Chapter V

CHEVERUS -- EARLY AND DIFFICULT YEARS (1942-1948)

Before the conclusion of Fr. James H. Dolan's term on December 8, 1944, he had called on Bishop Joseph E. McCarthy in early February, 1944. He was accompanied by Fr. William E. FitzGerald, and Fr. James M. Kilroy, acting Socius due to the illness of Fr. John J. Smith. The bishop had his secretary, Fr. James Burke, at the meeting. Contrary, the bishop asserted, to unfounded rumors of a planned coeducational arrangement, Cheverus was to remain a boys' school.

At this meeting and in the subsequent auto trip of inspection, not the Winslow (as is sometimes said) but the Windsor estate was rejected as too cramped. This Windsor estate was a triangular property at Deering Oaks. The Winslow was the estate later purchased. The bishop pointed out his preferred location across the street from the entrance to Payson Park. This property of eighteen acres was a narrow but long strip of land cut near its rear by a deep gully. As it was, some pastors and people opposed any school so far away from the city as any of these three locations.

As the party of five returned from the property opposite Payson Park entrance, someone noticed the stretch of land from the end of the park to the present site of Cheverus and wondered if that whole plot might not be the answer. It had an appeal if not in its entirety, at least in its Winslow part. It would appear that this whole tract, up to but not including the
commercial greenhouse, could have been obtained for some $8,000.

Later in June of that same year, the bishop indicated that a retreat house would be available very near to his residence on the Western Promenade. It appeared that this retreat house would be diocesan property, managed by Jesuits on an arrangement analogous to the one being found unsatisfactory at Cheverus. One possible estate for a retreat house, the O'Hara house in Falmouth, had been sold at this time.

On November 20, 1944, at variance with the February promise against coeducation, there was an official announcement in the Portland Press Herald of a new and coeducational diocesan high school. A voluntary (unsolicited) offer came within a few days to Cheverus offering free a piece of land in Falmouth, Maine. This site, however, even more distant from downtown Portland was viewed as a possible and future location for a college. It is not clear when the bishop came to favor the present Winslow property as the site for the new Cheverus.

In the spring of 1945 the bishop was strongly rumored as planning to buy a set of three houses adjoining and immediately behind his residence without any space for any serious kind of a school yard. The faculty house in this event would be a private dwelling directly behind the episcopal residence. It would be more cramped for housing than the Danforth Street residence. Fr. Maher, on an early visit to Portland, had disapproved this site for the school and residence. But since the bishop feared running out of money, he favored this less expensive location. When Fr. John McElaney, then
provincial, heard of this possible change in location, he urged Fr. FitzGerald to have the Society allowed by the bishop to select a site and design a building.

All of these ups and downs on location and coeducation constituted the background for an important conference between the bishop plus his secretary and the provincial (then Fr. McEleney) and local rector on June 20, 1945. Fr. Provincial's views were shaped in part by certain guidelines set forth by Fr. Assistant. There was to be no coeducation. A parish would be a desirable addition. The school should cease to be diocesan and become a Jesuit undertaking. The province itself was urged by Fr. Maher to aid the Portland Jesuits since their work there should be considered a "quasi-mission".

The offers made by the bishop on this occasion were breathtaking. The property for the school should be carefully studied by engineers and purchased by the bishop who would contribute $100,000 toward the project. His views on a retreat house were reiterated, when this matter came up, and there was no indication of strings attached. The bishop expressed his willingness to cut off a part of Msgr. Houlihan's parish of St. Joseph with a 400 family allotment of parishioners. While the Society would be expected to build the necessary church, the school hall (presumably on the Winslow estate or a nearby property) could be used temporarily as a substitute school chapel. Whatever was given would be given with a clear title and with the title deeds. To raise revenue a building drive would be permitted to gather more funds than the bishop's
$100,000 gift. All of these terms were to be confirmed in writing. Somewhat oddly and never realized was a proposed change in name from Cheverus to St. Sebastian. Presumably the name of the Jesuit (though uncanonized) Sebastian Râle in place of Cheverus would show the changeover from diocesan to Jesuit control of the school.

