

FOOTPRINTS
IN HIS

FR. MARTIN KUNDIG:
A PIONEER PRIEST (1805-1879)

Many adventurous men are drawn to the priesthood because of the chance to serve those in great need, travel to remote areas, and build strong communities based on the word of God. Fr. Martin Kundig, a Swiss-born missionary, spent the second half of his life in Wisconsin accomplishing all of those and more.

In 1842, when Fr. Kundig first arrived in Wisconsin, Milwaukee and its Catholic community were in its infancy. Like a painter with a blank canvas, Fr. Kundig went to work immediately and enthusiastically, and even in his first year here, made a dramatic impact on the organization of the Catholic Church.

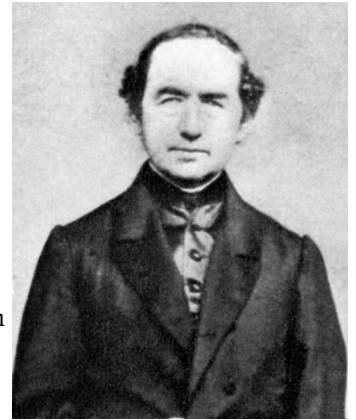
“No single priest did more to establish the Church in the present Archdiocese of Milwaukee than the pioneer who landed in Milwaukee in mid-July 1842,” writes a book reviewer in the *Catholic Herald*, March 21, 1942. “He built at least 22 churches, and founded the first Catholic schools in Milwaukee, Kenosha, Racine, St. Martins and Waukesha.”

The book was *Stuffed Saddlebags: The Life of Martin Kundig, Priest*, by Rev. Peter Leo Johnson, D.D., and it chronicled, as the *Catholic Herald* reported, “a priest on horseback traveling about southeastern Wisconsin with saddlebags stuffed with vestments and equipment for Mass...”

Many forces were at work to bring Fr. Kundig to Milwaukee. According to *Stuffed Saddlebags*, Fr. Kundig was involved in church life early on, earning a paid position as altar boy at daily Mass before he was 12 years old. He went on to study music at the Einsiedeln Monastery, then at the college in Lucerne, then to Rome, where he studied and served as a papal guard.

In his book on the history of the archdiocese, *In the Richness of the Earth*, Fr. Steven Avella writes that in 1827, while studying in Rome with his fellow Swiss, John Martin Henni, the two “were swayed by the romantic tales of Father Frederick Résé, the agent of Dominican Bishop Edward Fenwick of Cincinnati,

and both men volunteered to go to Ohio.” Fr. Kundig was ordained in Cincinnati in 1829, and remained in the United States until his death in 1879.



Fr. Kundig served in Cincinnati and Detroit, accomplishing much in both areas before accompanying Bishop Peter Paul Lefevre on a trip to Wisconsin in 1842. That trip turned into a “temporary” assignment of leading the Milwaukee Church for Fr. Kundig. He was 37 at the time and was about to spend the next 37 years of his life in Wisconsin.

“Fr. Kundig had the attitude and mindset to succeed here,” says Fr. Avella. “He ‘got it’ right away. This was the West, and he understood the new environment in which the Catholic Church had to grow.”

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“I believe that I can do much good here,” Fr. Kundig wrote in one of his letters, quoted in *Stuffed Saddlebags*. “In all events, I leave it to God.” In another letter, he wrote about the potential he saw in Milwaukee. “Here nature has done everything that is wanted for a large town, only money is wanted to make rise up a great and beautiful city.”

According to Fr. Avella, Fr. Kundig’s first order of business was to finish building the church his predecessor had begun, St. Luke, and to rename it St. Peter in honor of the patron of Detroit’s Bishop Lefevre. And, “to the great delight of the congregation, he installed a church bell he had purchased from a local Presbyterian church.” The original St. Peter Church, which preceded St. John Cathedral, was moved twice, according to Fr. Avella, and now rests at Old World Wisconsin.

Next, Fr. Kundig smoothed tensions in the parish by offering separate services for his English-, French- and German-speaking parishioners, something his predecessor could not offer, according to Fr. Avella. “This immediately under-

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cut anxieties that one group was going to be neglected by the Church.” He then set to work establishing first a school for girls, then a school for boys, all before the end of 1842, his first half-year in Wisconsin.

Also during the last half of 1842, Fr. Kundig began his travels throughout the region. According to Fr. Avella, an earlier pioneer priest, Fr. Thomas Morrisey, had made the first contact with Catholics in the outlying areas. Fr. Morrisey returned to Milwaukee from Michigan to help out at St. Peter’s while Fr. Kundig took to the road.

Over the months and years, this pioneer priest helped build churches and establish parishes in Racine, Kenosha, Waukesha, Brighton, Franklin Township, Yorkville, Muskego, Geneva, Madison and many others.

All the while, Fr. Kundig kept church leaders and others apprised of what was happening in Milwaukee and how quickly the Catholic population was growing, according to *Stuffed Saddlebags*. He also proved to be an early public relations master, planning a major demonstration for St. Patrick’s Day in 1843 to mark the anniversary of the Catholic Temperance Society. More than 3,000 Catholics assembled for an outdoor Mass and parade, complete with banners from the participating parishes.

“As events turned out, the hierarchy was so impressed that Wisconsin was designated as a diocese with Milwaukee as its headquarters,” writes Fr. Johnson in *Stuffed Saddlebags*. “At the time, gossip had selected either Green Bay or Prairie du Chien as the probable seat of the prospective diocese. Besides, there was a rumor that Wisconsin would be passed over for the time being in favor of Chicago, which was expected to include Wisconsin in its jurisdiction.”

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Pope Gregory XVI created the Wisconsin Diocese with Milwaukee as its see on November 28, 1843. Rev. John Martin Henni, Fr. Kundig’s friend and fellow Swiss, was appointed Milwaukee’s first bishop at the same time.

By 1859, Kundig’s travels settled down and he took up residence in the rectory of St. John’s Cathedral and continued to minister to Milwaukee Catholics celebrating baptisms, weddings, funerals and ministering in many other ways until his death in 1879.

Indeed, Fr. Kundig improved the lives of Catholics in Milwaukee and Wisconsin during his lifetime, and he, as much as any other, shaped the archdiocese we all enjoy today.

So many men have dedicated their lives in service to God and His people in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee that we cannot adequately recognize all their good works. Still, we want to share with you stories of some men whose contribution, sacrifice, vision and commitment may otherwise go unnoticed or underappreciated. Through this series, *IN HIS FOOTSTEPS*, we profile some of those clergy who have enriched us as Catholics and have helped shape our faith community and our world. *IN HIS FOOTSTEPS* installments also are available at www.archmil.org. Your feedback is welcome. Send your comments to Kathleen Hohl at hohlk@archmil.org or 414-769-3453.