

THE HISTORY OF ST. XAVIER PARISH begins in the year 1819 when the seven Catholic families in what is now the Cincinnati Metropolitan area built a church to draw their community together and to have a suitable place for the celebration of Mass and the sacraments. Their first church was a small wooden building 30 feet wide and 55 feet long. It was built at the corner of Liberty and Vine Streets, where the church of St. Francis Seraph now stands. It was called Christ Church. The builder was William Riley, a carpenter of Alexandria, Kentucky, who used timbers grown on his own property to frame and finish the modest structure.

At the time, Cincinnati was a part of the diocese of Bardstown, Kentucky. Two years later, in 1821, Cincinnati itself was made the seat of a diocese. Its first bishop was Edward Fenwick, a Dominican priest of the Priory of St. Rose, Kentucky. Bishop Fenwick made his home near what is now Lytle Park. Because of the difficulty of getting to the little church, now his cathedral, especially over the mud roads of winter, Bishop Fenwick purchased the Sycamore Street site and had the little cathedral put on rollers and moved to where our church now stands. Meanwhile, he had changed the name to St. Peter's.

Bishop Fenwick died in 1832 and was succeeded by Bishop John B. Purcell. Bishop Purcell bought additional property on Sycamore Street next to his cathedral and established a seminary and college there. Then, in 1840, he brought in the Jesuits to run the college and seminary. Meanwhile, he had begun to build a new cathedral at Eighth and Plum. When it was dedicated in 1845, the title of St. Peter-in-Chains was given to it. The church and college on Sycamore was placed under the patronage of St. Francis Xavier. The seminary, retaining its name of "Athenaeum," moved elsewhere in 1848.

By 1856 the number of people attending St. Xavier Church was so great that a new building was planned. The building was begun in 1858 under the leadership of Father Charles Driscoll, S.J., pastor from 1848 to 1885- the longest pastorate in the history of the parish. In 1861, Bishop Purcell celebrated the first Mass in the great new church, basically the church as we know it today. A fire on April 7, 1882 gutted the interior of the church and the roof was destroyed. The people rallied around and restored the church, rededicating it in 1882.

St. Xavier Parish was very much a typical neighborhood parish through much of its history. There were many modest homes in the bottoms and up the slopes of Mount Adams. With the coming of the highways, of Fort Washington Way, and of extensive riverfront development, most of those homes were razed and the people moved away. St. Xavier then became the parish we know today, serving downtown and northern Kentucky and farther areas, with the amazing total of 105 zip codes represented.

The current church building remained basically unchanged from 1883 until the directives of Vatican II called for a rearrangement of worship space. A fund-raising project got under way and a renovation committee was established. The committee chose Ken Jones and Associates as architects and Turner Construction Special Projects Division as general contractor and the work of renovation was begun in 1987. The most striking change was the redecoration of the church. It had been all beige with no color except for panels of cherry red atop the arches of the nave, and a section of cherry red carpet in the sanctuary. The architect chose bold colors that enhance the architecture and that reflect the medieval custom of enlivening great churches with strong colors.

Along with physical updating, the years since Vatican II have also seen progress in liturgical spirit. Lay persons, men and women, were welcomed as Lectors and Eucharistic Ministers and, eventually, women as Altar Servers. A splendid liturgical choir was developed. Communion service was introduced to accommodate downtown workers. The rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) became an annual program. And, meanwhile, the sacred tradition of weekday and Sunday Masses, of readily available sacrament of reconciliation and other sacraments continued as it had for over a century and a half. St. Xavier Parish, sharing with the Cathedral of St. Peter-in-Chains the honor of being the oldest parish in the Archdiocese, looks to the future with confidence in the Lord's challenging and sustaining grace, for the greater glory of God – AMDG.