Even at this June date there appeared to be a cloud of some size over these pledges. At this meeting the bishop set forth the financial situation of the diocese. When he became bishop in 1932, Bishop McCarthy's debt as "corporation sole" was $4,800,000 and he had no credit. In 1945, although the debt was as high as $3,800,000, his credit had been restored. There was then a bonded debt on the goods of the corporation-sole's holdings, and rigorous requirements on cash raised from the sale of assets. Moreover, outside the corporation-sole debt, there was a $600,000 debt arising from hospital construction, but this appeared manageable as long as the hospital flourished.

Still, it appears from his pledges to the Society that the Bishop was prepared to buy land for the school and the retreat house, and to give $100,000 toward the school. Just how this generosity was to be possible in view of the bonded debt and its restriction on use of funds did not seem to trouble the bishop or call for inquiry by the Society. Yet the nature of his large bonded debt did tie his hands as to what he might use or alienate from diocesan funds since the first claim on money was to the bond holders. It appears strange that this inhibiting factor did not appear in the account given to the consultors,
Fr. Maher or to Fr. Vicar.

The restraining power of the bonded debt does not seem to have been realized as a crucial element cramping the bishop's generosity. He did not seem to have been conscious of it, or he believed that there were ways around it as in the case of the hospital expenditures. One early modification was made by bishop when, on June 26, he had his lawyer call to say that, since the Winslow property had been jumped in part from $20,000 to $30,000 since 1937, he would be obliged to purchase some other desirable land.

The Society reaction to these initial pledges of the bishop were ecstatic, but cautious. The province consultors, informed on June 25, 1945, were delighted. They seemed to have believed that the property to be bought was that near Payson Park, rather than the Winslow. Their information came, it must be noted, a day ahead of the phone call that, due to the current cost of the Winslow property, some other location, presumably the bishop's inborn preference -- across from Payson Park --, would be acquired. They also thought that a boarding school might some day be built to attract students from other sections of Maine.

The Portland house consultors unanimously favored the Winslow estate. They looked forward to raising $100,000 to $150,000 by a drive and, thus, add this fund to the bishop's $100,000. They were unanimous in favoring a parish. They particularly urged that all the terms be stated in writing in the event of a later and less favorably-minded bishop. It was really to tie down Bishop McCarthy that the writing of terms was needed.
Fr. Maher, who was also pleased with the turn of events, urged written guaranties. He further urged, now that World War II was winding down, that Fr. Vicar in Rome be informed of the situation and that his approval be obtained. This approval was received in October 1945.

Then matters began to move backwards rather than forward. On October 10, 1945 the province consultors gave approval (to some unknown query) that the proposed parish church was to be built and owned by the diocese and be near rather than on, the school property. An early division of St. Joseph Parish had not met local approval, and the allegedly nearby site was quite distant and in an area little calculated to be of financial support to the school. Much of its area also was taken up by manufacturing or processing plants.

Perhaps, it was at this time that it became clear that the parish was to be entrusted to the Society for a limited period of years, say ten years. Hence, it was not surprising that, when Fr. McEleney and Fr. FitzGerald dined with Bishop McCarthy, on Thanksgiving Day, 1945, it was strongly sensed that the bishop was backing down on a drive and on his own financial support. But he did promise to put his remaining commitments in writing. All of this less promising situation was conveyed to the province consultors on December 10, 1945.

At this same time, a possible site (whether opposite Payson Park or the Winslow property) had become a bit of a political football. In the city council, there had arisen a zoning problem on the score that these areas were restricted to
one-family homes. An election was in progress with a projected change for increased memberships in the council from five to nine members. When it became evident that only a few people had this zoning problem, the old council in December, 1945 was favorable to a change that permitted a school.

On March 28, 1946 another conference took place between the bishop and the provincial. What transpired is not evident. But the consultors on June 1, 1946, in view of the bishop's arrears on his promises, decided to have an architect work out the approximate cost of a building on the Winslow site already purchased by a straw, Zelda M. Leif, the secretary to Judge Francis W. Sullivan who was the bishop's lawyer. Then the bishop would be told what the province could supply in funds toward the school and then ask the bishop flatly for a sufficiently large parish as a source of revenue. The whole matter would then be referred to Rome.

