

The History of St. Clement Parish in McGregor, Ontario

The steeple of St. Clement Church, towering high above the tree line, is a beacon of faith guiding travelers from all directions to the quiet village of McGregor. Here, Walker Road divides the municipalities of Amherstburg and Essex as well as the community. Historically the church has represented the home and the heart of its residents. Not only a place of worship, St. Clement the hub, the meeting place!

Early settlers looked forward to occasional visits by Fr. Louis Boue, a Jesuit priest who ministered to Catholics by celebrating the Eucharist and conferring the sacraments. He would travel from Rivière-aux-Canards across the lower half of Essex County as far as Point Pelee. In recognition of his dedication, the regional 4th Degree Knights of Columbus has named its Assembly #2355 after this devoted priest.

As many of these small communities grew, so did the Catholic population and the need to establish more parishes became apparent. Fr. Jean-Pierre Grand, a Basilian assigned to St. John the Baptist in Amherstburg, was given responsibility for establishing a new parish in McGregor. St. Clement, the 4th pope, ordained by St. Peter and well known for his writings emphasizing the unique priestly role of consecrating the Eucharist, was chosen as the patron saint. A wooden chapel and horse and buggy shelters were built on the present day property. Holy Mass was offered in this chapel for the first time on February 22, 1880.

This chapel served the needs of parishioners for more than twenty years but inevitably became too small as McGregor thrived and the congregation grew. Construction of the present church is credited to the direction of Bishop Fergus P. McEvoy. The cornerstone is dated "21 juin 1903" and our records show that Dean Wagner officiated at the blessing.

The exterior walls of the building are constructed of stone blocks probably from the local quarry. A 4ft. metal cross perched atop a 100 ft. steeple, towered over the belfry that houses the bell. This 27 inch bell which has a circumference of 111 inches came from the Buckeye Bell Foundry in Cincinnati. It had been used in the original chapel and was installed in the new church at the time of construction. The stamp, "Ave Maria 1883" memorializes its baptism with holy water and anointing with holy oil as was the customary ritual. Today the bell is visible but no longer functional; electronic chimes echoing throughout the village invite the parishioners to prayer. The tower

also fell to a sad demise in June 1946 when a huge windstorm toppled it. The original bell and cross were repositioned on the much shorter steeple seen today. Fifteen stained glass windows inspire those in prayer to meditate on the depicted events in Jesus' life, especially when illuminated by bright rays of sunshine. A sacristy extending to the south of the main church was used for morning masses, smaller prayer services and for storing the priests' and altar servers' vestments. Its brightness is due to the six stained glass windows depicting symbols of the Eucharist and the Holy Trinity. In 2003, the sacristy area was condensed in order to accommodate an office for the parish secretary.

The interior of the church is awesome in the true sense of the word. The three pure white plaster altars nestle some 15 statues made in Montreal. These icons inspire the faithful to emulate the virtues practiced by our Blessed Mother and various holy saints. Some churches chose to remove their statues subsequent to Vatican II but St. Clement's has retained them all. The marble rail separating the altar from the congregation was, however, removed at that time and the pulpit was lowered. The Stations of the Cross are also plaster and were transported by horse and buggy from Amherstburg as were many of the materials used in building the church, sacristy and rectory. Each depiction of the Way of the Cross is arched in gold and hand painted. Inset in the main altar is a beautiful illuminated fresco of DaVinci's interpretation of the Last Supper. A marble baptismal font, donated by Fr. D. Brisson while he was pastor from 1922 – 1924 has welcomed hundreds into the family of God and is still used today.

Repairs and renovations are constantly needed to preserve the 132 year old building. Cement steps to replace the original wooden ones, installation of storm windows to protect the stained glass windows, a new furnace, copper roof, reinforcement of the bell housing, re-mortaring of stones, carpeting and painting, electronic bells and alarm system, are some of the improvements that have been made to maintain the church. Preservation is an ongoing concern of the parish.

