

HISTORY OF PONTIAC – ST. MARY’S

When Bishop John J. Myers rededicated St. Mary’s Church on April 25, 1999, following its three-year restoration and redecoration program, he also was reaffirming the faith of a small group of mostly Irish Catholics who were among the early settlers in Pontiac – a congregation which so long ago wanted to build a church that would reflect the strength and beauty of its lasting faith.

Then, under the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of Chicago, the faithful traveled as far as Joliet, Bloomington, Wilmington, Ottawa or Morris to attend services. The first Mass in Pontiac was said by the Rev. Michael Hurley in a private home in July of 1857. Other priests occasionally visited the area during the following years, conducting services at homes of different members, usually those of Michael McCabe and William Cleary.

In 1866, the congregation purchased the Methodist Church and its site for \$2,000 and converted it into a Catholic Church. As a Catholic mission church, St. Mary’s was attended by pastors from Fairbury and Dwight.

The Diocese of Peoria was founded in 1877 and, in June, its first bishop, John Lancaster Spalding, appointed the Rev. Humphrey Winters Finch the first resident pastor of Pontiac and its out-missions of Flanagan, Cornell and the Illinois State Reformatory.

St. Mary’s Cemetery had already been established through the efforts of Luke Jordan who, in 1872, had made arrangements with Frank Roach, who later deeded the land to the Diocese of Peoria in 1879 for consideration of maintaining a Catholic cemetery and one dollar. Mrs. Ann Nevalle Jordan, who died September 8, 1872, was the first to be buried in St. Mary’s Cemetery.

In early November 1881, the Catholic parsonage was moved to the lot adjoining it on the east, and the ground was cleared up on the old site with the intent of erecting a brick church in the spring.

But it wasn’t until August 1882, that the Pontiac Sentinel announced: “Father Finch and the members of his church are making an earnest effort to secure a building in Pontiac which will be a credit to their society and to the standing of the Catholic Church in this county. The sum of \$8,000 has already been subscribed, a considerable part of which was pledged last Sunday, and as soon as this has been increased to \$12,000, work will be commenced. The society owns a fine building lot on the corner of Main and Howards streets on which the new church is to be erected.”

In the fall of 1883, The Sentinel noted that the Catholics had hoped to have their church enclosed before the onset of bad weather but the work had not progressed rapidly enough.

On September 5, 1884: “The brickwork of the Catholic Church has been completed, and the carpenters are busy putting on the roof. The church, when finished, will be a very handsome and imposing structure.”

Gothic in style was a graceful spire rising in the center of the town, the church presented all the ancient traditions and characteristics of Catholic art and architecture.

On October 25, 1885: “The work of lathing and plastering the new Catholic Church has begun.” The congregation had determined its church would be a work of excellence. Stained glass windows in the new church, the paper noted, will be memorial contributions by wealthy member of the Church. “They are being made by Kinsella, the Chicago artist who furnished the stained glass for the new Board of Trade Building and whose works can be seen in great cathedrals.” Also ordered were oak pews of excellent quality and design.

The Sentinel later reported that the three-day fair held in November that year “for the purpose of raising funds to complete the church building from top to bottom” was a great success with the women of the parish producing grand suppers all three days and the games providing much fun for all. “Mrs. Foley took the cow and the quilt was carried off by Mrs. Fitzgerald.” The fair had been postponed from October until mid-November so it could be held in the new building.

The windows, doors and pews were installed in 1886 and according to the August 20, 1886, Free Trader and Observer: “The doors of the new Catholic Church were thrown open to its members last Sunday morning (August 15). The building is a handsome one, and though very little had been said publicly at the time of its opening, it was crowded full.” The next day, John Fitzgerald, an old citizen of Pontiac died and his funeral was the first to be conducted in the new church.

After five long years of construction, the new church was dedicated November 27, 1887. But there was much work to be done on the inside and, as yet, there was no altar, a common wood table being used.

In June 1889, the newspaper reported the Catholic Church had been frescoed and new altar furnishings put in, stating that the selection of altar and pulpit furniture shows taste on the part of the Rev. Father Hedges, who had succeeded Father Finch as pastor in the summer of 1888.

Ten years after its dedication, during the pastorate of the Rev. Patrick Lyons, the congregation had outgrown the church and the building was extended to the north along the identical lines of the original plans. The newspaper noted in January 1898 that the new extension was practically completed. Bishop Spalding dedicated the extended church and confirmed a class of 50 on Tuesday, July 19, 1898.