On June 26, 1946, the very day on which Fr. Daniel J. Feeney was announced as Auxiliary Bishop of Portland, the province consultors proposed that the province should attempt to raise $250,000 and seek permission to borrow up to $500,000 more, provided a lucrative parish would be offered. Such a debt, it was observed, would require a tuition charge such as the bishop favored earlier, and some reliance on a moderately-priced boarding school.

Just before Fr. Provincial was to go to Rome in the late summer of 1946 for the election of a new Jesuit General, he presented his conclusions on August 7 to the bishop. This letter
repeated what was said to have been the agreement of the preceding March, whereby the province would supply $100,000 for the school and the bishop would donate a sum not of $100,000 but of $150,000 plus the land. The Society would own the school, maintain it by a normal tuition, the present parish assessments aiding Cheverus students would continue (with no reference to a time limit) and a parish would be constructed.

The school building had been estimated as costing $450,000. Fr. Provincial pointed out that he had learned from Fr. FitzGerald that it was planned that the new school would belong to the diocese, be built and maintained by it, and that any offer of a parish had been withdrawn. There was also added another and seemingly conflicting view that the sum of $200,000, promised at Thanksgiving, 1945, to be raised through diocesan channels, was being withdrawn, and that the Society should borrow this money. On these pledges and rumors the provincial desired clarification as he was about to go to Rome.

The needed assurances, therefore, dealt with the permanent status of the Jesuits at Cheverus, the receiving of a parish, the authorized drive for funds, the continuation of the parish assessments, the possibility of a normal tuition charge, and, finally, the guarantee of no coeducation. He also added that the present physical conditions of the school were inadequate. This reference was to St. Aloysius Grammar School, close to the cathedral where Cheverus was to open in September, 1946. The bishop had sold, on July 11, 1945, the inadequate Free Street property to Sears-Roebuck, which had demolished the
building and replaced it with a warehouse.

The money had been held in escrow from July 1945 until the abandonment of the school property at the end of the 1945-46 school year. As it was, the demolition had begun before classes had ended. While it had been the intention of Bishop McCarthy, as expressed to Fr. Joseph R. N. Maxwell in 1941, to expend the money received toward a new Cheverus, the exigencies of his bonded indebtedness made this impossible, no matter what were his pledges. On such a point he should finally have been clear and frank, and the Society could understand his plight and stay with a seemingly dying situation or withdraw gracefully. The bishop was more legally encumbered than he cared to admit in word to others, or even, it appears, to himself.

Although this letter to Bishop McCarthy was answered very promptly on the very next day, August 8th, the bishop indicated that its contents had been long reflected upon. In view of rising costs, he had to be satisfied with the present school structure (St. Aloysius) as a necessary stop-gap for several years. His advisers did want a single structure capable of having both boys and girls, even if both were taught separately. He realized, he told the provincial, that such a coeducational structure did not meet the acceptance of the present Cheverus rector, but he implied that Fr. FitzGerald's opposition was personal and not official Society thinking. In this he was mistaken. While he praised the previous service of the Portland Jesuits, there simply had to be a definite postponement of a new school building.
A copy of the bishop's letter was sent to Fr. Maher, but there is no copy of any reply. Fr. Maher's known views on coeducation were definitely negative. The province consultors, on being apprised of this impasse reacted, as Fr. FitzGerald had, against coeducation. They also recognized the inadequacy of the financial support and the present poor school facilities. The golden fence around a projected Cheverus came crashing down. For the time, short of precipitous withdrawal, the Portland Jesuits and the province officials had to grin and bear it. At this heavily clouded stage, Fr. Provincial left for Rome and a subsequent visit to Baghdad.

