

## History of St. Mary's Parish

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the few Catholics of Montgomery County, which was then in the Diocese of Wheeling, West Virginia, were served by visiting priests, either from St. Mary's in Wytheville or St. Andrew's in Roanoke, who offered Mass on an irregular basis, but usually not on Sunday. "When a priest was not available on Sunday," wrote Sister Mary Stanislaus Henderson, a Visitation sister and daughter of the VPI health officer, "parishioners met in private homes and read a five-minute sermon, sang hymns, and prayed the rosary." Among them were Robert and Mary Otey Patterson of Philadelphia, who had a summer home on Alleghany Street. They erected a small portable chapel that was used for the celebration of Mass when their son, Father James Patterson, visited Blacksburg. During the winter months, Mass was said at intervals of six to eight weeks in private homes or occasionally the VPI auditorium. Priests came on weekdays, since train schedules and distances made it impossible for them to say Sunday Mass in their home parishes and come to Blacksburg the same day.

The first mention of Blacksburg appeared in the 1911 Catholic Directory (for 1910) as a station of St. Mary's of Wytheville in the Diocese of Wheeling. Not long after, the Patterson's sold their portable chapel to the Blacksburg Catholics. Aided with other donations, they erected a small chapel on North Main Street (the site of the current Wendy's Restaurant) on land belonging to the Y. B. Keister family. It was named Sacred Heart Chapel. In 1918 Blacksburg was listed in the Catholic Directory as a mission of St. Mary's, Wytheville.

During World War I, when Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI) became a Students' Army Training Corps, the need for more worship space became more acute. After the war, programs for army and navy veterans were offered at the school, and a number of officers were assigned there. Concerned for the spiritual welfare of those groups and the resident Catholics, Bishop Patrick Donahue of Wheeling authorized the purchase of land on Wilson Street in 1921. Father J. R. Davern of Wytheville and Father Patrick Divinney, his successor, took the necessary steps to obtain approval and funds to build on it. Rt. Rev. John Swint, the new bishop of Wheeling, approved the construction of a small wooden church and made a donation for the project. J. J. Owens, Frank Pitts, Martin Bresnahan, William Kelsey, Ben Brock, and Y. B. Keister were named trustees by court order. Funds came from the sale of the chapel on Main Street, a gift from the Extension Society of the Catholic Church, and donations from the parishioners. Expenditures were not to exceed \$1,000 because, according to Bishop Swint, "a neat little church could be built for that." One condition for the gift from the Extension Society was that the new church had to be named St. Mary's. Construction was completed in 1923, and it was dedicated as St. Mary's on the first Sunday of June, 1924.

Because of the difficulty the priests from Wytheville had in coming to Blacksburg, Father J. A. Kelliher of St. Andrew's, Roanoke, obtained permission from the Bishop of Richmond to celebrate Mass once a month as a favor to Bishop Swint, his friend. When Father Albert Chrzanowski became pastor in Wytheville in 1928, he took over responsibility for St. Mary's until 1931. Beginning in January, 1932, Father James Gilsenan of Our Lady of Nazareth Parish in Roanoke came every Sunday and sent two sisters to Blacksburg on Saturdays to teach catechism to the children. In 1934 Father Chrzanowski was given an assistant pastor who had responsibility for the Mission in Blacksburg. Fathers Leo Fohl, Peter Arts, and George Walter in succession served in that capacity. In 1937 Father Walter negotiated the purchase of a house across Wilson Street to serve as a rectory.

Soon St. Mary's was large enough to become a parish in the Wheeling Diocese, which occurred on September 1, 1938, with Father George Walter as its pastor. The parish originally consisted of Montgomery, Floyd, Pulaski, Giles and part of Craig counties. As the New River Valley became more industrialized, especially with the construction of the Celanese plant near Pearisburg and the Army Ammunition plant near Radford, the increasing number of Catholics led to the need to offer Sunday Mass in Pulaski, Radford, and Pearisburg. With the number of Catholic students at VPI increasing as well, Bishop Swint assigned Father Conrad Marrama to Blacksburg in 1940 with responsibility for the campus ministry. Over the next four years, two other assistant pastors served in that position. Although the creation of a POW camp near Radford toward the end of World War II required the priests at St. Mary's to minister to the Catholic prisoners, the last years of the war saw shrinking enrollments at VPI, and the parish lost its assistant pastor in 1944.

With the end of the war, the surge in veterans attending VPI and the increase in the number of faculty members created a need for a larger worship space. Father Robert Goshorn, named pastor in 1946, began the discussions for building a new church. The next year Father Leo Fohl returned to Blacksburg as pastor with the task of building it. The classic Carolina granite building on Progress Street, where the rectory had stood, with stained glass windows dedicated to Mr. and Mrs. Martin Bresnahan, George Fohl, Louise Herring, Joseph Hild, Marie D. Keister, John Neidhardt, Jr., J. J. Owens, Mary Lynch Owens, and Ella Russell, was finished in 1948. The building on Wilson Street became the parish hall.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, new parishes were organized for the other counties originally part of St. Mary's, leaving all of Montgomery County in the parish. In 1966, after sixteen years of service to St. Mary's, Father Fohl was reassigned to Parkersburg, West Virginia. Following several short-term pastors, Father Joseph Mascioli arrived in 1968 and remained until 1971. Shortly after his arrival the estate of long-time parishioner Mrs. Martin J. Bresnahan, who had died in 1965, was settled, and her heirs agreed to sell a piece of land on Harding Avenue to the parish. The purchase was completed in 1968. Three years later Father William Gardner succeeded Father Mascioli as pastor. Father Gardner

saw to the purchase of a house on Harding Avenue across from the parish's property to serve as the rectory. The living quarters attached to the church on Progress Street were transformed into office space.

