

ST. PATRICK'S IN JOLIET Celebrates 175 Years as a Parish



In today's disposable culture, longevity is something to be applauded. That is why there was lots of applause at the recent events regarding the anniversary celebration at St. Patrick's Church in Joliet. The parish is celebrating its 175th anniversary, which kicked off with a Mass presided over by Bishop R. Daniel Conlon in early September.

To understand the parish, one has to go back to its roots. Its birth was due to canal workers who were dying during the malaria epidemic of 1838. That prompted Father John Francis Plunkett, from Dublin, Ireland, to arrive in Joliet, where he was appointed as the first pastor of the future St. Patrick's Church by Bishop Simon Brute of Vincennes (now Indianapolis), Indiana.

There was plenty of work to do for the priest as many immigrant families had settled in the area, due to the building of the Illinois-Michigan canal. The families were French, German and Irish, most of them Catholic. As a result, the community began to grow, which led Father Plunkett to lead the way for the construction of a new stone church on Broadway Street, just west of the canal and south of Jefferson Street.

That church, of course, was St. Patrick's,

which is the oldest Catholic church in the Diocese of Joliet and the second oldest in the metropolitan Chicago area. Sadly, Father Plunkett was thrown off his horse during a snow storm in 1840 and died from injuries to his head.

The parish has had a total of 16 pastors, but one who had an immense influence on the parish – because of his longevity – was Father Phillip L. Kennedy, who served as pastor of St. Patrick's from 1917 until 1961. It was during his time frame as the leader of the parish that St. Patrick's moved to its present location on Marion Street.

Father Kennedy purchased the land for the church from Louis and Isabelle Kaffer, the grandparents of the late Auxiliary Bishop Roger Kaffer, who moved one door east. Soon, however, Father Kennedy approached them again, this time asking to buy their new residence because he hoped to use it as a convent for the Dominican Sisters. So the Kaffers moved again, this time to a home on Oneida

and Prairie streets – close enough to be within the parish boundaries but far enough away to be “out of the reach of P.L. Kennedy,” according to a story in the April 15, 1994, edition of the diocesan publication at the time, the *New Catholic Explorer*. The first Mass at the new church was held on March 2, 1919. Father Kennedy also presided over the building of the school and a rectory.

In the years that followed, the parish experienced a lot of growth, debt and renovations. However, in 2011, its school closed.

Despite the closing, lessons learned at the



school still have come in handy. Ronald Kalcic, a parishioner at the parish since 1949, related a recent conversation he had with one of his daughters.

“My daughter said the nuns, besides being strict, were kind, but tough,” Kalcic said. “She remembers to this day certain things that they taught her, both religious wise – she’s a good Catholic – and values wise.”

Since the parish has been in existence for so long, one major reason has been how people see it as part of their family.

“St. Patrick's Church and the family of parishioners have always been there for me, supporting and encouraging me as I've grown into adulthood, and they have continued that support even as I've been able to give back and pass that support on to others,” said Darlene Huston, who was baptized at the parish in 1966 and went to grade school there and has been a member of the school and church choirs over the years.

When Deacon Darrell Kelsey and his wife were looking for a parish 25 years, they went to various churches in the area. They had just bought a house in Joliet, and the couple who sold them the house suggested they try St. Patrick's.

“It was a warm, welcoming,” he said, referring to his first visit there. “Everyone was real eager to make us feel comfortable there, while some of the other parishes we had been in and left, no one said boo to us.”

He's been happy ever since making the parish his spiritual home.

“It's full of great people,” Deacon Kelsey said. “That's what makes any parish – the people who are there and how they represent Christ.”

Meanwhile, the Tellez family has been going to St. Patrick's for about 20 years now.

“In those years we have experienced a church that is engulfed in family and community,” said Tamara Tellez.

“Our children attended grade school; they have all made first communions, confirmations and quinceañeras there. St. Pat's is truly an inclusive community that welcomes all and reaches out to help anyone in need. It has become both our family, as well as our 'extended' family's place of worship.”

The sense of family exists even when people who have gone to the church years ago hear about the death of someone they used to know.

About three years ago, Clara Smith Chamberlin, a parishioner since 1963, said her son died in Utah from cancer. She had the body flown to Joliet, where the funeral was done at St. Patrick's. Her son had attended the school years earlier, and a bunch of his former classmates read his obituary in the newspaper and attended the wake and the funeral.

“That made me feel good,” Chamberlin said. “That told me something. The kids who went to Catholic school stuck together.”

The demographics in Joliet have changed over the years, with an increase in the Hispanic population, so the parish added a Spanish Mass. Miriam (Mimi) Hernandez arrived at the parish around the time that Mass was added, around six years ago, she said.

“The actual church is not only beautiful, but the feeling that I have when I am there is just full of calmness, peace, and

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love,” Hernandez said. “I have seen acceptance, willingness to help, and fraternal love from both the Anglo and Hispanic communities.”

Immigrant families have always been at the heart of the parish, ever since it was formed, something that St. Patrick's pastor, Father Peter G. Jankowski, is well aware of.

“St. Patrick's was, is, and will continue to be an immigrant parish, where we welcome those who have established our church, those who have helped us grow and those who are new to our community,” Father Jankowski said. “We are blessed to have them all, and we are blessed that God has walked with us through these 175 years.”

Asked to describe his parish, Father Jankowski said: “We are a church of the poor. We are serving the poor and the needy in this particular region, between the food pantry and our Vincent de Paul and English-as-a-Second Language program, our service programs, our work at Shepherds' Table [which helps to feed the hungry at the Catholic Charities'-sponsored Daybreak Center]. Our parish continually strives to help those who cannot help themselves.”

