

HISTORY OF ASCENSION PARISH

The roots of Ascension trace back to first being a mission church of St. Anthony parish which was formed in the early 1900's to serve the mostly German Catholics in and around the bustling community of Centaur Station. Located on the Missouri River west of the current Spirit of St. Louis airport, Centaur boasted rail service, a lime quarry, hotel and store. The first pastor was Rev. Charles Keller who was appointed in 1910. Mass was held on the third floor of a lumber barn. Fr. Reh was appointed in 1913 and was followed by Fr. Louis Schultz in 1917. As the population moved eastward, the church moved from the lumber barn to a smaller building that was used as a school.

By about 1920, Fr. Schultz sought to establish a parish in the town of Chesterfield that would be more centrally located to its congregation. He held Mass in a barn on Olive Street Road owned by his cousin, Joseph Schultz. An attempt was made to purchase land for a new parish but it was not approved by then Archbishop Glennon. In 1921, Fr. Vincent McCartney was appointed to St. Anthony's. Soon after, Theresa Reuther, who later became Sister Cortona of the Sisters of St. Mary, donated two acres of land for the new parish. Ground was broken on April 17, 1923 and the church we lovingly call our "Little Church" was dedicated on Ascension Thursday, May 29, 1924. This new church remained a mission of St. Anthony in Centaur until Fr. John Godfrey was appointed as pastor in 1941 and Ascension became an independent parish with its own small school of 56 children. At first, Fr. Godfrey and the Sisters who taught at the school lived at and commuted from St. Monica's in Creve Coeur but soon Father built a rectory and added some rooms in the school for the Sisters.

During World War II years, growth was slow at Ascension but the parish served participants on both sides of the conflict. A Military Police training camp was set up in Babler Park and Fr. Godfrey took on the additional responsibility of the men's spiritual care. Later in the war, sixty-five Italian prisoners of war arrived in the area under the command of a lieutenant from the Bronx. The officer's first stop was at the rectory to ask Father to provide for the spiritual needs of his men and prisoners, almost all of whom were Catholic. The Italian prisoners shortly after requested to throw a party for Fr. Godfrey and the women of the parish provided homemade cakes and coffee. When Italy surrendered, all sixty-five prisoners volunteered for the American army and left Chesterfield.

After the Italians came a group of German POW army soldiers who worked in the fields and another group of German sailors who did levee work on the Missouri River. The army soldiers were mainly receptive to the church though at first, they were discouraged by their gestapo fellow prisoners. A couple of the Austrian soldiers were assigned to paint the church when Father requested help from their commanding officer. They arrived with tears in their eyes they were so happy to be painting a Catholic church and always spent a few minutes in prayer in the little church at each rest period. The sailors, however, remained dedicated Nazis. By the end of the war, Fr. Godfrey was able to celebrate Mass with the soldiers, but he was never welcomed by the sailors.

Chesterfield also welcomed Japanese Nesei deportees from California. They were American citizens who had been treated as prisoners of war. Many worked for Ascension parishioners who were kind to them. Often small groups of young Japanese attended Sunday Mass though their parents who were Buddhist did not come.

After the war, contract workers from Mexico called Braceros came to work the fields. Most were married and came on 90-day work permits to support their families. As many as 150 men were brought to Sunday Mass from Gumbo in Chesterfield Valley and they inspired the Ascension parishioners with their special devotion to Our Lady. Each year, the parish celebrated the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe with the Braceros. Today, our parish celebrates the feast with a Spanish Mass accompanied by authentic music and followed by a party with Mexican food.

In 1948, the Parish Hall was built. Shortly after, St. Anthony's parish in Centaur was closed by the diocese and vigorous growth began at Ascension. Then Archbishop Ritter approved the purchase of six additional acres and contracted for a new school building in 1958. The men of the parish remodeled the old school into a convent for the Sisters.

Also in 1958, the County Council named the new road leading to the parish Santa Maria Drive as suggested by Fr. Godfrey in honor of Our Lady who had brought so many blessings to the parish and the Braceros. Following Fr. Godfrey as pastor came Fr. Matthews in 1966 followed by Fr. Regan in 1967 who served for five years. Records show that our Parish School of Religion goes back to this time when in 1968, the first PSR class was initiated. Around this time, four carpenters from the parish completely remodeled "The Little Church" to bring it up to date after the changes brought about by Vatican II.

Fr. (later Monsignor) William Drennan arrived in 1972 and during his service, the current main church was completed on June 12, 1977 and dedicated on the feast of Corpus Christi. The school addition with a multi-purpose room was completed on September 7, 1980. The continued rapid growth of Ascension led to a split and the formation of a new parish, St. Alban Roe in Wildwood, which was dedicated March 20, 1983. In April, 1983 the current parish rectory building was completed which provided badly needed office space and living quarters for three priests.

Fr. (later Monsignor) Joseph Pins arrived in 1988 and that same year, the school gym was completed. With Sisters no longer living at the parish, the Ascension Early Childhood Center (The Little School) was opened in the former convent building in September, 1995. It was the first Catholic pre-school in the St. Louis area. An addition to the school was dedicated on September 5, 1999.

Fr. (later Monsignor) Dennis Stehly became pastor in 2004. During his stay, the main church was remodeled and the Little Church continued to be restored as a quiet, reverent house of prayer. Fr. Thomas Molini, our current pastor, was appointed July 1, 2016. Improvements and changes continue to be made. The Ascension Early Childhood Center was relocated into the parish school building and their former home has been remodeled this past year as the Parish Office building with space for the priests, staff and conference rooms. The rectory will now serve just as a home for the priests.

The history of Ascension parish has been a rich and vibrant one. Through love, faith and sacrifice during periods of expansion and often rapid growth, we have gone from being an outlying mission church into one of the larger St. Louis suburban parishes. The early parishioners of Ascension welcomed and ministered to people from many lands and we continue that mission spirit today through our many outreach and social justice programs. The generosity and faithfulness of our parish is a hallmark of the Spirit of Ascension and we encourage you to become a part of it.

This information was taken from an article in the St. Louis Review, "I Was a Stranger and You Took Me In" by Robert Clavenna, (published Dec 12, 1958) and from an Ascension history compiled by Dick Demko (published in 1984).