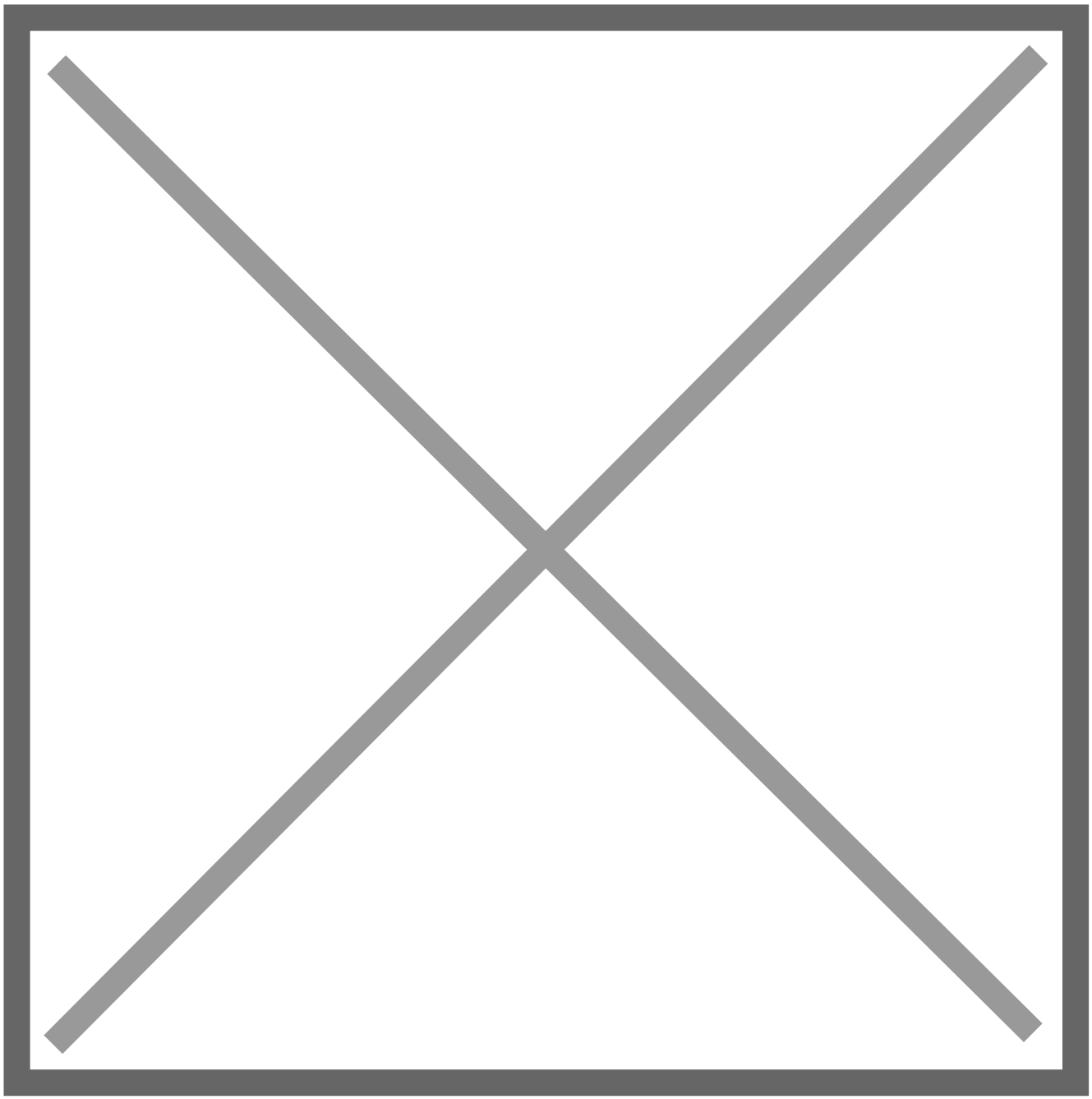
News



The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception is seen in Kansas City, Mo., Nov. 6, 2025. (OSV News/Patrick Stoops)



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For Americans reflecting on the nation's history during its 250th birthday, the word "pioneer" might conjure up images of settlers' covered wagons trundling into the wilderness; buckskin-clad explorers mapping lands unseen by European eyes; or homesteaders eking out a lonely and challenging existence in an unforgiving terrain.

It's rarer, however, to immediately think of the priests who were also among them as the United States expanded ever westward.

But they are there, embedded in American history — and their memory isn't simply consigned to dusty archives; they are celebrated as local heroes, with one even in the first stages of potential sainthood.

"They really did not think Catholicism could ever take root here," Zachary Daughtrey, archivist for the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph in Missouri, told OSV News. "But when Father Donnelly came, he came with a strength. He came with a will — and the ability to be tenacious in making sure Catholicism succeeded."

Often referred to as "The Builder," Fr. Bernard Donnelly (1810-1880) was born in Kilnacreeva, County Cavan, Ireland, trained as an engineer, and immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1830s. He first found work as a teacher, but then enrolled in the seminary. In 1845, he was ordained and assigned to a parish in Independence,

Missouri.

"There was such a lack of priests in the area," said Daughtrey. "As someone who could have come here and been so down that he was posted to the absolute end of American civilization at the time, he just takes it all on the chin — and he's ready to go to work."

Donnelly described his horseback mission trips in the diocesan newspaper — The Catholic Banner — as six-week journeys taking him away from home to cover more than 30 miles a day, reaching Catholic families living maybe 20 miles apart.

The tenaciousness Daughtrey refers to soon earned Donnelly the moniker "The Pioneer Priest," and also saw him acting as a construction foreman of sorts — recruiting hundreds of Irish immigrants to literally carve Kansas City, Missouri, out of the tall limestone bluffs once surrounding it. The Irish laborers naturally brought their religion with them — and so a Catholic community was established, and grew.

