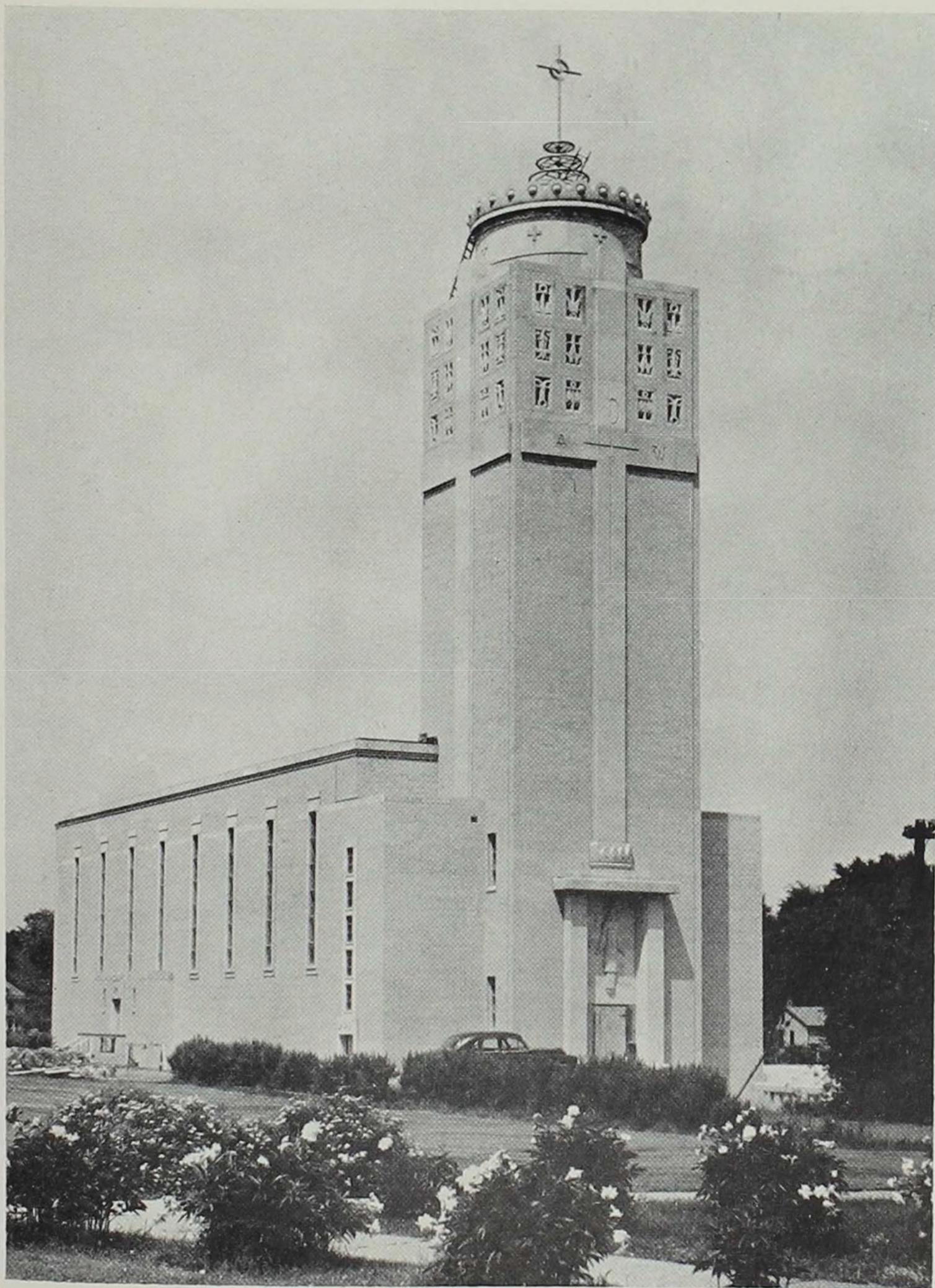


St. Mary's Church



St. Francis Xavier's Church

CