

The Parish History of the
CHURCH OF THE SACRED HEART

149 SOUTH PLAINFIELD AVENUE
SOUTH PLAINFIELD, NEW JERSEY

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The steady employment offered by nearby farms and the local saw and grist mills attracted the original Catholic settlers --predominantly Irish--who came to the area which is now known as South Plainfield. Records indicate that some of these first families included Winifred and Thomas Saverd, Catherine and John Geary, Nora and John Horan, Mary Horan Lyons, Jennie Randolph, Bridget Kaine Hamilton, Margaret Ledden, Anna and Peter McDonough, Mary and Patrick Kaine, Maria and Dennis Harlow, Anna and Jack McGuire, Katherine and Anthony Phillips, Margaret and Thomas Duffy, Ellen and John Hogan, Anna and William Riley, Rose and Frank Miller, Mary and William Ball, Lucy and Stanley Leach, Catherine and Charles Thornton, Alice and Morris Higgins, Thomas and Mamie Fitzgerald, and the brother/sister family: Alice and Jack McDonough.

In those years, whoever had carriages or wagons travelled to Saint Francis Church in Metuchen or to Saint John's in Dunellen in order to worship with their fellow Catholics. Some enterprising believers even travelled to Mass on a hand car that was supplied by a Lehigh Valley Railroad foreman, Dennis J. Harlow, Sr. All took turns at the pumping until the worshippers reached their destination. At the turn of the century, the Eucharist was celebrated in various homes opened for that purpose by the families mentioned above. This first took place in 1904 in the home of Peter McDonough, Sr. on Hamilton Boulevard. Children were relegated to the dining room. as the Eucharist was being celebrated in the sitting room.

The first official place of Catholic worship for the small community was Washington Hall. Located then at a spot near the present location of the intersection of Lakeview and Maple Avenues, Washington Hall was used on week nights for civic meetings and on Saturdays for dances. (The bottom floor was used for apartments.) Although this building no longer stands, early

members of the parish remember it being used for many fundraising events also.

At this time in the community's history, Father Edward J. Dunphy, pastor of Saint John's in Dunellen, served as the group's Eucharistic celebrant. It was also under his leadership that they became a mission of Saint John's Church. The parish was officially incorporated on August 22, 1905 by the Bishop of Trenton, the Most Rev. James A. McFaul, D.D. On January 27, 1906, property was donated by Thomas Savard for the purpose of building the first permanent place of worship. Under the continuing leadership of Father Dunphy, the small frame building was completed by Michael D. O'Keefe, a builder from Plainfield and many parishioners who volunteered their services.

Sacred Heart remained a mission of Saint John's until 1909 when it was raised to the status of a parish. The Rev. John F. Baldwin was appointed its pastoral leader, and the parish received its first boundary lines on January 23, 1912. These lines have remained intact until the present. The northern boundary is the city of Plainfield. The eastern boundary includes Woodland Avenue and Inman Avenue to Potter's Crossing to Woodbrook Farms. To the south, the boundaries are New Durham Road and Woodbrook Road (So. Plfd.) To the west, Stelton Road and New Brunswick Avenue form the parish lines.

For the first fifteen years of its existence as a parish, Sacred Heart was served by Father Baldwin who was residing at and serving as chaplain to Mount St. Mary's, the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Mercy of New Jersey in Watchung. The rapid growth of the parish and the ever-increasing needs of its people soon required a full-time resident pastor. For a short time, Father Baldwin lived in a home on Plainfield Avenue near the present location of the James W. Conroy Funeral Home. From

this location, he began to make his "pastoral" presence a "physical" reality. He acquired the property adjacent to the church at a cost of \$6,000 from Thomas Saverd and John Geary on September 25, 1922, and with this, he made plans to build a rectory. Father Baldwin's preparations for the construction of this parish building were made with the future in mind. The parish house would serve as a residence for the priests and as offices for the administration of the parish. The rectory was completed in 1923 as a frame, three-story house with a concrete basement and a slate roof. This building still serves as the administrative center of the parish. Its original cost: an amazing \$15,000!

With the expansion of industry in South Plainfield, a large Italian population from New York City and many Polish families from Pennsylvania began to settle in this area--thus increasing the parish size. To meet the needs of an ever-growing parish membership, Father Baldwin expanded the original frame church building by adding a new sanctuary and sacristy and by doubling the seating capacity of nave. A few years earlier, on June 30, 1919, Father Baldwin had also considered the future needs of his new parish by purchasing twenty-one acres of land for the purpose of establishing a cemetery. Located between Clinton and New Brunswick Avenues, Holy Redeemer is still supervised, maintained and developed by Sacred Heart Church.