During the pastorates of the Rev. Father Patrick Lyons, who served from 1890 to 1910, and the Rev. Father J.H. Cannon, who served from 1910 to 1932 the church purchased the remainder of the property in its city square block.

Construction of a rectory was completed in September 1892. The Free Trader & Observer described it as a two-story building with basement, of modern architecture and elegantly furnished and carpeted. "The first floor comprises parlor and reception room, dining room, kitchen and two bedrooms. On the second floor are the assistant pastor's study, two sleeping apartments, bathroom and storeroom." The house, which stood where the present convent now stands, later was moved to 111 E. Livingston St., and in recent years the parish purchased the property from the Dietiker family for future parish expansion.

The bell in the steeple of St. Mary's Church was christened "St. Mary" on Tuesday, January 31, 1893, with Frank Neifing and Mary Finnell serving as godparents. In all 22 priests took part in the ceremonies. Michael Fox was in charge of erecting the bell in the tower. The bell, which itself weighs 2,150 pounds with an additional 500 pounds for the mountings, was cast in bronze by the Stuckstede Bell Co., in St. Louis in 1893. It then was placed in the church tower and rung for the first time the following Sunday.

St. Mary's School was erected in 1902 and completed in 1903. On May 29, 1903 the paper reported contractors were again at work at St. Mary's school. "The walls have settled and dried out and now will be plastered and completed."

The three-store building covered a space 40 by 104 feet. The first story, or basement, was almost entirely above ground. The exterior was red pressed brick with trim of Bedford cut stone. The foundations were rough Bedford stone. The slate roof, which was of Mansard style, practically added another story, the paper said.

It contained classrooms, dormitories for pupils, kitchens, and dining rooms, play rooms for pupils and private rooms for the nuns.

On August 28, the paper noted that five nuns from the Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who had been engaged to take charge of the school, had been busy equipping the school rooms and their dwelling apartments.

On Monday morning, September 7, 1903, approximately 100 pupils reported for the first classes to be held at St. Mary's. Three classrooms were used for grades 1 through 7. A fourth nun taught music and the fifth served as housekeeper.

The new school could accommodate 180 pupils and included living quarters for six teaching sisters and ample room for the music department. The following year a fourth classroom was opened, thus affording two grades to each teacher, grades 1 - 8.

In 1914, Father Cannon erected a parish rectory of Bedford stone construction, and the former rectory, a yellow frame house, was moved one block north.

The congregation continued to grow and, in the late 1920's, plans were made to build a new and larger church. A temporary frame building was constructed on the site of the first frame church. On January 5, 1930 the "last Mass" was held in St. Mary's Catholic Church. The next day workmen removed equipment and furniture to the temporary building to the north. It was planned at that time to raze the old church, but building plans came to a halt as the country plunged even deeper into a Depression.

The Rev. J. H. Cannon, pastor since 1910, died in 1932, and the Rev. Thomas Shea was named pastor July 14, 1932. He named a building committee composed of Thomas Googerty, Wray Call, F. A. Ortman, W. J. Butler and James Murphy and a complete survey was made of the old church. They found the foundation and walls of the building to be in an excellent state of preservation.

Parish sentiment, as well as economic reasons, dictated that the original old church be kept intact, but renovated. Plans were drawn that provided for the addition of the large transepts, all new entrances, a new heating plant, new and modern lighting equipment, staining and tuck-pointing the whole building and a complete revamping of the interior in keeping the Gothic lines of the old building.

This revamping included the removal of a huge balcony which had extended from the present choir loft to about half-way down the church.

In addition, three new altars of Brocatello-Sienna marble were installed, a new tile floor was laid, new

oak pews were placed to provide a seating capacity of 650 and three new stained glass windows were installed. All of this was accomplished in the mid-1930s in the midst of the country's Great Depression.

Following the death of Father Shea in June 1948, the Rev. John T. Shields was named to St. Mary's. During his 26 years as pastor, a new school and a new convent were built and many improvements were made to the church. St. Mary's also purchased a piece of property at the south end of St. Mary's Cemetery from the American Legion, which was used to enlarge the cemetery.

November 24, 1957 marked the groundbreaking ceremonies for the new school, and the cornerstone was blessed on May 18, 1958. Classes started in the new building on September 8, 1958, with 271 children enrolled in the eighth grades. Teachers at that time included seven nuns and a lay teacher.

A new convent to house the nuns was necessary. The brick structure, fronting on Howard Street, includes a small chapel at its west end. Groundbreaking was on May 1, 1962 and the first Mass was celebrated in the chapel on August 22, 1963.

