

AN HISTORICAL SKETCH CHURCH OF SAINT MARY, HELP OF CHRISTIANS

One hundred fifty nine years have passed since the parish of Saint Mary, Help of Christians had its beginning in the north end of Pittston.

The history of this parish is a story of the families united under a duly ordained priest. Now that the parish of Saint Mary, Help of Christians is being consolidated into a new parish at the Saint Mary, Help of Christians site, it is important that a summary of its history be prepared.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a number of Irish families attracted to this promising valley by the opening of the anthracite coal fields brought with them the religious spirit for which the Irish have long been noted.

During the years 1837 to 1849, the homes of Thomas McCue and Michael Reap became the stopping place for missionary priests until the building of our first church in 1851.

Rev. Henry Fitzsimmons, stationed at Carbondale, was the first priest to make regular visits to the Catholics of Pittston and surrounding areas.

In 1846, Rev. Patrick Prendergast succeeded Father Fitzsimmons.

In 1849, Rev. Basil Shorb succeeded Father Prendergast and it was he who secured the piece of land on the hill - known afterwards as Church Hill - and encouraged the building of the first church.

While plans were in the formative stage, Father Shorb was succeeded by Rev. John Loughran. In the summer of 1851, the dream was realized when the first Catholic church in the North Wyoming Valley was blessed. For the first time in a building specially dedicated to the service of God, Holy Mass was offered.

Old Saint Mary's was not securely erected. No pews were installed, but families disposed to do so, placed moveable benches in the church. The members of this scattered parish, which constituted the entire Pittston Area and surrounding towns, were required to attend Saint Mary's. All the faithful climbed the hill to attend Mass in the modest building on Church Hill.

In 1853, Rev. John P. O'Shaughnessy, formerly stationed in Wilkes-Barre, replaced Father Loughran. For years he gave unreservedly of his time and effort to the many needs of the people. In a short time, the Catholic population outgrew the church. With this in mind, Father O'Shaughnessy, pastor of Saint Mary's, secured a plot of ground on William Street, Pittston, and set about the erection of a new building. On October 17, 1853, five years after securing the ground on William Street, the new church, under the title of St. John the Evangelist, was dedicated.

Due to the deterioration of Old Saint Mary's Church, services were discontinued there for some time.

In 1881, the Catholic families of Upper Pittston desired the construction of another building of their own to replace the first church of 1851. This was accomplished under the direction of Father John J. Finnen. The second Saint Mary's occupied the same spot as did the Old Saint Mary, Help of Christians. It was built in 1882 and was blessed by the Most. Reverend William O'Hara, D.D., Bishop of Scranton, on May 6, 1883. This was a substantial frame building with basement and gallery. The church served the

faithful of Upper Pittston for years until the construction in 1905 of the third Saint Mary, Help of Christians Church at its present site on North Main Street.

Priests who served Saint Mary's Church in the 1880's and 1890's were Rev. Joseph Coroner and Rev. John Greve. Father Greve was first assigned as an assistant pastor to the Rev. John Finnen. He served in this capacity for ten years at which time he was appointed pastor of St. Mary, Help of Christians in 1895.

During the early pastorate of Father Greve, St. Mary's Parish experienced a terrible tragedy, the Twin Shaft Mine Disaster, in which thirty-five of the most prominent men of the parish were among the fifty-eight who met a tragic death early on Sunday morning, June 28, 1896.

As time went on, Father Greve and his parishioners saw the need of a new church in a more central (present) site on North Main Street. However, the first of the parish buildings on the present site was Finnen Memorial Hall, named in memory of his former pastor and friend.

The site on which Memorial Hall and the present St. Mary, Help of Christians Church is built was owned by the Maloney Family. It was purchased for the sum of six thousand dollars in 1902. Memorial Hall was intended for a convent school with large classrooms. The upper floor was arranged so that the young people might enjoy social activities. The basement was fitted with a social room, library and gymnasium. The cost of the building at completion was six thousand, five hundred dollars. Upon the completion of this project, the pastor and parishioners worked for the erection of a new church. Saint, Mary, Help of Christians Church, built in 1905, was the crowning event of Father Greve's work to the service of God. The strain of the building projects undermined Father Greve's health. Hoping that an ocean voyage might prove beneficial, he planned a trip to Europe. He passed away on the homeward bound voyage on October 9, 1908, just one day before the arrival in New York on the steamship "Arabic".

