

History

History evokes the past. It is fitting to glance backwards on St. Mary's first fifty years as a developing young parish with many commendable accomplishments. But one can also look with pride at the growth and achievements in her second passing of fifty years; a period of significant sweeping changes within the Mother Church in which our own church has played such an important role.

Church Dedicated in 1888

Conneaut was organized into a parish with Rev. Father Jennings as its first pastor in 1884. Prior to this time, Conneaut, along with Ashtabula and Jefferson, were organized as missions under the care of one pastor in 1850. St. Mary Church is situated on land bought by Father Jennings in the spring of 1887 with the stained glass windows donated as memorials by parishioners. The bell was purchased at the sum of four hundred and twenty dollars by Rev. Father Murphy, pastor, and dedicated to St. Ignatius by Bishop Ignatius Horstmann in 1897. School construction was begun in 1900 with formal opening and dedication in August of 1901. Enrollment was completed with 153 children receiving instructions from Sisters of the Holy Humility of Mary who were placed in charge of education. The summer of that same year five acres on West Main Road were purchased for a cemetery, and dedicated to the patronage of St. Joseph. A golden Jubilee Anniversary book was compiled to commemorate the first fifty years of St. Mary parish. This second historical profile of the church begins with the year 1938 up to the present year of our church's one hundred year celebration.

The Thirties

In 1938, under the pastorate of Father Gribbon, the church underwent improvements to its interior which featured a new sanctuary and tabernacle. Father Kennedy followed Father Gribbon and the Holy Name Society was formed under his pastorate. The society, composed of men only, met in the basement of the school. Its twenty members organized to help meet the needs of the church, offer service and participate in prayer. No formal choir existed at that time, but the following organists provided music during Masses: Maggie Clark, Dorothy Sanford, with Art Natto as vocalist. It was also learned that Father Kennedy had drawn up the first plans for St. Mary's Hall, later to be the hall eventually realized under the pastorate of Father James Stevenson who came to St. Mary Church in the decade of the forties. It can also be noted that at this time our parish was still under the directorship of the Cleveland diocese.

The Forties

The decade of the forties began on a sad note, with Father Jennings (first parish priest) passing in April of 1941. Rev. Father Bartley J. Kennedy took over in 1944 as pastor. In 1943, the Youngstown Diocese was born and St. Mary Church, along with ninety-two other parishes and six missions, entered the first Directory of the Youngstown Diocese. Bishop McFadden, in ill health, then stepped down and Bishop Emmet M. Walsh headed the new diocese.

Father James Stevenson

Father James Stevenson took over St. Mary Church's pastorate, arriving in 1949 to serve eighteen years in which parishioners, students and school staff came to know and value him highly. Sister Mary Anthony of the Holy Humility of Mary order was principal at that time and directed a staff of teachers comprised mostly of nuns from the well known Blue Nuns from Villa Maria in Pennsylvania. Mother of students formed a club to address issues and problems arising from the school. These and other organizations met in the school basement; however, Father Stevenson was then beginning to formulate concrete plans for construction of the hall.

One most remembers the decade of the forties in the solemn beauty of Marie Walter's music. Marie began playing and singing in 1940. For forty seven years St. Mary Church was the beneficiary of her talent and unswerving dedication. During one period early in this decade, visiting priest, along with regularly scheduled Masses, required Marie's services seven days a week beginning at 6:45am with Mass and finishing in the late morning hours. Marie's music gave joy and religious solemnity to First Holy Communion, weddings, funerals, and all holy days. With Marie at the organ, St. Mary Church always had a key ingredient in all its Masses and ceremonies; the uplifting joy and beauty of her music.

Catholic Daughters of the Americas

The Catholic Daughters of the Americas, Conneaut Court, was organized and formed in December of 1919 with fifty members initiated into Court No. 413. Leo Cunningham, past Grand Knight of the Knights of Columbus was instrumental in organizing the Conneaut Court which was then named Daughters of Isabella." The Conneaut Court, at their 20th anniversary in 1939, changed their name to the Catholic Daughters of the Americas. Parish members of Court 413 are held in esteem for their valuable work and positions held. These members, too numerous to single out, have served St. Mary Church and the community with outstanding leadership and accomplishments in carrying out their principles which aim for continual moral and intellectual improvement while carrying out charitable activities for both religious and benevolent purposes.

The Knights of Columbus

The Knights of Columbus, a fraternal order and insurance association, was founded in 1882 with Conneaut Council NO. 627 being granted its charter to forty-nine members in 1902. In 1947, Conneaut Council had 200 members who had their headquarters in the former George Cleveland homestead on Harbor Street. Currently, the Knights have their headquarters located on North Amboy Road, where the former Our Lady of Fatima chapel was located. St. Mary Church has valued the services of all the many members who have given so generously of their time to the service of their fellow man while contributing symbolic pomp and color to ceremonial activities.

The Fifties

A look into the decade of the fifties brings poignant memories of those high spirited young priests who came to assist Father Stevenson, our pastor. Some of them were: Father Patrick O'Leary (1953-57), Father Orlando Rich (1955), and Father Benedict

Franzetta, who later was elevated to Bishop. A highlight of this decade was the organization and beginning of CCD classes in 1951 by the late Mary Stearns, well remembered for her twenty-five years as a teacher for the school. She was honored at a dinner in 1976. At that time Father John Welsch commended the seventy-four year old member of St. Mary's for her years of unwavering dedication and contribution to the education of young people. Under Father Stevenson, plans for St. Mary's Hall become a reality in the late fifties as moves for design and construction got underway.

