

50-60 painted 1879

29 families 1966

WHY ST. JANUARIUS?

The Martyr-Saint and "Our Lady of the Grapes"

On October 4th, in the year of our national centennial, 1876, the little Catholic congregation of Naples officially incorporated as "St. Januarius Roman Catholic Church of Naples, N. Y." Three years later, on May 19, 1879, Bernard J. McQuaid, the bishop of Rochester, dedicated the congregation's first church building. It was a frame structure with Gothic windows and a little belfry, all painted white. The cost -- \$2,500 -- indicates that the building was small, but it was plenty large enough for the fifty or sixty parishioners, most of whom were German immigrants. Naturally, Bishop McQuaid gave the church the name "St. Januarius".

But why Saint Januarius? Why an ancient Roman saint in a village that had no Italian citizens? And in a diocese where most of the churches were named after the Virgin Mary or St. Patrick or one of the bible saints?

St. Januarius was chosen because he was the chief patron saint of Naples in Italy, after which Naples in New York had been named.

And why was the village at the foot of Canandaigua Lake called Naples? A good question: the choice was most probably accidental. When the township of Naples was first created in 1789, it was called "Middletown". The village itself was called "Watkinstown", after William Watkins, one of the early settlers and larger landowners. However, in 1808, the name "Watkinstown" was replaced by "Naples". The reason for the change is most likely this. In the early years of the last century it became quite stylish for small upstate settlements to adopt romantic place names from long ago and far away. A good many of the names chosen were those of Italian cities: Milan, Modena, Palermo, Parma, Savona, Verona. One hamlet in Cattaraugus County even chose "Napoli" - the real name, in Italian, of the city which, in English, we call Naples.

Once the Ontario County village had picked the name, "Naples", it was almost inevitable that a Catholic church built there would be placed under the patronage of St. Januarius.

Probably the German vintners who made up the original congregation did not know much about the Neapolitan saint. But Bishop McQuaid did, and so did Father Dietrich Laurenzis, the young German priest who founded the new church. You see, every year the Church celebrates the feast of St. Januarius of Napoli on September 19th; and in the breviary that priests use for their daily official prayer there used to be a long account, under that date, of the martyrdom of Januarius and companions, and with it an account of the remarkable phenomenon that had occurred throughout the years in connection with Januarius' blood. Who was the first to suggest the name for the new church, we do not know. Maybe Father Laurenzis, maybe the Bishop, maybe another priest. But it was most likely a priest who made the recommendation.

And who was Januarius? What was the story of his martyrdom? And what was this phenomenon of his blood?

All we know absolutely is that Januarius was a bishop from the country around Naples, Italy, who dies for the Christian faith in the Roman persecutions, and was thenceforth held in high esteem and veneration as a saint. The first dependable historical reference to his fame as a martyr is found in a letter written about the year 432 by a priest named Uranius to a man named Pacatus. Uranius was himself from the Naples district. He speaks of Januarius as a "bishop and martyr, who is the glory of the church of Naples." The first picture of St. Januarius dates from around the same year. It is in a painting over a recessed tomb in the underground cemetery called the Catacomb of St. Januarius, located at Capodimonte, one of the hills above Naples. He is the central figure in a fan-shaped panel, flanked by two female figures whose names are given, and who were apparently buried below the picture. The Saint is a youngish man dressed in Roman garb. His head is crowned by a halo, which also enclosed the monogram of Christ, the Chi Rho. His hands are extended in prayer like a priest. Above his figure are the words, "Sancto Martyri Ianuario": "To the Holy Martyr Januarius."

Nothing is known for sure about his background except that he is constantly referred to, not as the bishop of Naples, but as the bishop of Benevento - a city some thirty miles east of Naples.

There is also no completely dependable account of the martyrdom of Januarius and his companions. The popular

Monte Vergine, a Benedictine establishment about fifteen miles south of Benevento. In 1480, the bones were rediscovered. On that occasion, the Archbishop of Naples, Alfonso Carafa, decided to bring them back in triumph to the city from which they had been stolen. Ever since then the relics have been enshrined in the Naples Cathedral of St. Januarius. In 1964, by the way, the current archbishop, Cardinal Alfonso Castaldo, authorized a scientific examination of the bones. The scientist engaged reported, among other things, that the skeleton was one of a man in his mid-thirties, and over six feet in height. For his time and locale, St. Januarius was an unusually tall man.

Most saints are popularly supposed to have "specialties"--- favors of a special category for which their intercession is particularly effective. The Neapolitans turn to St. Januarius to protect them when calamities threaten: war, famine and plague; and those disasters that are endemic to the volcanic Italian south, earthquakes and the eruptions of nearby Mount Vesuvius. In the early middle ages, there was already an annual procession to his shrine in thanks for preserving the city from the eruption that occurred around 471 A.D. By 1337, the Neapolitans had begun another annual public procession on the Saturday before the first Sunday in May -- apparently the day on which his relics had originally been brought to Naples. Later on, the feast of the Patronage of St. Januarius was instituted on December 19th. It commemorated another volcanic eruption that occurred in 1631, and was later extended to recall the earthquake that occurred in the neighboring province of Basilicata in 1857. The Patronage also became a day of solemn religious observance. But the major celebration continued to be the traditional day of the Saint's martyrdom, September 19th.

The "blood phenomenon" usually occurs in connection with these festal observances. It consists of the liquefaction of some dark red congealed matter that is reputed to be Januarius' blood. The first known reference to the occurrence dates from 1389. An otherwise unknown Neapolitan chronicler of the fourteenth century made the following entry under the date of August 17, 1389: "...a huge procession was held on account of the miracle that our Lord Jesus Christ worked in connection with the blood of St. Januarius, which was in an ampule and then was liquified

the Cathedral's blood have also, in past times, come into the possession of certain private individuals. It is interesting to note that whenever the blood liquefies in the Cathedral, the relics belonging to private individuals also liquefy; and the dark stain on the slab at Pozzuoli becomes moist and lively.