The parish religious educational efforts took root as early as the late 1800's when the priests from Saint Francis in Metuchen would travel to teach the children their religious instructions and to prepare them for the sacraments. During the administration of Father Baldwin, several Sisters of Mercy would come weekly to South Plainfield to teach the children. These Sisters continued the catechesis of the parish's youngsters after Rev. Thomas A. Campbell succeeded Father Baldwin in September, 1929, and throughout the pastorate of Rev. Edward A. Corrigan, who came in 1934.

Father Corrigan is fondly remembered as being "great with the kids." He was famous for planning day trips for the parish youngsters to many places including Lake Hopatcong.

When Rev. Francis Lyons became pastor in 1930, he began efforts to secure the full-time assistance of a religious community who could reside in the parish itself. On April 18, 1939, Bishop Kiley terminated the agreement that arranged for the service of four sisters that would begin in the fall of that year. From Garrison, New York, the Sisters of the Atonement (Graymoor) began serving Sacred Heart. They arrived on September 1, 1939, and under the leadership of Sister Mary Anthony, their Superior, took residence at 133 South Plainfield Avenue.

The house that was converted into a convent for the sisters had originally stood right next to the rectory; however, when the latter was built, the home was moved several hundred feet to the left. (A water pump that was in the kitchen of the house still stands today in the rectory yard.)

The Sisters of the Atonement served the parish in various ways; however, their primary ministry was religious education. By December, 1939, they were teaching 414 children in Sacred Heart Hall, Roosevelt Center, Willis Center, and Oak Tree Center. They also visited the sick of the parish, and they trained altar boys in the "Knights of the Altar." They met with the Sodality for the parish's young women and the "Mission Crusaders" for the boys. Among the many Sisters of the Atonement who served Sacred Heart parish until June, 1953, Sister Mary Paul and Sister Mary Bride are fondly remembered. The earliest evidence of lay people being involved in the formal religious instruction of children can be found in the work of the Sodality women. Evidently, the classes were held on Saturday mornings around 10 AM and on Sunday mornings after the Eucharist was celebrated. Two of the earliest lay catechists in the parish were Catherine Kaine, who later became a Sister of Charity of Saint Augustine

and Jennie Gaudosi. The classes usually had fifteen to twenty students, and their ages varied from seven to twelve years.

One of the earliest lay organizations to spring up at Sacred Heart was the Rosary Society. On November 19, 1911, the sixteen charter members were installed. Records from these early years indicate that the women met regularly to pray together the Rosary, and they were instrumental in the parish fundraising efforts. Their projects included spaghetti dinners and minstrel shows. They were also the group who took meticulous care of the liturgical linens. Until this day, the Altar and Rosary Society serves the parish in this capacity.

The earliest organized men's group was the Holy Name Society which came into being in the mid-twenties. Like the Rosary Society, their meetings were held in the church hall (basement) below the nave. The Holy Name was also involved in fundraising events and they frequently sponsored Communion breakfasts and parish socials.

In 1944, Rev. James G. Harding was appointed pastor of Sacred Heart. Father Harding was the first pastor to consider the possibility of opening a parochial school; however, he died in July, 1951 before seeing his dream fulfilled. Later that month, when Rev. Alfred T. Sico became the pastor of Sacred Heart, the dream of a school began to become a reality.

To meet the needs of an ever-expanding Catholic population, and to take advantage of the building boom that was occurring in the country at that time, Bishop George W. Ahr approved the construction of a combination church and eleven-room school. Ground was broken on October 1, 1952 and the cornerstone was laid by January 1953. The school was opened for grades 1-4 on September 4, 1953 by Sister Mary Alma, and five other Sisters of Mercy: Sister Mary Alfreda, Sister Mary Joanna, Sister Mary Lucy, Sister Mariella and Mrs. Patricia Angiolitti. The initial enrollment was 324. In 1954, a new wing housing five classrooms was added, and a three-floor convent was built at 200 Randolph Avenue to accommodate the sisters.

During the early fifties when the new combination church/school was used, Father Sico and his associates celebrated the Eucharist nine times on Sunday using both the auditorium and the cafeteria of the school.

The population of South Plainfield was soaring during this period of time, and from 1950 to 1960, the totals increased from 8,000 to 20,000. It became obvious that building a new church would be a necessity. Following a meeting between Bishop Ahrens, Father Sico and the architect, John MacWilliam, the decision was made to erect a new church.

Farmland adjacent to the old church was purchased from Filomena and Angelo DeFillipo, and the ground was broken for the new church in March, 1964. After various fund-raising activities and high parish involvement, the new 1500-seat structure was becoming a reality. It was finally dedicated on November 21, 1965. Many people believed it would one day serve as the cathedral if the Diocese of Trenton were ever divided with north/south boundaries.