Decades of Change

Following the fifties, there entered a twenty year period in which two decades of significant change took place. This evolved out of Vatican II decreed by Pope John XXIII in 1963. Thus the Mother Church began to take on a new sound as well as a new look. Initiation of the new sound took place in March of 1965. Revisions in the Mass were adopted the first Sunday of Lent that year. Most significant were: prayers shortened at beginning of Mass, elimination of the Last Gospel as well as traditional prayer recitation after Mass, the Sanctus and Agnus Dei, usually done by the priest, were to be sung or spoken by the congregation, and provisions for a "new prayer of the People" to be said after the Creed and before the Offertory. The teaching sisters at St. Mary School initiated one of the new looks in September of 1962 when they shed their traditional habits of severe headdress and long, full-flowing skirts for a more contemporary look in conservative length skirts with matching jackets. This change also included permission for the nuns to use their baptismal names.

The First Formal Choir

One cannot look at these changing years without glancing at the list of those young priests who came in rapid succession to assist both Father James Stevenson and his replacement, Father Blaine Pierce. The 1960's brought us Father Robert Reidy who was replaced by Father Phillip Conley in June 1965. He was replaced by Father David Rhodes who came in January 1967. Father Rhodes taught at St. John's High School, but more importantly, he started the first formal choir in the church under the direction of Robert Pietrowski with Bud Boehm as organist. In 1968, the choir continued under the able direction of George Voytek with organists Carol Tinney and Elgie Ring. The choir gave pontifical solemnity to Mass and we cherish the memory. With the new Mass and liturgy one hears a uniquely different sound and indeed it is easy to understand the old proverb of "he who sings at Mass prays twice."

St. Mary's Hall Dedicated

In 1964, Father Stevenson's tenure was coming to a close but not before he was able to see the dedication of St. Mary's Hall become a reality. The Hall was dedicated in 1964 with the east classrooms completed at that time. In 1967 we said farewell to Father James Stevenson and welcomed Father Blaine Pierce to the pastorate of our church. And shortly after we all shared sadness in learning of Father Ronald Waechter's untimely death in October of 1972. We remember him well as Assistant Pastor to Father Pierce in his early years at St. Mary. While Father Pierce was with us we were fortunate to share in the silver jubilee celebration of his priesthood in 1971.

St. Mary's School Closed

The last graduating class from St. Mary School is still fresh in the minds of all of us. A decision was made to house all Catholic students in one school: a newer, more modern school was chosen. For many it was a difficult change to give up the old school. In June 1972, the school closed and St. Mary students merged into Mother Cabrini School. With the Blue Nuns no longer teaching, we saw the convent close and another significant era in St. Mary's passed into history.

St. Mary's Ladies Guild Formed

In 1972, we bid a fond good bye to Father Blain Pierce when Father John Welsch arrived to direct and guide St. Mary. Under Father John Welsch's guidance, St. Mary's Ladies Guild was formed and organized in September, 1975. Its aims and goals were focused on activities with spiritual, social and helpful meanings. The Ladies Guild is similar in function to The Altar Society of earlier church years. Weekly bingo games at the hall were initiated under Father Welsch's cheerful guidance. Church bingo is now enjoying its twelfth year.

Father John Welsch

In this historical journey, one finally arrives at the present yet fast-fading decade of the eighties. Encompassed in these recent years are patience and rededication of both clergy and parishioners as the Mass, the new liturgy, and the new musical sounds have begun to effect changes. The eighties primarily signify the years of adapting to Pope John XXIII Vatican II decree of 1963. Father John Welsch continued as pastor; in fact, a highlight of 1981, saw Father Welsch presiding over the dedication of the St. Joseph Shrine in St. Joseph Cemetery. The shrine was donated to the cemetery by both St. Mary and Cabrini churches. Under Father Welsch, the Ladies Guild reaffirmed their aims in which they assisted the parish by generating extra income through their monthly card parties and rummage sales. While still with us, Father Welsch oversaw the newly formed classrooms in the gymnasium area of the hall. Thus ended Fr. Welsch's twelve years at St. Mary's.

In July of 1986, Father Welsch was replaced by our present pastor, Father John Summers. Father Summers brings to St. Mary Church a zealous spirit of dedication to the new changes that have been taking place. A native of Youngstown, Ohio, he comes to us from the church of the Immaculate Conception, in that same area. In the two years that Father John Summers has been guiding and directing St. Mary Church in the new spirit of recreation and rededication, the Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults was formed in October, 1986, and the Parish Council, under his direction, was also formed in October, 1987. The Vatican Council stipulated that the Catholic Faith be looked at and explained so that others may understand through teachings and example what our church and faith means. Upon learning and seeing, one can then make a decision to join the church.

Joyful Noise Choir

Our choir came under new leadership in 1987 when Craig Cleveland took over the duties of George Voytek. Along with Craig, certain choir members now assist the assembly by leading them in the singing of hymns and responses during Mass. One can smile from within when the Joyful Noise Choir became yet another addition to the new sound in our church. Under the guidance and direction of Gloria Bartone, young people who truly desired to express their faith in song, formed this group in 1981.

The Future

Looking at these past fifty years of growth, achievements, and dramatic change, one can clearly see that St. Mary Church is indeed an example of how members' unwavering faith and dedication can bring a parish through significant change and yet never lose the deep commitment to her ongoing development and progress. The entire embodiment of St. Mary Church celebrates her centennial year in jubilation for all she stands for...for all she has accomplished; and for all the loving faith held within her these past one hundred years of her life.