"The Builder" erected churches, too.

"He was very instrumental in building the cathedral," Daughtrey shared, referring to the golden-domed Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. "He owned a brickyard in downtown Kansas City, and the bricks that were used to build the cathedral came from Fr. Donnelly's brickyard."

"I just don't think there would have been the successes of the Catholic Church in the area," concluded Daughtrey, "had it not been for Fr. Donnelly coming here."

In Minnesota, Fr. Valentine Sommereisen (1829-1897) is not only thought of as a pioneer priest — there's an elegant historical marker that says so. Inscribed "Pioneer Missionary Priest" with an inset picture of the determined-looking pastor, it stands in front of St. Joseph Church, a small log and field-surrounded structure completed in 1861. St. Joseph's was the first Catholic church in Brown County, and it was Sommereisen who celebrated its first Mass.

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Indeed, Sommereisen was a priest of firsts: He was the first resident Catholic priest in three large areas of the American West, including southwestern Minnesota, the

Dakota Territory and western Kansas. Born in Rouffach, Alsace, France, he and several other theology students followed Father Augustin Ravoux to Minnesota in 1854. Sommereisen was ordained in 1856, and from his first assignment in Mankato, Minnesota, he ministered to 36 communities in 14 counties.

"Father Valentine came to this area 150 years ago, in October of 1876," Fr. Reggie Urban, a retired priest in the Diocese of Dodge City, Kansas, told OSV News. "And when he did so, this whole region — from the Rocky Mountains to Montana and down to Oklahoma, and then all the way to the Missouri River and the Kansas City area — was called by the Catholic Church 'The Apostolic Vicariate of Indian Territory East of the Rockies.' There were no dioceses; no parishes."

Able to speak Sioux, the priest in 1862 baptized 33 of the 38 Dakota Sioux who were hanged in Mankato during the largest mass execution in U.S. history, following the Dakota War. He later accompanied the three-month Yellowstone Expedition of 1873, whose security was ensured by Gen. George Custer's 7th Calvary as the Northern Pacific Railroad survey team traversed the Dakota and Montana territories.

Thirteen years after his ordination, Sommereisen had about 5,000 people under his care; some 250 of whom had been baptized within one year. Urban is known to joke that he has "never baptized that many people in one year, nor in my 29 years as a priest."

Urban also has a personal interest in Father Valentine's history.

In 1876 Sommereisen was appointed pastor at Hays, Kansas — with the care of six nearby Volga German settlements and their parishes, and various railroad towns. "Volga Germans" are ethnic Germans who migrated to Russia in the 1700s and later immigrated to Kansas in the 1870s.

"My ancestors came from Russia; part of the Volga migration. And one of these parishes," said Urban, "is my ancestral parish."

In the Diocese of Duluth, Minnesota, Catholics know precisely who is meant when anyone refers to "The Patriarch of Duluth" — it's Msgr. Joseph Buh (1833-1922), another pioneer priest whose honorary title is inscribed on his tomb at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Rosary.

Born in modern-day Zadobje, Slovenia, he was ordained in 1858, and left for New York as a missionary in 1864.

"He came primarily to work with Native Americans," Fr. Richard Kunst, pastor of St. James Parish in Duluth, told OSV News. "And as Slovenians in particular came to Northeastern Minnesota, he worked with them as well — but he was very much a missionary priest for everybody."

The Ojibwe (Chippewa) people called him by two names: "Masinaigans," meaning "little book" — a reference to the breviary and diary that always accompanied him — and "meshidong," or "long beard," in tribute to Buh's impressive facial hair.

"When you hear stories about some of these missionary priests, Msgr. Buh certainly had the most extreme circumstances he had to go through just to minister to people," Kunst said. "There were stories of him traipsing through blizzards at 30-40 below overnight, just to go and anoint somebody — so he had to fight that, just to bring the Gospel and the sacraments to the people."

Buh, pronounced "Boo," eventually established 57 parishes, and became vicar general of the Diocese of Duluth.

"He had very large territory he was pastorally responsible for — and prior to modern transportation, he had a horse and buggy and not very good roads," continued Kunst. "Once trains were introduced here, he got rid of the horse and buggy and went by train. It was much more efficient for him — but none of that was easy by today's standards."

"It always just amazes me," Kunst reflected, "to think of a handful of priests in some remote area having to cover hundreds of miles. I don't know if I would have been called to that sort of lifestyle back then."

Kunst, who grew up hearing about Buh's exploits, and his bishop, Daniel Felton, were among the first to promote Buh's sainthood cause.

"We're waiting from the Holy See to get the approval back," said Kunst, diocesan postulator. "That's when we would say that the cause is formally introduced, and he'll automatically get the title 'Servant of God.' But the exploration aspect of this has been going on for about 2.5 years."?

On June 10, the U.S. bishops voted in support of the Duluth Diocese advancing the cause of Msgr. Buh at their 2026 spring plenary assembly in Orlando, Florida.

Since the 1940s, second-class relics have circulated, said Father Kunst, noting that the Sisters of St. Scholastica Monastery had holy cards made with bits of cloth from one of his shirts. A second-class relic is a possession of a saint or would-be saint; a first-class relic is a physical body, such as bone, hair, blood or flesh.

"Even though there was no formal cause, it was just the idea of the sanctity — of what he brought to northeastern Minnesota — in his missionary journeys. He was also buried in a special casket that was intended to be exhumed at a later date. They just knew — this priest is going to have some sort of cause for canonization."

"There's a real consciousness in our diocese as to who Msgr. Buh was," concluded Kunst. "He's legendary."

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