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

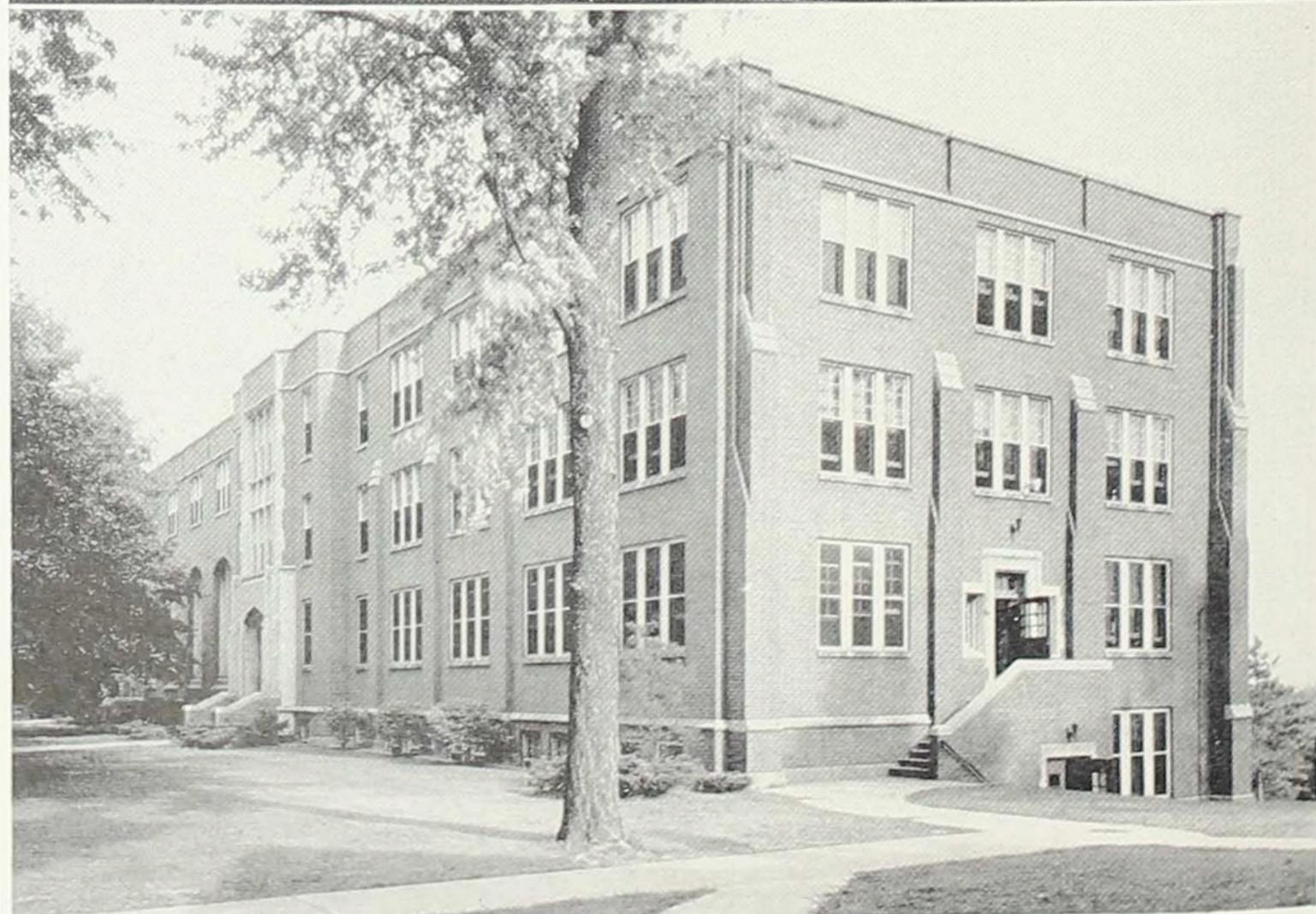
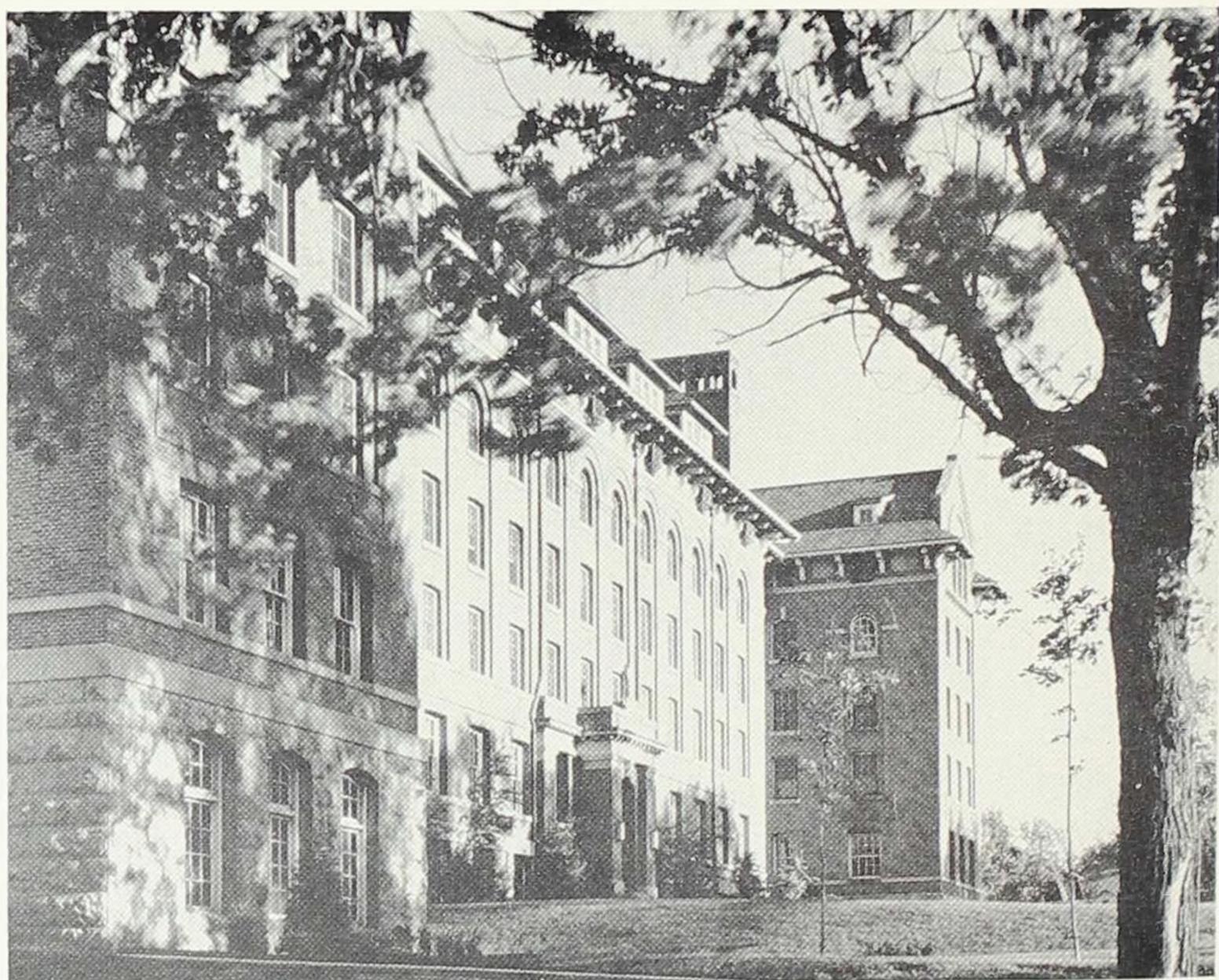