On November 6, 1968, Father Sico died, after having served Sacred Heart Parish for over seventeen years. Appointed to succeed him was the Auxillary Bishop of Trenton, the Most Rev. John C. Reiss, the man who was later to become bishop of the Diocese of Trenton (1980).

After less than a year at Sacred Heart, Bishop Reiss was succeeded by Monsignor Edmund W. Kreger, who was installed on June 20, 1969. Monsignor embraced leadership of the parish which had now grown to be one of the largest in the Diocese.

An increased adult population also meant an increased juvenile population in the parish, and Sacred Heart struggled to meet their needs too.

Besides staffing the large school, the Sisters of Mercy were also conducting the religion classes in the afternoons for the parish's public school children. The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) population soon grew to twice the size of the numbers SacredHeart School

could accommodate. Under the leadership of Sisters Maria Madelon and Annette Duignan, the Sisters of Mercy continued to teach all these children throughout the fifties and sixties.

To ease the heavy administrative burdens that were then carried by Sister Annette, Father Pat Castles who was serving as an Associate Pastor in the late sixties, took over the CCD program in the fall of 1970.

Father Castles also began adult education classes, parent involvement in sacramental preparation and a high school program. Among the many active lay catechists at this time were Eleanor Disch, Mary Mazepa and Pauline Blackford. Sister Kathleen McDonald, RSM is especially remembered for her leadership in sacramental preparation and Betty Gorman and Susan Staub in Confirmation programming.

As a response to the changes called for in the Second Vatican Council, the whole Church was experiencing tremendous tumult. The adaptation and renewal that was called for affected the people of Sacred Heart just as it did the rest of the Church. The late sixties and early seventies brought decreased attendance at the Sunday liturgies, and subsequently, decreased financial support. For the faithful who did remain active during these years, Vatican II suddenly placed upon their shoulders the increased responsibilities of lay involvement and lay leadership.

May, 1972 marked the beginning of the charismatic prayer movement in the parish -- a spiritual renewal effort that took root first among the laity. It was at this time that four or five people began praying together regularly in the home of Millie Corvelyn on Eganey Avenue. By October, 1977, as the group grew and developed, and with the assistance of Father Jay Bowden, its meeting place was moved to the Sacred Heart School cafeteria. After a community outreach effort in Advent of that year (Jesus Week, 1977), the group's numbers swelled to forty--fifty regular "pray-ers."

Pastoral duties became ever greater and more diverse during the early Seventies, and the need for extra ministers at Sacred Heart became evident. At the encouragement of Father Castles, Monsignor Kreger, a long-

time leader in the religious education effort in Central Jersey, began the search for a person or persons to serve the parish as Director(s) of Religious Education.

Finally, in August, 1972, five women who had formed an experimental religious community, under the authority of Bishop Ahr, made an agreement with Monsignor Kreger to organize and develop a total parish religious education program for Sacred Heart. The community was housed at the Stockoff Farmhouse on Clinton Avenue. This house was multi-purpose dwelling, for it was used for the new programs for pre-school children, teens, and adults. It also served as a center for organizational meetings, Scripture study and small-group liturgies. (Several families even celebrated First Eucharist there.) Serving Sacred Heart as the first DRE's were Sister Rosalind (Pat Tracey): adult and high school education, Sister Genevieve (Monica Mazurkiewicz): elementary program Sister Patricia Ann Gogucki: pre-school education; and Sister Jane: junior high program.

By August, 1974 the group dispersed, and only Sisters Rosalind (Pat) and Genevieve (Monica) remained as parish DRE's . Because of the dilapidated condition of the farmhouse, the Office of Religious Education was moved to two small rooms on the first floor of the convent on Randolph Avenue. At this point in time, the convent was also being used for private piano lessons with Sister Mary Maher, R.S.M.

As the increased involvement of the laity continued to blossom at Sacred Heart, a Steering Committee under the direction of Father Lucian Donnelly, was formed on May 13, 1973 to begin the groundwork for the establishment of a Parish Council. The Steering Committee worked for months writing the constitution. Members who served in this group were: Gene Baker, Frank Bellow, Ray Ellersick, Susan Staub, Bob Wingert, and Betty Gorman. When completed, it was finally approved by vote of the

parishioners on November 30, 1974. The first officers elected to serve the parish in Mary, 1975 were President: Joseph Mondoro, Vice President Danny Gallagher; Secretary: Karen Kudless, and Secretary of Parish Information: Gertrude Gillis.

Ministry to teens at Sacred Heart actually began in the early years when the old barn behind the convent and rectory was open for roller skating and basketball. CYO was, for many years, a strong and vital organization in the parish.