After his return from Rome and Baghdad, Fr. Provincial McElaney reviewed with his consultors on February 14, 1947, the deteriorated situation in Portland. He planned to write to the bishop of the frustration of earlier hopes, but to add that, despite the inadequacy of the present building, he intended to remain in an emergency situation. In the new school situation Fr. FitzGerald, to the displeasure of Bishop McCarthy, had urged a more decent teachers' room for lunch-time and off-class periods. More concern seemed to have been felt for a weekly Dorcas-type sewing circle than for Jesuits, many on in years, to have some minimum comforts.

Nevertheless despite an intention to remain, Fr. McElaney did believe some clearer financial arrangements were imperative, and he did draw the line at coeducation. Rather than accept that, the Society would withdraw. It was in this tense atmosphere that a request came from the pastor of North
Whitefield, whose church of St. Denis is, along with St. Patrick's at Damariscotta in Maine, one of the two oldest and extant New England Catholic church structures. The pastor requested that Benedict Reilly, S.J., a native son, might be ordained in St. Denis as an inducement for more vocations from that area. While in contemporary times, such a request would be quickly honored, such a reason was then judged too unsatisfactory in the very week in which this page was initially drafted, a later Jesuit, Dan Jamros, was due for ordination at his home parish of St. Stanislaus, Adams, Massachusetts. As for Fr. Reilly, he was appointed administrator of this parish in 1977.

While it was the school building that was stressed as inadequate in Fr. Provincial's letter, the bishop proposed a move of the faculty residence from Danforth Street to a house near his own on the Western Promenade. The Portland house consultors opposed the move. It would be merely to another diocesan dwelling, too remote from (and endanger) the preferred school site on Ocean Avenue. In addition, the move would be to an old house in a Mayfair section. The province consultors proved less forthright. The offer should be dealt with more gingerly, and the reason not seem either too stand-offish or definite. Nothing came of this proposal.

Soon the bishop returned to his offer of a retreat house. Fr. Provincial replied on April 11, 1947, to this offer and wondered what might be the outlook for a new school. On June 2, 1947, he visited the bishop but told his consultors on June 6 that the visit was really unsatisfactory. The situation was as
it had been the previous August. On the day after his visit to Bishop McCarthy, Fr. McElaney had visited Bishop Feeney, the auxiliary, but the meeting was purely social. Nevertheless, at the consultors' meeting on June 6, 1947, he broached the possibility of a new superior at Cheverus.

The unsatisfactory character of Fr. Provincial's visit in April led early in the following autumn to the planned composition of a letter to the bishop. He had Fr. FitzGerald draw up a draft letter and a preliminary statement which he could use as an aid in the formulation of his own official letter. The provincial's letter begins irenically with the view that, if the bishop and his advisers believe their own educational plans could be better carried out by others, the Society would gracefully withdraw in their favor and be glad to have helped for some five to six years.

If, however, the Society was to remain, there must be a definite understanding on a list of seven matters. Cheverus was to be for boys only. The new school structure and the land on which it was to be built must be the property of the Society. Substantial assistance must come from the diocese in building the school in whole or part. The diocese must subsidize the school's operation until tuition charges can manage it. Raising funds should be authorized throughout the diocese. As soon as possible the school site must be settled or a choice of location left to the Society where it could also construct a faculty dwelling. Finally it was insisted that these conditions, after approval by the bishop and his consultors, be considered a solid guarantee
for the future. In view, too, of new missionary commitments and increased ones in older missions, some early answer would be helpful in aiding assignments of province personnel. The letter concluded by saying that, if these conditions appear impossible, any parting would be on good terms, and with the understanding and recognition of the tough local conditions of an economic nature.

Bishop McCarthy in replying took a different tact from that of the previous August. Then it was the economic situation that precluded any diocesan action on a school for an indefinite future. Now he was holding the Society to the terms of the March 2, 1942, agreement whereby the commitment was not only to teach in a diocesan rather than a Jesuit school, but where this commitment was also of extended duration. Hence, any abandonment of Cheverus was not so simple a matter as Fr. Provincial's letter seemed to imply.