Chapel of Christ the King  
St. Ambrose College — Davenport

St. Francis Xavier's Church  
Dyersville

St. Mary's Church  
Iowa City

SOME CATHOLIC COLLEGES IN IOWA



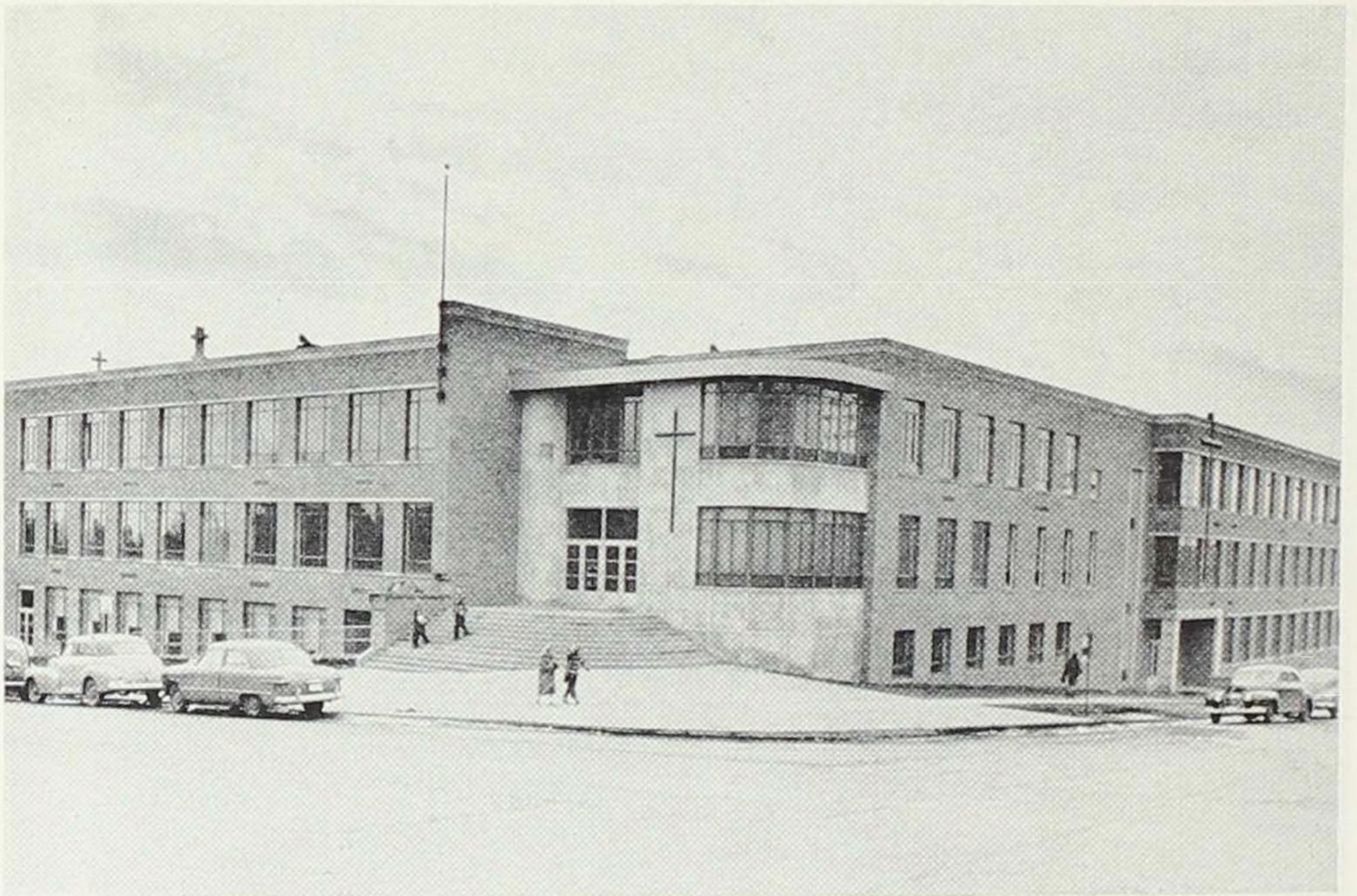
*Top: Keane Hall, Loras College at Dubuque  
Bottom: Marycrest College at Davenport*

