

St. Catherine of Alexandria Parish Celebrates 170-Year Anniversary

By [The Catholic Herald](#) | Nov 27, 2017

WHO WAS ST. CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA?

■ St. Catherine was born around 287 in Alexandria, Egypt, which was a center of culture and learning as well as faith.

■ Christian tradition states she was of noble birth, possibly a princess. As a member of nobility, she was also educated and was an avid scholar.

■ About age 14, she experienced a moving vision of Mary and the infant Jesus and she decided to become a Christian.

■ When the emperor Maxentius began persecuting Christians, Catherine visited him to denounce his cruelty.

■ Rather than order her execution, Maxentius summoned 50 orators and philosophers to debate her. However, Catherine was moved by the power of the Holy Spirit and spoke eloquently in defense of her faith. Her words were so moving that several pagans converted to Christianity and were immediately executed.

■ Unable to defeat her rhetorically or intimidate her into giving up her faith, the emperor ordered her to be tortured and imprisoned.

■ Catherine was martyred around 305 in Alexandria. She is also recognized as a Great Martyr and Saint by the Orthodox Church.

■ St. Catherine of Alexandria is the patron saint of librarians and her feast day is Nov. 25.



Top: St. Catherine of Alexandria. Above: External photo of St. Catherine Parish. (Photos by Tom Andrews)

“I guess the first image that comes to mind is ever-ancient, ever-new.”

Fr. Michael Strachota has only been on the scene as a shared pastor for six years while simultaneously serving St. Joan of Arc Parish in Nashotah. Yet, as he reflects on the heritage of

St. Catherine of Alexandria Catholic Church in the tiny, rural community of Mapleton, Wisconsin (a small corner of what is now Oconomowoc), his facial expression says it all. Excitement and enthusiasm. Thankfulness and a hopeful outlook for what lies ahead.

“I’m proud to be part of this celebration because I have only a small segment of service here and yet I’ve been able to see the growth of the parish,” Fr. Strachota continued. “I think the parish kind of takes it for granted. They just do what they are about in their love of God and don’t realize what a witness that is. It’s exciting to see the parish come alive in what they have inherited and continue to pass on.”

Saturday, Nov. 18, marked St. Catherine’s 170th anniversary and the entire congregation made sure the evening would be very special. The evening Mass was jointly celebrated by Most Reverend James T. Schuerman, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, and Fr. Strachota. The inspirational voices of the St. Catherine’s adult choir, the children’s choir, the bell choir and the St. Joan of Arc adult choir were accompanied by the church’s outstanding instrumentalists.

“The worship experience here is more contemporary but with all of the traditions of the Catholic Church,” said Bill Frederick, pastoral associate and director of the senior care ministry at St. Catherine’s and at St. Joan of Arc. “We have outstanding preachers in Fr. Strachota and Deacon Larry Normann and, when people leave this church, they feel lifted. The music here is extraordinary with an outstanding choir.”

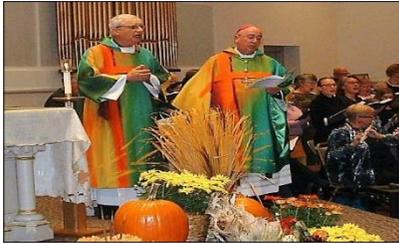
Indeed, for this special occasion, Liturgy Music Director Steve Johnson composed a brand new choral anthem based on an Irish melody as a nod to the church’s Irish heritage — the prayer of St. Patrick’s breastplate, “Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me,” which was played during the offertory.

“When people enter into worship here, they love to sing and praise God,” said Fr. Strachota. “We have a beautiful choir, beautiful pipe organ and all of the elements that make worship strong and vibrant so that, as they come in, they experience something they may not have experienced in other places.”

As the Mass was about to begin, the church doors were opened to allow those in attendance a chance to hear the ringing of the iconic St. Catherine’s bell. It was the first time the bell had been rung in 10 years and its sweet tones signaled the church’s presence to the rest of the surrounding community.

“The bell was blessed and installed in the tower in October of 1899 on the feast of the Holy Rosary and was dedicated to our Blessed Mother Mary,” Frederick explained. “It has been rung for many years and we had the bell repaired for this anniversary celebration. This bell has allowed people to know that St. Catherine’s is here for 170 years. It’s a beautiful symbol of our faith, publicly announcing our faith to the world around us.”

“I love the bell and they still have the pull on the bell that they can ring it and announce to the rest of the community surrounding us that this is a church that’s alive and we’re coming out with good news to tell everybody,” added Fr. Strachota.



Fr. Michael Strachota (left) and Bishop James Schuerman celebrated Mass for the 170th anniversary of St. Catherine Parish on Saturday, Nov. 18. (Photo by Tom Andrews)

The evening’s Mass celebration also featured formal congratulations from political dignitaries, including a proclamation from Gov. Scott Walker, letters from U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, State Rep. Joel Kleefisch, Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch and Mayor David Nold of Oconomowoc. The Kleefisch and Nold families are also members of the parish.

Following communion, Fr. Strachota was presented with a special gift from the parish, a beautiful painting of Jeremiah the Prophet with his hand stretched out to heaven painted by Fr. Gary Wankerl, pastor of Holy Mother of Consolation Church in Oregon, Wisconsin.

Wisconsin was not even a state yet 170 years ago, and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee wasn’t named an Archdiocese until 1875. The church was originally established under the Archdiocese of Detroit. The Irish immigrants who settled in the Mapleton area first planted the seeds of what is now a long-lasting, prosperous Catholic Christian community.

The first pastor, Fr. Thomas Morrissey, established St. Catherine of Alexandria Catholic Church in the summer of 1847. Since that time, 28 pastors have served St. Catherine’s, which got its name to honor the family who donated the land for the building, Catherine and Alexander Coyle. The Coyles are buried in the cemetery just outside the east entrance of the church.

Ten years after the first Mass was celebrated in the Coyle home, a small wooden church was erected in what today is the church’s lower parking lot. In 1886, a new church was built and would later become the current gathering area. Through the generosity and encouragement of Walter and Grace Merton, along with the entire congregation, a new worship space was created. The first Mass was celebrated on Christmas Eve 2000. The new church, built with all-new amenities, preserved the sacred traditional high altar and statues and the restored Stations of the Cross.

The windows of the original church were painted (not stained) glass. The top portions of the original windows were used and new windows to match the old ones were made with stained glass.

When St. Catherine's began, the congregation consisted of 200 members. Today, the parish has approximately 770 families, about 2,000 members, 11 staff members and 130 students in its

IN 2016, ST. CATHERINE PARISH,

OCONOMOWOC RECORDED:

- Registered Households: 715
- Registered Individuals: 2,107
- Baptisms: 16
- Confirmations: 19
- Marriages: 6

If you want to visit:

St. Catherine Parish

W359N8512 Brown St. Oconomowoc, 53066

Mass Times:

Saturday Mass of Anticipation: 5 p.m.

Sunday Mass: 9 a.m.

Christian Formation Program.

“St. Catherine's has seen tremendous growth,” added Frederick. “I don't think that was envisioned 170 years ago as it was just a small country parish even up until 1995 and only seated 100 people. They didn't have restrooms inside the church until 1983. There was an outhouse and then people used the rectory.”