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## **Historical Novel Depicts Early Catholic Church in Marquette**

Have you ever wished you could meet Father Marquette or Bishop Baraga? Have you ever wondered what it was like to be a Catholic when Upper Michigan was first settled? Read the new historical novel *Iron Pioneers* and see life through the eyes of early Marquette Catholics.

*Iron Pioneers* is the first novel in a trilogy about Marquette's history and people from 1849-1999. The author, Tyler R. Tichelaar, is a seventh generation Marquette resident and a member of St. Michael's Parish.

"In writing the history of Marquette, it is impossible not to discuss the Catholic Church," says Tichelaar. "Throughout the last century and a half, approximately fifty percent of Upper Michigan's population have been Catholic, and Bishop Baraga and Father Marquette are internationally famous."

The first white people in Upper Michigan included many Catholic missionaries. The Prologue to *Iron Pioneers* depicts Father Marquette's visit to the area in 1671 when he said a Mass and converted many of the Ojibwa. Father Marquette is depicted as pleased with the people's faith and their beautiful land, never imagining someday a city will be built there that bears his name.

In *Iron Pioneers*, the Catholic Church is a constant presence in the early settlers' lives. The pioneers are a mix of Catholics and Protestants from New England, Quebec, and Europe. These characters experience each other's religious differences and prejudices, yet work together to survive in a rugged new land.

Religious tensions arise among the characters. Rebecca Brookfield, a staunch Methodist, promotes temperance and is alarmed that the Catholics drink wine at Communion. Other characters fear family conflicts if they marry outside of their religion.

Historical Catholic moments abound in *Iron Pioneers*. Bishop Baraga lays the cornerstone of St. Peter's Cathedral in 1864. Baraga's 1868 funeral is depicted, with the cathedral packed to overflowing, and a crowd standing outside in a raging blizzard to pay its final respects.

While canonization efforts for Bishop Baraga did not begin until the twentieth century, in *Iron Pioneers*, the characters recognize their bishop's saintliness. Molly Bergmann brings her baby to Bishop Baraga when the child is burning up with a fever. She credits Baraga with healing the child when he lays his hand on its forehead. "Miracles were attested to at the end of Bishop Baraga's life," says Tichelaar. "I wished to create a fictional miracle that could very easily occur, yet be explained rationally as just a turn in the fever. That Molly chooses to believe the event is a miracle reflects her own faith and the power of the Church in her life."

The novel also tells of a scandal in the diocese. Bishop Vertin made himself unpopular by transferring the pastor of St. Peter's Cathedral to Mackinac Island in 1879. Shortly after the transfer, the cathedral mysteriously burnt. Rumor was that angry parishioners burnt down the cathedral. "No one knows if parishioners were responsible for the fire," says Tichelaar, "but the possibility makes a great story." In *Iron Pioneers*, Molly Bergmann suspects her husband, an Italian Catholic saloonkeeper, was involved in the cathedral's destruction.

Most importantly, *Iron Pioneers* explores religious faith. The characters pray, go to confession, and struggle to know and follow God's will. Patrick, an Irish immigrant, expresses concern that the Catholic Church in Ireland is rigid and does not help the oppressed Irish. He also questions the purpose of the vision at Knock which did not relieve the people from their poverty. Other characters trust in God despite their obstacles. Molly Bergmann finds strength in her marital trials; after going to confession, she is inspired to be charitable rather than consider her own unhappiness.

“Religion played a vital role in early Marquette’s history,” says Tichelaar. “I strove to create characters deeply concerned with their spiritual lives. I don’t think the novel could be realistic without characters who question God and struggle with their faith. This search for faith and meaning is what made those pioneers’ lives of value; it is the same quest for faith and meaning we pursue today. Lessons learned from those early pioneers, both Catholic and Protestant, can strengthen our faith in the twenty-first century.”

*Iron Pioneers* is available in local bookstores or by order. For more information, visit [www.MarquetteFiction.com](http://www.MarquetteFiction.com).

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