SOME CATHOLIC COLLEGES IN IOWA

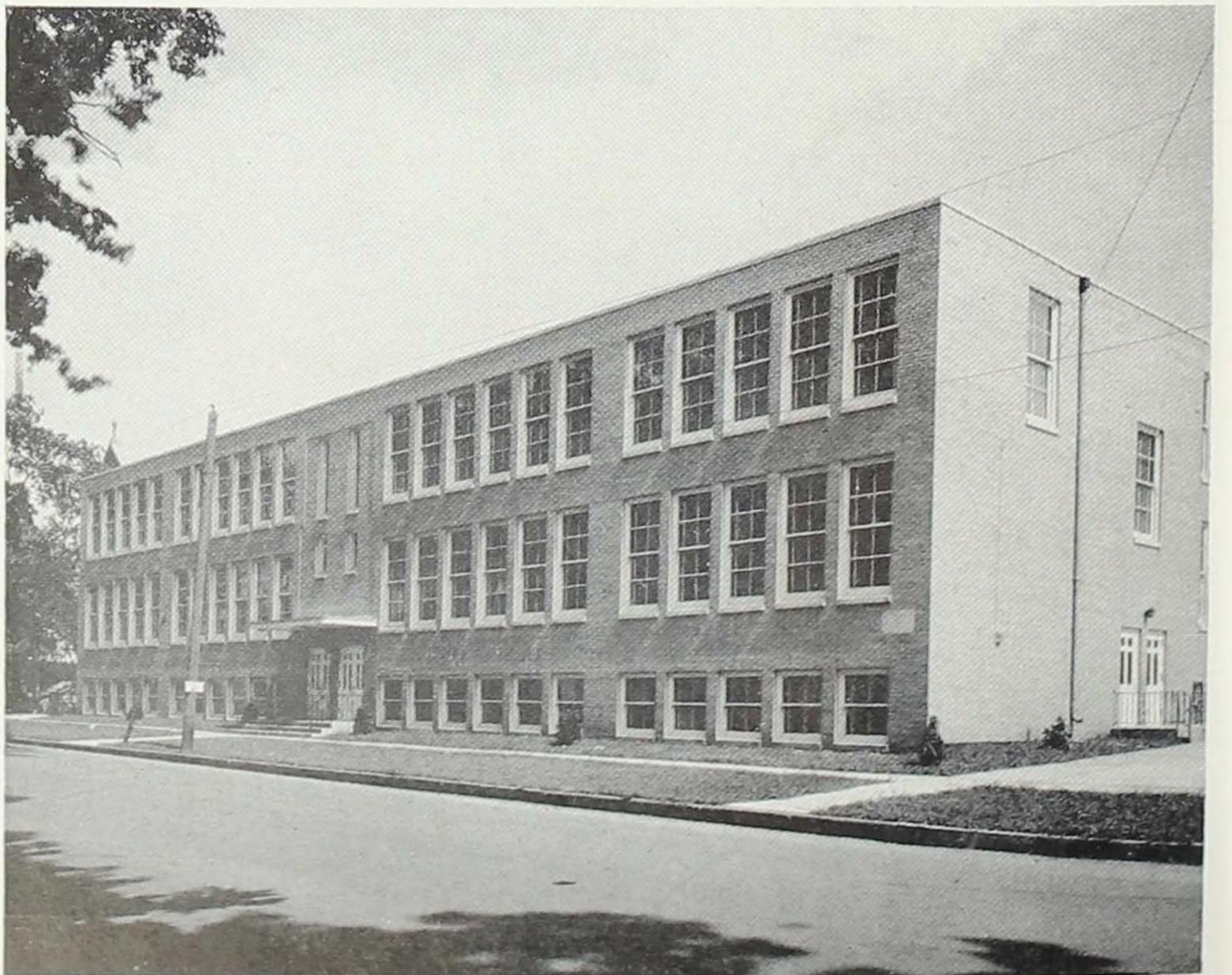


*Top: Clarke College at Dubuque  
Bottom: Briar Cliff