Many vocations to the Priesthood and to Religious Life have been sparked and nurtured within the families of St. Clement parish. Over the years, the congregation has appreciated the sacrifices that so many devoted priests and sisters have made while serving our needs. In return, parishioners have striven to help them feel at home in our midst. The rectory, erected in 1911 to house Fr. J. Dolphis Pinsonneault was attached to the sacristy for easy access to the church in every season and in all types of weather. Twenty pastors have served our parish over 132 years with Fr. Romeo Lefaive holding the record for the longest residency from 1945 to 1963. We are so

grateful to God for their presence among us, their guidance, commitment and fidelity.

The first Sisters to live in McGregor came from Chatham. Even though French was the dominant language in the area, only English public education was available to the children of McGregor until 1917. At that time, Anderdon and Colchester North School Board requested that the Ursuline Sisters send three qualified French teachers. Sister Superior assigned Mother Visitation as Principal, Mother St. Leo, Mother Eulalia who specialized in teaching music, and Mother Winnifred as their housekeeper. At first, the Sisters lived in a house south of the church until it burned down. Then they moved into a home directly across the street from the church until 1944 when Fr. Magloire Baillargeon directed the building of St. Clare Convent. In 1917, upon the hiring of the Sisters, the local school became a separate school named École Ste-Ursule after the patron saint of the Ursuline Sisters. Many sisters from this order faithfully guided the children in the Catholic faith, and taught French and English to three generations of students over a span of 50 years. Unfortunately, fewer vocations and the aging population of the sisters led to a decision to move out of McGregor in the 1960's. The convent is now a privately owned rest home for the disadvantaged. École Ste-Ursule has survived and grown many times over. Three additions have been built and dedicated French teachers continue to pass on the Catholic faith, language and culture to our youth.

Every parish needs a place for meetings and it was the Knights of Columbus #2844 who led the parish in this project. The crawl space under the sacristy was envisioned as a future meeting room. Men, school boys, and altar servers all pitched in. By the sweat of their brow this area was excavated one shovelful at a time. The heavy clay clumps were dug out and tossed through the small side windows to be hauled away by another shovel brigade. It was not until 1944 that Salle St. Louis was built behind the church. This two-story structure was struck in 1946 by a tornado that tore away the roof and blew the top floor inward. The hall was renovated as a one floor building, only to be assaulted again by a tornado in 1971. This time a quarter of the church roof was ripped off and deposited on top of the parish hall. New life came to the hall again in 1963 when Monseigneur Augustin Caron led a restoration project. However, recurring extensive structural damage forced its demolition in the summer of 2002. The last functions held there were in conjunction with the World Youth Days when the parish hosted youth from California and a group of Oriental youth studying in Hamilton. Today we are able to access the new McGregor Community Center, located directly behind the church, for parish events and meetings.

Our history and our heritage are indeed rich with stories of priests, sisters, teachers and parishioners who have worked unselfishly for a common purpose: to know, love and serve God to the best of one's ability in the little village of McGregor. This saga relates not only our past but reflects an ongoing pilgrimage of faith today. Lightning bolts, winds, tornadoes, floods, fire and age have all threatened the building. Other storms such as Vatican II changes, having no priest for a period of time, learning to work with lay ministries and parish councils, francophones having to accept the reality that French Masses are now being celebrated at St. Joseph in River Canard have all challenged the faith of parishioners; undoubtedly more will surface in the future. These trials have drawn the people of the parish to work together, to focus on our mission statement. The strong faith and commitment of workers in St. Clement's vineyard remains undaunted. The same courage and love of God that inspired our ancestors still flows in our veins. Many who have moved away from McGregor and come back to visit have commented on how they feel at home in our church, that they can pray better because they feel closer to God there.

In his Pastoral Plan, Bishop Fabbro has reminded us that we are called by Jesus through Baptism to be living signs of Christ's presence in the world today. We are grateful for our rich heritage of faith and we pray for God's help to continue to grow in our faith as we serve and witness to our beliefs.