Are Catholics obliged to accept this phenomenon as a divine miracle? No. Catholics must accept only those miracles which Christ performed to give men a basis for faith in Him. However, they may accept as miracles post-Bible happenings for which no natural causes can be demonstrated. The miracles performed at Lourdes, at Ste Anne de Beaupre, and by various saints are not necessary as the foundation of Christian faith, but they can strengthen the faith of Christians in the power and providence of God.

Some scientists still think that a natural explanation may one day be found for the "blood miracle" of St. Januarius. But even science is obliged to admit that the phenomenon has several extraordinary features.

First of all, the blood (and a technical analysis has proved it to be human blood) does not always liquefy at the same temperature. At times this occurs more rapidly in cold weather than in warm. Secondly, the amount of material in the sealed phials varies in volume from one occasion to another. Third, the weight of the liquefied blood also varies considerably in different liquefactions -- as much as 25 grams. At times, when the volume decreases, the weight increases -- which is contrary to the laws of physics.

So there you have the story of St. Januarius, patron of old Naples and new Naples. And there you have the amazing story of the liquefaction of his blood.

But we cannot conclude our remarks on Naples, New York without mentioning the grapes for which it is famous; or without mentioning the local shrine of our Lady of the Grapes.

When the name "Watkinstown" was changed to "Naples", there was nary a grape growing on its beautiful hillsides. That was one more point of difference between Naples, New York and Naples, Italy. The Italian city is a center of wine-making. The wines of neighboring Salerno, Grangano, Ischia, Procida, and Posilippo are of high quality. "Lacrimae Christi" is a

leading Italian wine; and "Falerno" was praised as long ago as the first century before Christ by the Latin poets, Virgil and Horace.

In the mid-1800's, however, the grape and wine industry of the Finger Lakes was launched, and Naples Valley joined the movement. It started around Keuka Lake. The first grapes were planted in 1830 in the Town of Urbana at the foot of the Keuka Valley. Then, in 1853, Andrew Reisinger, a German-born vintner, planted two acres of Isabella and Catawba grapes in the Town of Pulteney on the west slope of Keuka Lake. From them he was able to produce an acceptable wine. By 1860, the Town of Urbana alone had 2,000 acres of vineyards. Grape planting began near Naples around 1857 or 1858, and by 1860, Naples had thirty acres given over to grape growing. Since that time, the Keuka Lake area and the Naples area have been at the hub of New York's upstate grape growing and wine making industry. Thus, new Naples came to resemble old Naples in something more than just name.

The subject of Naples Valley grapes naturally brings us to "Our Lady of the Grapes," the shrine of the Virgin Mary connected with the church of St. Januarius.

In 1964, Father Bernard Kuchman, who was pastor from 1964 to 1971, was inspired to set up a shrine to our Lady that would be associated with the town's grape industry. Great painters have often painted into pictures of the Madonna and Child some small feature that has served to identify them: Raphael's "Madonna of the Goldfinch," for instance, or Giovanni Bellini's "Madonna of the Little Trees." Father Kuchman recalled that the seventeenth-century French artist, Pierre Mignard, had painted a Mother and Child in which the subjects are holding a bunch of grapes. Known as "Madonna of the Grapecluster," this picture now hangs in the Louvre in Paris. He obtained a large color print of the Mignard madonna and installed it in an ornamental shrine in the old wooden church.

The present church was finished in 1966. Architects James Johnson and Peter Romeo had designed the cast-cement walls with random oval windows of colored glass to suggest grapes. The shrine of Our Lady of the Grapes was now set up in a place of honor to the left of the new altar. Father Kuchman had even wanted to dedicate the new church building to our Lady of the Grapes rather than to St. Januarius; but the diocesan authorities decided against the change.

There can be no doubt about the appropriateness of a Marian shrine under this title in a village when the vine plays such an important role. In 1972, Father Robert Smith, who succeeded Father Kuchman in 1971, decided it would be even more fitting to have the shrine out-of-doors against the background of the vine-clad hills. He engaged Mr. John C. Menihan, prominent Rochester artist, to undertake the project of a completely original sculpture of the Madonna and Child. The result, in 1975, was an "Our Lady of the Grapes" welded in weathered steel and attached to an ornamental screen of "fractured rib" cement blocks erected on the rectory lawn behind the church. This shrine was erected by Mr. Euclid St. Pierre of Naples. An unusual feature of the shrine's landscaping is the two small vine trellises that flank it. A cutting of Concord grape vine and a cutting of Delaware grape vine has been planted beneath each trellis. When these mature and produce the popular blue Concord table grapes and the red Delaware wine grapes, Naples' Madonna and Child of the Grapes will have their own little vineyard to emphasize their title.

The date of September 26, 1976, was chosen for formal dedication of the shrine. It was the Sunday that was the closest possible, under the circumstances, to the October 4th that marked the centenary of the church's incorporation. It also fell within the bicentennial year of the United States -- a year in which the nation commemorated its debt to all who have made America great, including the American vintners.

As we kneel before the shrine of Our Lady of the Grapes and lift up our eyes to the vine-mantled hills of Naples Valley, the words of divine promise that spring almost automatically to our lips are the words of the Eucharistic Liturgy:

Blessed are you,
Lord God of all creation.
Through your goodness
we have this wine to offer,
fruit of the vine
and work of human hands.....

Robert F. McNamara