College at Sioux City*

CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN IOWA



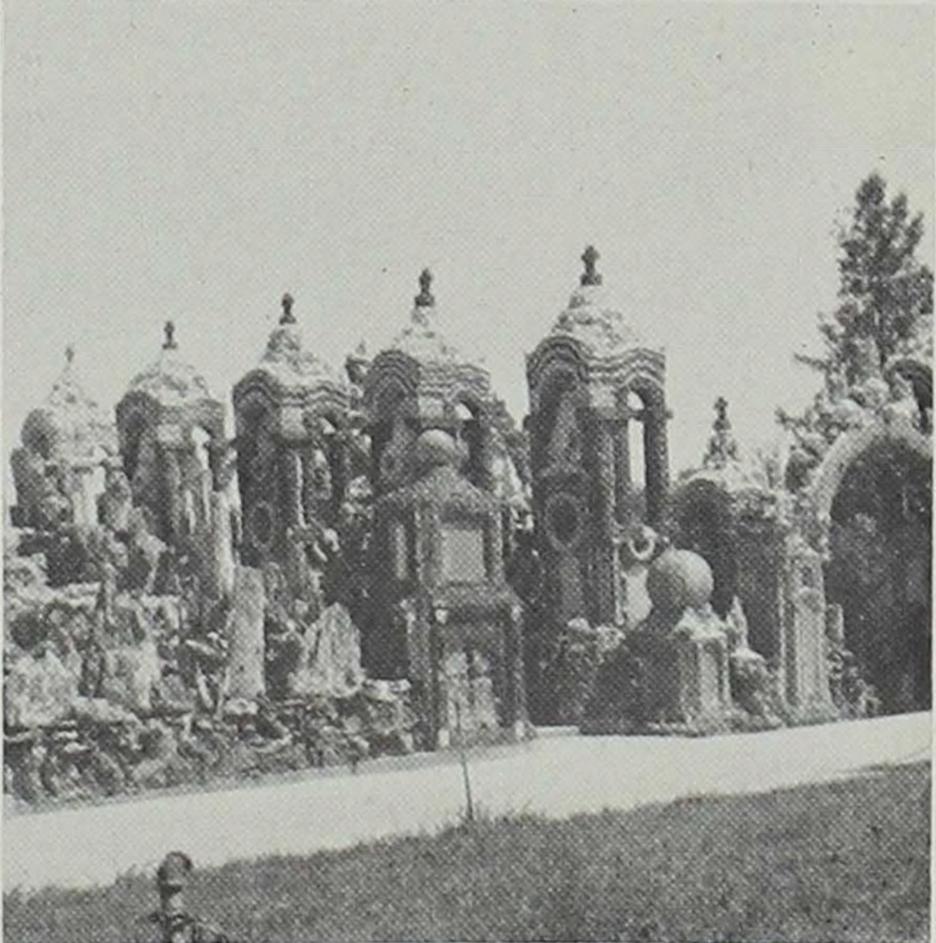