On the meaning of the 1942 agreement regarding the permanency of teaching in a diocesan high school, Fr. James H. Dolan was queried by Fr. FitzGerald. Fr. Dolan admitted that the sense of the terms could be misleading, but their original intent had been clear. The Society went to the Portland Diocese with permanence for its ordinary ministries and some day — if circumstances were right — to establish a college. But it went, and these are the operative words, for the present, that is, for the time being, to teach in a diocesan high school. This function was not permanent. The bishop, according to Fr. Dolan, appeared to have made the point that the teaching was in a
diocesan high school and arguments, therefore, against this situation were not automatically a ground for withdrawal. He had not, it would appear, made the point that this task must be continued until the Society was released by the bishop.

That some point had been made effectively by the bishop appeared from some subsequent actions. As early as January 29, 1948, Fr. Provincial had informed Fr. FitzGerald that the province would continue at Cheverus despite the adverse circumstances. Thus, no invidious criticism could be aroused by leaving.

Evidently some communications (annual or special) had gone to Fr. General on a possible withdrawal. In a reply written without reference to the bishop's interpretation of the 1942 agreement, Fr. General had favored proposing a definite policy, and urging that the school cease to be diocesan. The consultors, apprised of Bishop McCarthy's views, believed that Fr. General should know that, in the original formal invitation to Portland, the presumption and the wording implied teaching in a diocesan school.

By April 16, 1948, when reports were flying about in Portland about a Jesuit withdrawal from Cheverus, no reply had come from Fr. General after he was informed of the bishop's contention. When one letter came in May, it stated that a later communication would discuss Portland. When such a letter came and when its contents were divulged to the consultors on July 14, 1948, it admitted the original agreement was for teaching in a diocesan high school, and the General concluded that any
withdrawal must be on conditions satisfactory to the bishop.

Bishop McCarthy did not have authority long enough to enjoy his victory. On July 27, 1948, Bishop Feeney became apostolic administrator of the diocese and, on March 4, 1952, coadjutor bishop with the right of succession.

Sometime prior to the change in administrative responsibility, Bishop McCarthy had purchased the Winslow estate, but not the land between it and Payson Park. The purchase had been effected, as has been seen, through Zelda M. Leif, the secretary to Judge Sullivan, the bishop's lawyer. The deeds, once in possession of the diocese, were kept under the control of the bishop and not made over to the Society. To be legally set up for the ultimate holding of the school property, a petition was made at Augusta for the incorporation of St. Ignatius Residence of the Society of Jesus. The incorporation became official on October 7, 1948.

This phase of Jesuit life in Portland concludes not only with Bishop Feeney having the jurisdiction once possessed by Bishop McCarthy, but also with a new Jesuit rector. At the consultors' meeting of July 14, 1948, the name of Fr. Robert A. Hewitt was proposed as a successor to Fr. FitzGerald at the expiration of his term. The delicate situation might, it was believed, be moved forward by Fr. Hewitt. Since building at Boston College High School, where he was rector, was still in the future even though land had been obtained, his removal from there could be made auspiciously. Names of potential superiors at Boston College High School were considered, as well as other
specific names for the Portland terna. On November 6, 1948, Fr. FitzGerald left Cheverus for Boston and for possible work at St. Benedict's Center.

Fr. Hewitt replaced Fr. FitzGerald. Since he was to be an important actor in the next and more pleasant phase at Portland, this data on Fr. Hewitt is pertinent. His four year regency was equally divided between St. Peter's High School in Jersey City and Holy Cross College. On completing his theology and tertianship, he studied moral theology at the Gregorian University in Rome. On returning to Weston, he taught ethics briefly, and then moral theology until appointed rector there in 1937. Just a short time before his six-year term expired, he was transferred as rector to Boston College High School and Immaculate Conception Church on Harrison Avenue in Boston.

Then, once again shortly before that term ended, Father Hewitt became the second rector of Cheverus. Here it was his good fortune to be put in touch with an anonymous benefactor prepared in November, 1950 to give $500,000 for a new school building for Cheverus. Through this benefaction as will be seen, God blessed those who had suffered from inadequacies and frustrations, but who as operarii inconfusibiles continued to toil in classroom, sanctuary, pulpit and rostrum.