

175th Anniversary History of St. Mary Parish
1934 – 2009

2009 – A most memorable year. This year the parishioners of St. Mary Parish arrive at another milestone. We have been a most integral part of this community for one hundred seventy five years. Surely, none of us can even imagine how this area has been changed and influenced by the continued faith which flows from so many wonderful years of spirituality. How many generations of baptisms, marriages, funerals, and especially, the huge impact our school has had both on the children and on our entire geographical area.

In 1798, Fr. Delhet was sent from St. Anne Parish in Detroit to establish a church on the Raisin River in what is now St. Mary Parish in Monroe. It wasn't until 1818 that Fr. Gabriel Richard wrote to the Bishop about eight Catholic families living around the Huron River settlement at the foot of the Huron River. They were settling in the area to farm, trap and fish, and were generally of French Canadian decent.

Finally, in 1834, Fr. Vincent Badin supervised the building of a small wooden church which was located on the river, where presently Lee Road meets Jefferson in East Rockwood. Many years passed before there was a resident priest. By 1847, the congregation had grown so large that the Redemptorist priests replaced the chapel with a larger frame church and dedicated it under the title of St. Mary Parish. In 1853, additional land was donated by the Bondy family to be used as a cemetery. The property is presently being developed by Brownstown Township into a dedicated Historic Site. The remaining graves and tombstones have been moved to Our Lady of Hope Cemetery in Riverview. In 1873, due to the increase in the settlement, which today is known as Rockwood, it was determined that a more likely place for the church was near the railroad connecting Michigan and Ohio, and the Huron River. The church was moved to Rockwood in 1876.

In 1880, land for a new church was donated by Stephen Mannausa. The frame church was torn down, and a beautiful, new brick church, that would seat four hundred, was built at a cost of \$5,000. The rectory was built at a cost of \$3,000, and soon after, a carriage shed was added on St. Stephen street behind the rectory. This church was dedicated on July 11, 1880.

In 1899 Fr. John Helton became the first resident pastor at St. Mary's, in 1903 he was succeeded by Fr. Toussaint Rose.

After a large fire in the church, which caused extensive damage, the congregation decided to tear down the old church and replace it with a larger building. The stained glass windows were removed and many of the original bricks were used to build the bell tower in the new church. (The present large and beautiful round window over our choir loft is the window from the original church. We are definitely going to get that window restored.) This new church was built in 1911.

In the 1920's , the bishop issued orders that Catholic Schools should become a part of Catholic Church communities. Land adjacent to the church was purchased from the Scheffer family and plans were made to build a school. Nuns from the IHM Sisters, in Monroe, were sought to teach

weekly catechism to the children. In 1929, the construction of the school began. Cletus Laginess, Lorraine Mercure's father, and John Normandin, Richard's brother, and two other men broke ground. In September 1930, the doors of the new school were opened, under the direction of the Sisters of St. Francis, from Rochester, Minnesota. The times presented many financial problems, as the stock market crashed and the Great Depression of the 1930's began. However, prayers were answered, and the school has continued throughout these seventy-nine years. What a wonderful tribute to the parishioners, who through all these years found the ways and means to realize the importance of giving our children a good sound Catholic education!

In 1934, Fr. Rose retired and was replaced by Fr. Archibald Soest, who guided the parish from a large debt to solvency. This feat was accomplished by the start of weekly collection envelopes for each service. Other activities, including picnics, raffles, bazaars, dinners, dances and bingo, were implemented to help pay for the debt and operational costs.

In 1962, Fr. Gerald LeVasseur replaced the ailing Fr. Soest. The Sisters of St. Francis left the school and the Adrian Dominican Sisters replaced them. School enrollment was increasing rapidly. So, in 1962, the new school was built attached to the existing building and the old school building was renovated. This expansion doubled the number of classrooms and cost \$180,240.

In 1966, Fr. Francis Zarrett succeeded Fr. LeVasseur and was here until 1969. Fr. Thomas Sauter took up residence in the rectory in 1969 and found that he had inherited an \$800,000 debt. It was also noted by many parishioners that Fr. Sauter was in need of a better car, as his car was too old for any priest to be driving. The parish rose to the occasion and collected money to buy him a new car, which was presented to him after Mass one day, with many parish families included in the presentation.

A financial crisis developed in the parish which threatened to close the school. Due to the efforts of parishioners Stan Trieweiler and Dale Cousino, both members of the Gibraltar School Board, a system of "shared-time" was developed. At that time, the Gibraltar School District could not accommodate the St. Mary's students in their already crowded buildings. St. Mary's students remained in their classrooms, sharing teachers with the public school system. The shared-time program worked wonderfully for fifteen years, until the Supreme Court ruled the program unconstitutional, again putting our school in jeopardy of closing. At that time, our parishioners started a "Save Our School" campaign where tuition was raised and volunteers helped save on operational costs.

Many years passed, and Fr. Sauter became one of the family with every parishioner. After thirty-three years with St. Mary's, he was revered as a man blessed by God, who truly cared for each person he knew. He was known as a teacher, pastor, boss, friend, and a humble, shy man who brought much to our parish.

When Fr. Sauter retired in July 2002, Fr. Marc Gawronski arrived to lead us for three years. His energy and wit were well received, and much was accomplished. We all realized the value of Fr.

Marc's wonderful and inspiring homilies; they always included the type of humor that makes one remember what was said.

In 2005, Fr. Jim Rafferty arrived for his first assignment as pastor. Fr. Jim is truly a person everyone can count on to keep us close to God. He is always ready and available to administer the Sacraments to us in a remarkable and Christ-like way. His reverence continues to lead us closer to God.

With Fr. Jim as our pastor, much has been accomplished. Our church grounds have seen changes that will last for many years. Through the efforts of many capable people, our parish has seen many improvements, all necessary and tastefully accomplished. Thanks to the support of parishioners, all projects have been, and will continue to be, completed without a debt.

St. Mary's Parish is a place where all people can come together to worship and seek God's presence in His word, the sacraments and through God's people. The community has come to know and trust our Parish as a place where faith is nourished. We can come to God through the Eucharist, celebrate God's love, and find support and help.

Much has changed over the years here in our parish, but one thing remains the same: God continues to make his love known to all of us through our church, faith, pastor and our entire faith community.....Truly continuous blessings!

I hope that this short history of S. Mary Parish will help us with our future challenges and bring all of us closer to God.

Let's make this 175th Anniversary a bright beginning that will lead us all to eternal happiness!

Dale Cousino