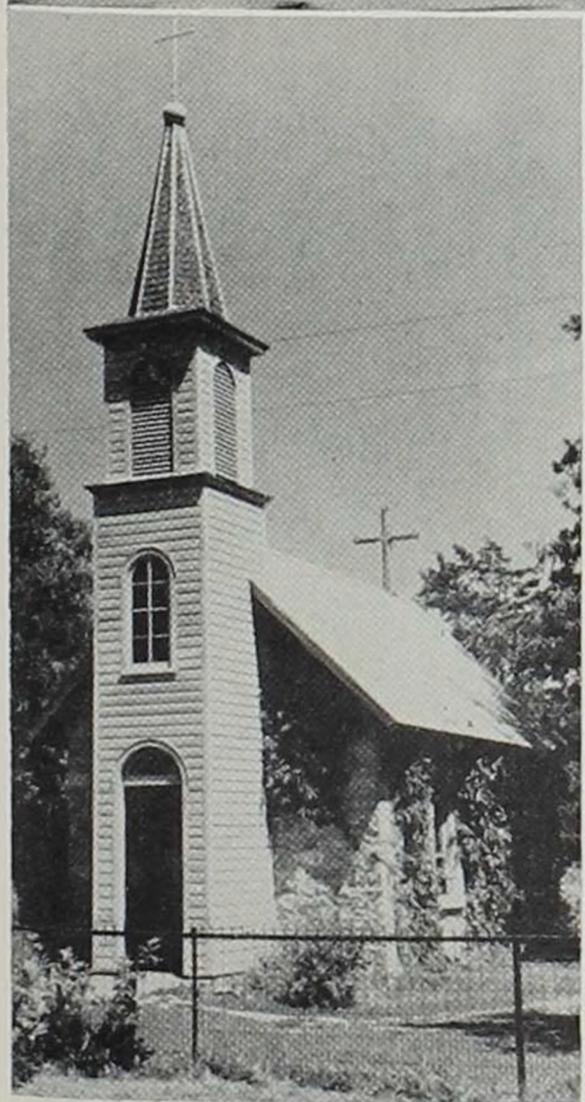
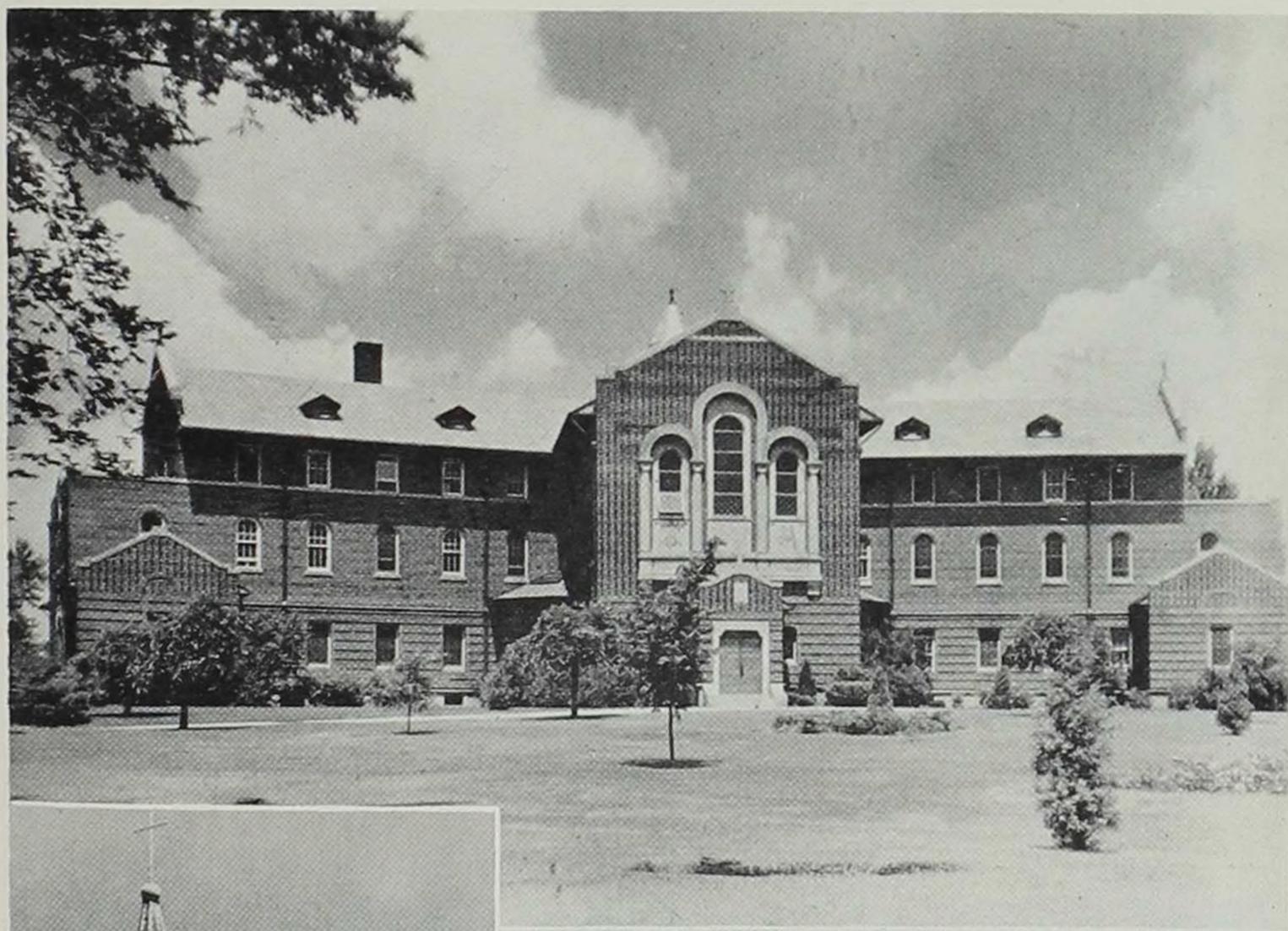
Immaculate Conception Parochial School, Charles City