Msgr. Shields retired in June 1974 and the Rev. Joseph J. O'Dea was named pastor. He continued the care of the church, rejuvenating its appearance with tuck-pointing in 1976. In 1977, Msgr. Joseph J. O'Dea had the bell "St. Mary" electrified and it tolled again for the first time in many years for the midnight Christmas Eve Mass that year. In 1978, the platform and front steps were remodeled and a ramp was built. In 1980, an extensive and much needed remodeling and redecorating of the rectory got underway. In the church, a rebuilt Kimball pipe organ was installed and dedicated March 22, 1981.

The St. Vincent de Paul Society was formed December 7, 1982 to assist the needy of the community. They opened the Food Pantry March 17, 1983, in the former Margaret Brown home which had been purchased by the church in 1979. The pantry supplies free food and clothing to the needy, receiving support from a monthly collection at St. Mary's Church.

February 2, 1983 was the beginning of the Perpetual Adoration program at St. Mary's (around-the-clock-time of prayer and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament).

During Msgr. O'Dea's pastorate, St. Mary's Cemetery accepted from the State of Illinois the transfer of property which had been used for burials by the Pontiac Correctional Center. Msgr. O'Dea retired November 5, 1986.

Rev. E. Edward Higgins was appointed pastor and major restoration was undertaken, including a new roof, new steps and brick tuck-pointing.

Renovations continued under Father Thomas Mack who arrived in Pontiac in September 1998 as the ninth resident pastor of St. Mary's Parish. Renovation continued. The altars of sacrifice and repose and baptismal font and pulpit were replaced, while other sanctuary furnishings were restored. Pews were removed, stained and varnished. New carpeting and light fixtures were installed. Fresh paint brought out architectural highlights. The goal was to retain the architectural integrity of the edifice, while providing for contemporary means for liturgical celebration.

A bi-monthly parish newsletter, Voice of St. Mary's was initiated in September, 2001 with the first issue noting that Pastor Thomas Mack would also serve missions: St. Joseph's (Flanagan) and St. John's (Cullom).

On May 18, 2002 parishioners Jim Wallace and George Wagner were ordained Permanent Deacons, the first ever in the Pontiac Vicariate. Father Mack became Msgr. Mack with his investiture held October 27, 2003.

The Knights of Columbus celebrated their 100 years of service to St. Mary's in 2004. The Knights donated the monument to the unborn and pray the rosary on the second Sunday of each month.

A Parish Census in 2005 identified the need for a new facility that would house a parish hall, new kitchen, meeting room, larger kindergarten room, full size gym and St. Vincent de Paul Facility. Livingston Street, to the north of the existing school building, was closed down and three adjacent properties to the north were acquired and houses torn down to make room for the new facility that was dedicated by Bishop Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C. on January 12, 2008.

On Wednesday, June 13, 2012, after 14 years of service to St. Mary's, Msgr. Mack left Pontiac for a new assignment after celebrating the 7:00 a.m. Mass to a packed house of well-wishers.

Upon Msgr. Mack's departure, Fr. David Sabel, who had served as our Parochial Vicar (assistant pastor) for three years, was elevated to Pastor of St. Mary's, St. John's and St. Joseph's parishes. In June, 2013, Fr. Sabel also became Pastor of St. Paul Parish in Odell as a result of a new cluster arrangement set up by the Diocese of Peoria.

In Spring 2015, a new cluster arrangement including St. Mary's - Pontiac, St. Joseph's in Flanagan, St. Joseph's in Chenoa, and St. Mary's in Lexington was established in 2018 with Fr. David Sabel as

Pastor. Fr. Adam Cesarek was ordained and became Parochial Vicar for the cluster of parishes.

In June 2019, Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Chatsworth was re-opened. Fr. David Sabel was assigned as Pastor for Chatsworth, Flanagan, Chenoa, and Lexington assisted by Fr. William Keebler. Fr. Adam Cesarek was named as Administrator at St. Mary's - Pontiac.

In 2019, The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Program was added in the upstairs of the convent. In year one, this program was offered to Kindergarten children. By 2024, this program expanded and offered to children from PreK to Fifth Grade.

In June 2020, Fr. Adam Cesarek was named Pastor at St. Mary's - Pontiac.

St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry was gifted a building, giving them more space, at 401 E. Water Street and renamed St. Mary's Food Pantry. The vacated space by the Parish Hall is renovated to create a preschool classroom. Little Disciples Preschool opened August 2020.

On December 3, 2022, parishioner Ray White was ordained as Permanent Deacon.

In June 2023, Fr. Joseph Baker was named Pastor at St. Mary's - Pontiac.