In 1974, St. Mary's and the other parishes of southwest Virginia were transferred to the Diocese of Richmond under Bishop Walter Sullivan. He enacted the program of appointed temporary deacons to parishes for pastoral training. Rev. Dennis Sweeney was the first deacon to serve St. Mary's in 1975. On March 7, 1976, Bishop Sullivan installed Father Thomas Miller as pastor in the first installation ceremony at St. Mary's, Father Gardner having been reassigned to Charlottesville. Dr. Robert Hennessee of Blacksburg Presbyterian Church led the prayers of the faithful at the installation ceremony.

Upon his arrival, Father Miller quickly found that the rapid growth of Virginia Tech and arrival of new industries in the county were straining the capacity of the church on Progress Street. In 1978, a study determined the needs of the parish so that the goals of a building committee could be defined. Later that year, the Parish council appointed a Building Committee, which Robert Kelly chaired, to oversee design and construction of a new facility on the parish's property on Harding Avenue. The groundbreaking ceremony took place on June 29, 1980, and the new church was dedicated on October 25, 1981. The stone church on Progress Street was sold to St. Francis Anglican Church, and the parish hall on Wilson Street became the Odd Fellows' lodge.

In May 1983, Father Paul Gallagher, who had served as chaplain to the student community at Virginia Tech for six years in the 1960s, returned to Blacksburg as pastor, while Father Miller went to Richmond to become rector of the cathedral. When St. Mary's parish celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1988, it had about 375 families. In 1991 Father Gallagher retired from active ministry, and Father James Burge was named the new pastor. Tragically, Father Burge died after only two months in Blacksburg. Father Donald Lemay was then assigned to St. Mary's.

Father Lemay hoped to alleviate the crowding in the church on Harding Avenue by supporting the creation of Holy Spirit parish in Christiansburg in 1995, but it proved to be only a temporary fix. One way to relieve the demands on the pastor created by the large congregation was the ordination of permanent deacons, and in 1992 Dr. Michael Ellerbrock became St. Mary's first married deacon.

Father Lemay was assigned to a parish in Richmond in 2000, and Father James Arsenault arrived as pastor. By then the need for a larger facility was obvious, as the parish had grown to about 700 families, and many of the 4,500 Catholic students at Virginia Tech attended Sunday Mass at St. Mary's as well. In September 2000, Father Arsenault arranged for the purchase of thirty-five acres of land on Old Mill Road, and a house on the property became the rectory. A year later a building committee was formed to plan a new building, and Loretta Zamer was named project manager. Ground breaking took place on June 18, 2006, and the building on Harding Avenue was sold to Blacksburg United Methodist church.

Before construction on the new building was completed, tragedy struck on April 16, 2007. When the news of the mass shootings on the Virginia Tech campus reached Father Arsenault and Deacon Ellerbrock, they immediately responded to the site to attend to the dying and wounded and counsel the victims' families and friends. The priests from the region came to Blacksburg for a Mass and prayer service in the evening at St. Mary's, while the church basement was used to provide meals and quiet moments for the first responders during the long days they were on duty. Among the victims were Professor Kevin Granata, a member of the parish, and several Catholic students. The funeral Mass of one of the student victims, Cadet Matthew LaPorte, was held at St. Mary's, and the entire Corps of Cadets marched to the church to attend it.

A year later, on June 8, 2008, the parishioners felt very different emotions as the first Mass in the new church on Old Mill Road was said. Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo dedicated it on July 29. The following June, Father Arsenault was transferred to Richmond, and Father Remi Sojka, who had spent a summer at St. Mary's as a seminarian in 1993, came to the parish from Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Salem. The parish was now able to settle down after the turmoil and activity of the previous several years. Unfortunately, the parish faced a few problems, including a serious health issue in the rectory on Old Mill Rd, which forced Father Sojka to move out, and the parish began renting a townhouse to serve as a rectory. An inability of the Parish Council to reach a consensus on key issues led to its decision to disband itself in early 2012. Several months later Father Sojka created the Pastor's Advisory Council to take over the duties of the Parish Council. Late in 2012, a formal census of the parish members took place, revealing that as of June 2013, there are 573 families in the parish.

### **Former Clergy of St. Mary's & Newman Community**

Father George I. Walter 1938 – 1946

Father Conrad J. Marrama – Campus Ministry 1940 – 1943

Father Thaddeus Grondalski – Assistant Pastor October 1943

Father John P. Sweeney – Assistant Pastor December 1943 – April 1944

Father Robert Goshorn 1946 – 1948

Father Leo R. Fohl 1948 – 1966

Msgr. Reverend Richard Sadie – Assistant Pastor 1958 – 1963

Father Paul Gallagher 1963 – 1969

Father LeRoy Beyer Summer 1966

Father Bert Valdes 1967 – 1968

Father Joseph Mascioli 1968 - 1971

Father George Wilcox – Campus Ministry 1969 – 1975

Father William Gardner 1971 – 1976

Father Jerry Przywara – Campus Ministry 1975 – 1982

Deacon Dr. Dennis Sweeney 1975 – 1976

Msgr. Reverend Thomas Miller 1976 – 1983

Father Richard Mooney – Campus Ministry 1982 - 2007

Father Paul Gallagher 1983 – 1991

Father James Burge June-August 1991

Father Donald Lemay 1991-2000

Father James Arsenault 2000-2009

Father James Grace – Campus Ministry 2007 – June 2013

Father David Sharland – Campus Ministry July 2013 until present

Father Remi Sojka 2009 to Present

Deacon Dr. Michael Ellerbrock 1992 to Present

**\*Note: This listing may not be conclusive.**