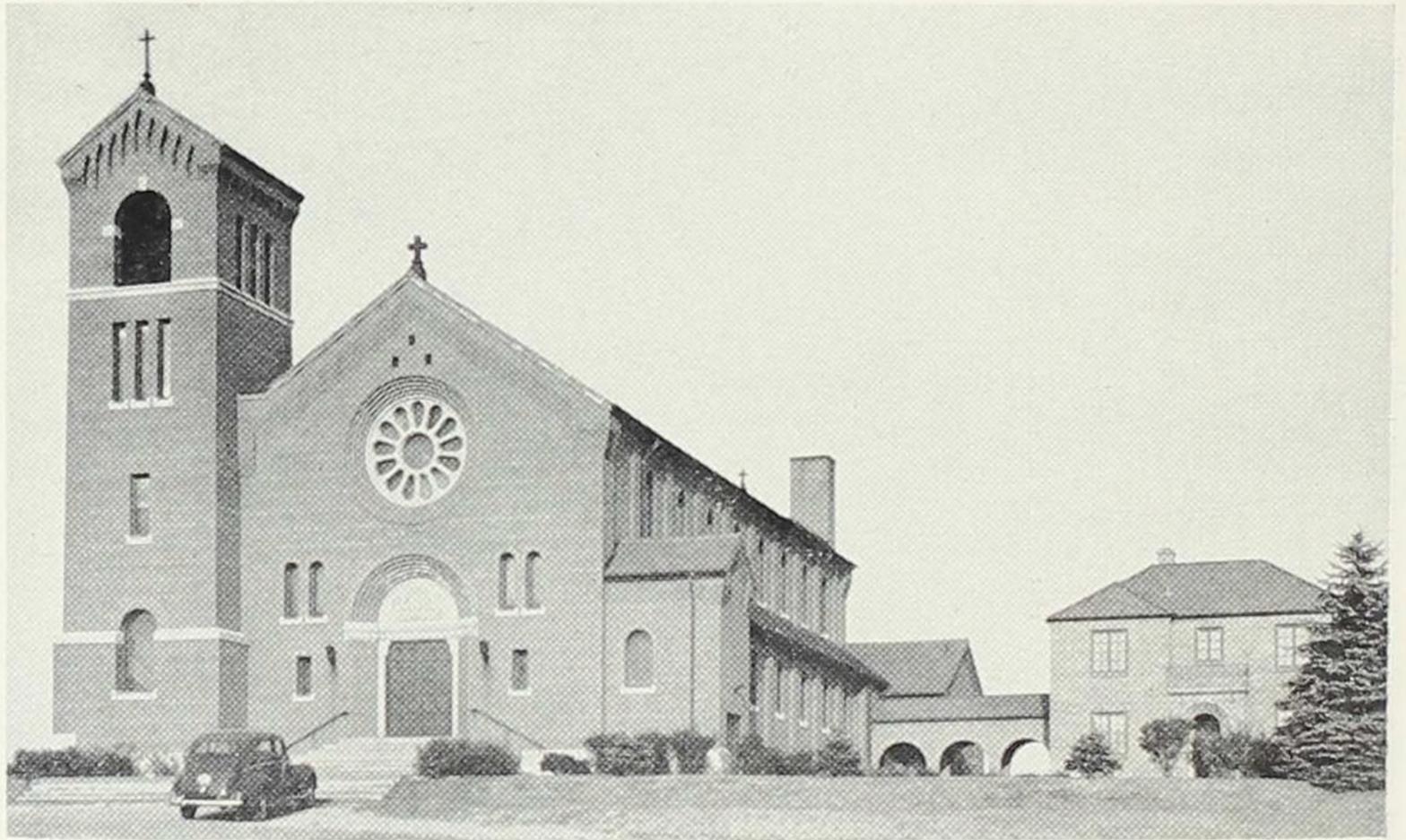
Heelan High School, Sioux City

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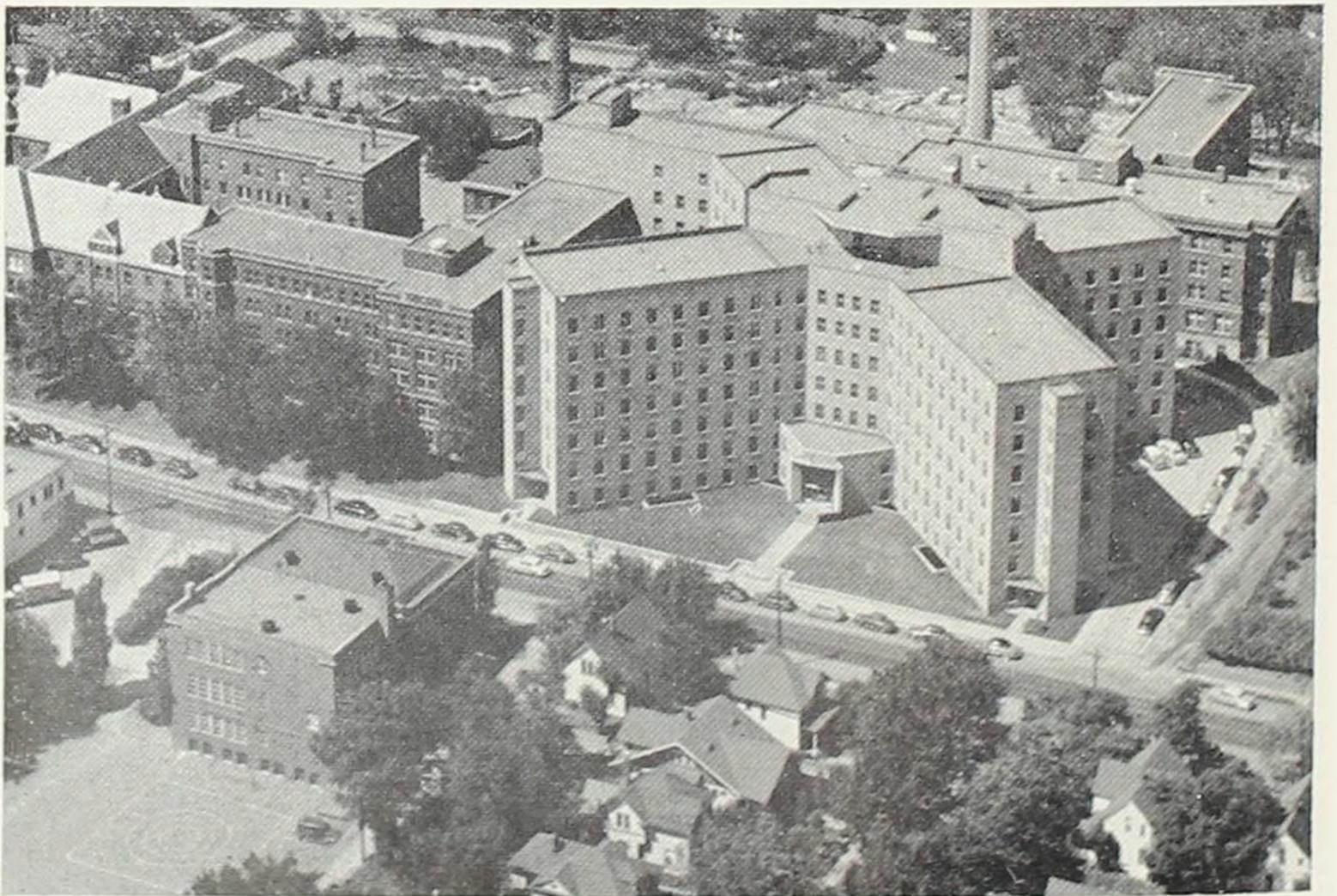
CATHOLIC LANDMARKS IN IOWA



Top: St. Gabriel's Monastery — Des Moines  
Bottom: Left — World's Smallest Church at Festina; Right — Grotto at West Bend



St. Bridget's Church at Victor



St. Joseph's Hospital — Sioux City

ber, he had baptized thirteen whites and half-breeds.

The bishop and Father Treacy organized an expedition in the spring of 1856. In April, with twenty-five families and eighteen ox-drawn wagons, the priest left Garryowen and, passing through Sioux City after eight weeks, entered into northeastern Nebraska and opened up a settlement on the Elk River, called St. John's. He later continued his labors up and down the Missouri, at Sioux City, Council Bluffs, Omaha, and other points, and at the outbreak of the Civil War became an army chaplain, serving most of the time with the army of General Rosecrans. Father Treacy died in St. Louis in 1889.

In addition to these remarks on the work of Mathias Loras, mention should be made of the fact that both he and his vicar-general, the Abbé Joseph Cretin (later Bishop of St. Paul), entertained strong views on the liquor problems in Iowa. Both of them natives of France, where wine was the common beverage of all peoples, and both of them strangers at first to American customs and attitudes, they became zealous advocates of total abstinence by their words and by their actions. They became more than that. Not zealots or fanatics were they, but later writers referred to them as "active prohibitionists." Bishop Loras organized a number of total abstinence societies in Iowa and personally administered the pledge to hun-

dreds of persons. Later, at St. Paul, when the Minnesota legislature had voted the passage of a strict "Maine Liquor Law," Bishop Cretin ordered the bells of his cathedral to be rung in joyous approval.

M. M. HOFFMAN