When Father Castles moved onto the youth scene, he made efforts to add a religious educational dimension to the already vibrant sports program. Father Lucien Donnelly also continued this effort with weekend retreat programs. These early efforts took more structured form in 1972 when Sister Pat Tracey began the Genesis/Lighthouse Program. Still working in the farmhouse, Sister Pat and a team of adults and teens developed a program which included weekend retreats (Genesis) and monthly meetings (Lighthouse). This first organized attempt to expand youth ministry beyond CYO athletic programs was designed to give the youth of the parish an experience of Christian community, and opportunity to deepen their prayer life, a chance to perform some volunteer service and the opportunity to participate in some relevant religious educational experiences. During these years however, the CYO and Genesis/Lighthouse remained separate and distinct. Consequently, they often failed to reach the same group of young people. At this stage in its development, total youth ministry, although envisioned, was not yet a reality. After Sister Pat's departure in June, 1977, the youth program was left without a full-time director; therefore in the fall of 1977, Brother Vincent Gartland and Mr. Robert Morton, fulltime faculty members of St. Joseph's High School in Metuchen, began part-time coordination of the youth activities at Sacred Heart. Throughout this time, the Genesis/Lighthouse program was carried on by a volunteer adult staff including John and Kathy Bisci, Louis and Diana Scioscia, Maryann and Nick Travesano, Richard and Joan Naberezny and John and Fran Schulte. Brother Vincent and Mr. Morton terminated their work at Sacred Heart

After the year ended, and for the next two years the adult team carried on their ministry autonomously with the financial support of the Religious Education Center and their own fundraising activities.

The five-year ministry of Sisters Pat and Monica at Sacred Heart marked a turning point in the parish's religious education efforts. The Sisters' work resulted in the organized involvement of over six hundred families, eight hundred children and one hundred volunteer catechists. Their work in adult education, teacher training, parent involvement, and sacramental preparation laid the sturdy foundation for the future growth and development of continuing Christian education at Sacred Heart.

Throughout the Seventies Sacred Heart School continued to develop and has remained filled to capacity. In August, 1976, Sister Joan Carter began serving as the school principal. Under her leadership, Sacred Heart School still serves the parish and the community of South Plainfield as a active educational center for grades 1-8.

During the late Seventies, other new faces appeared at Sacred Heart to help share the ministry of the ever-growing parish. In June, 1977 Father Matthew Sheary joined Father Jay Bowden and Monsignor Kreger, who were serving in the priestly ministry. In September, 1977 Ms. Mary Ann became the first lay person to serve the parish professionally as its Director of Religious Education. On June 9, 1978, Father Richard Lyons came to Sacred Heart when Father Jay was transferred. During the summer of 1978, two other men began service at Sacred Heart. Rev. Mr. Joseph Halpin began the intern year that would precede his ordination to the priesthood, and Mrs Lawrence Casholi, a Sacred Heart parishioner, began service here as the parish's first Permanent Deacon. In September, 1979, Sister Beth Dempsey began work as the parish's Youth Minister.

With the installation of Father Henry L. Hemmerling as the new pastor on September 9, 1979, the parish administration became a shared responsibility. Father Henry's style of leadership in his new parish took form in his team ministry approach. By initiating weekly staff meetings, the direction of the parish and the ministry of its people began to be evaluated with goals established and tasks undertaken by joint decision of the administrative staff.

One of the highlights of Father Henry's first months at Sacred Heart included the erection and dedication of the shrine in honor of Our Lady of Grace. Through the fund-raising efforts of the Altar and Rosary Society, the shrine was built with donations from the parishioners. During the week of January 14, 1980, Sacred Heart observed "Mary Week," a celebration which included a guest speaker on Mary in the Scriptures, a movie about Our Lady of Guadalupe, a living Rosary, a day of prayer and fasting, a parish soup supper and finally, the dedication ceremony and luncheon that followed. Members of the Altar and Rosary Society who worked so diligently on the whole project were "Bert" Gartland, Jane Ciaumarino, Mary McNerney, and Peg Hogan.

In September, 1980, Sister Pat Conlin joined the parish administrative staff as the Director of Social Concerns. Her office was set up on the first floor of the Convent. Her work with the elderly, homebound and alienated members of the parish is done with the assistance of Sister Mary Maher and lay volunteers. Two of Sister Pat's first projects was Sacred Heart's involvement for the first time in a Crop Walk for the alleviation of world hunger on Sunday, October 19, 1980 and the sponsorship of a Vietnamese family by Sacred Heart Parish.

In December, 1980, Rev. Mr. Robert Franklin, a new Deacon, began his service in the parish. His involvement included preaching, teaching and serving on the parish committee formed to coordinate the Diocesan Centennial Celebration.