Curates who served with Father Greve were Rev. N.J. McManus, Rev. Bernard O'Bryne, Rev. Van Rea, Rev. Thomas O'Malley and Rev. Thomas Grogan. Monsignor George L. Lucas became pastor of St. Mary's Church on October 30, 1908. He purchased the lot known as the Wagner estate for the site of the parish rectory. The residence at 725 North Main Street, which had been vacated by Fr. Greve, was sold at this time.

In 1912, Monsignor Lucas was transferred to Saint Patrick's Church in West Scranton, and Father Peter Gough became pastor of St. Mary's. Fr. Gough's achievements in the temporal affairs of the parish reveal the efficient executive ability he possessed. The erection and furnishing in 1913 of the eighteen room rectory beside the church exemplifies his judgment in practical planning and sound values. In addition, he purchased the adjoining plot of ground on which he hoped to build a convent and establish a parochial school.

For health reasons, Fr. Gough took a leave of absence and spent several months in the western states. Father returned apparently improved, but a relapse occurred soon after, from which he never fully recovered. He died on December 18, 1916 at the Rectory. Assistant pastors were Rev. Francis Siddons and Rev. Edward H. Burke. Father George J. Dixon began his pastorate on february 2, 1917. In 1930, Fr. Dixon saw the completion of the beautiful St. Mary's Convent.

The school building originally known as Memorial Hall, constructed in 1903 and named in memory of a former pastor of St. Mary's, Rev. John J. Finnen, opened on September 8, 1930 with 175 pupils. The teachers were Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, whose Motherhouse is at Marywood University, Scranton. Father Dixon's faithful and untiring life of service to others ended on

March 1, 1936. Assistant priests during Fr. Dixon's pastorate were: Rev. J. Ben Lemard and Rev. Arthur J. McAndrew.

The Rev. John J. Featherstone was assigned to St. Mary's Parish after the death of Fr. Dixon. During his time as pastor, Dr. Featherstone served as Diocesan Superintendent of Schools, a post he held from 1924 to 1944. He was also responsible for the spiritual care of the patients in the Ransom Home, and worked with the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters for the development of St. Mary's School. Due to illness, Dr. Featherstone was a patient at Seton Institute in Baltimore, MD from 1954 to 1963. During his illness, Fr. Edward T. Gallagher and Fr. Andrew P. Maloney administered to the Parish. Assistant Pastors included: Rev. Arthur I. McAndrews, Rev. Joseph P. M. McDonough, Rev. A. F. Moriarity, Rev. James M. McAuliffe, Rev. John J. White, Rev. James J. Kane, Rev. Edward T. Gallagher, Rev. John J. Galenas and Rev. Paul G. Melesky.

Rev. Andrew P. Maloney, who had served as the administrator of St. Mary's from 1956 was named pastor on the death of Dr. Featherstone in 1963. Two particular accomplishments of Fr. Maloney were the St. Jude's Novena and the dedication of the stained glass window in memory of President John F. Kennedy. Assistant Pastors who served were Rev. John J. Galenas, Rev. Paul Melesky and Rev. Joseph P. Sammons.

Rev. Edward J. Gerrity became pastor in 1967. Under his guidance, the directives of Vatican II were implemented. St. Mary, Help of Christians School and St. Rocco's School were consolidated forming Pittston Catholic Elementary School. Grades 1 through 4 were housed at the south Pittston location and were taught by the Filippini Order of Sisters. The Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters taught Grades 5 through 8 at the building in Upper Pittston.

In 1970, a decision by the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters to discontinue staffing the school, due to a shortage of personnel, made the closing of the school a reality. Later the school building was razed. After the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary left, the rectory was moved to the convent building. The former rectory was used as a residence by the Sisters of Mercy who assisted with a parish CCD Program.

On November 16, 1972, a fire broke out in the rear of the rectory. Extensive repairs were made. Today the former convent houses the rectory, the church office and St. Mary's Early Childhood Learning Center.

During Fr. Gerrity's tenure, a quilters club was organized and their handmade quilts were chanced off to benefit the parish. The fondness the people felt for Fr. Gerrity was demonstrated years later when the Parish Hall was named in his honor. Rev. Joseph Sammons served as Assistant Pastor and Rev. Daniel Hitchko was in residence.

Rev. William B. Blake became pastor of Saint Mary, Help of Christians in June 1982. Rev. Joseph Gilbert was in residence and Rev. Mr. Joseph Gowarty served as Deacon. Fr. Blake continued the spirit of Vatican II and encouraged young people to become involved in parish life. The CCD Program was expanded. A Youth Ministry Program was begun and a Vacation Bible School became a summer activity. Fr. Blake enlisted the assistance of Sr. Henrita McArdle, IHM to spur congregational participation in liturgical music. The parish summer picnic was revived as a fundraiser and social event. Physical improvements to the parish property included restoration of the church's brick exterior, new church pews, a lift to make the church building handicap accessible, a new furnace in the CCD building and an automated bell system to ring the bells of St. Mary's. In 1986, the churches of Saint Mary, Help of Christians and Saint Mary's Assumption were yoked. Fr. Blake led the parish during the transition.

Father William J. Karl was named pastor of St. Mary's Parish in 1988. He began the Lucky Number Calendar as a substitute for a summer picnic and helped stabilize the parish finances.

In July of 1990, Rev. Richard J. Polmounter was appointed the 10th Pastor of Saint Mary's Parish. He continued to bring the sister churches together as one family. This parish continues today as a vibrant example of our faith.

Fr. Polmounter revitalized the Annual Saint Jude Novena, the Altar and Rosary Society and the Vacation Bible School. Spiritual growth has been encouraged through the Road to Resurrection, and Renew in 2000. Improvements made to the parish property included renovations of the interior and exterior of the Parish Hall and CCD Center. New roofs were put on the Rectory, CCD Center, Church and Garage. Windows were replaced in the rectory and CCD center and new heating systems were installed in the Church and rectory. A new Church organ was purchased and installed in 1997 and the parking lot was expanded. Father Louis Kaminski replaced Father Polmounter in the fall of 2006.

In June of 2007, Blessed Sacrament, Hughestown, St. Mary's Assumption and St. Mary, Help of Christians, Pittston, were linked. Father Maloney was appointed pastor of all three parishes which began to come together in the Parish Community of Blessed Sacrament † St. Mary's.

In December, 2007, a diocesan parish reconfiguration process, "Called to Holiness and Mission: Pastoral Planning in the Diocese of Scranton", was announced. Since that time Core Teams from each parish, in conjunction with the Pittston Area Cluster Team, spent much time in prayer, study and dialogue regarding the presence of the Church in the area. A recommendation was sent to the Diocesan Planning Commission in May, 2008.

The final decision for parishes in the diocese was announced by Bishop Martino on January 31, 2008. The decision regarding our parishes stated that *Blessed Sacrament Parish, Hughestown, St. Mary's Assumption Parish, Pittston, and St. Mary, Help of Christian Parish, Pittston would all consolidate into a new parish at the St. Mary, Help of Christians' site. The church buildings of Blessed Sacrament and St. Mary's Assumption will close.*

Called to Holiness and Mission

On Sunday, November 21, 2010, at 10:30 a.m., a closing liturgy is being celebrated at St. Mary, Help of Christians Church. The new parish, ***Our Lady of the Eucharist*** will open on the First Sunday of Advent, November 28, 2010.

Our Lady of the Eucharist maintains the roots and traditions of all three parishes as we come together. The Eucharist is the center of our life as a Catholic Church. It has been the center of the life of our parishes. The name "Blessed Sacrament" holds a special meaning for all of us as we consolidate. Our Blessed Mother has also been a very important figure in the community life of the parishes, especially under the names "St. Mary's Assumption" and "St. Mary, Help of Christians."

Because the Eucharist and Our Blessed Mother are central elements of our faith life, we celebrate the newly consolidated parish of ***Our Lady of the Eucharist***.

Updated History