

Second Church

The contract for the new church was signed on June 28th, 1938. Three days later, on the first Friday in July, and the Feast of the Most Precious Blood, the ground for the new church was broken. The pastor, Father Peter Post, did the honors while many parishioners were present. They had been anxiously waiting for this happy day. Work began shortly after this date.

The construction of the church was under contract with Manhattan Construction Company in Fort Smith. The plans for the church were drawn by Bassham and Wheeler, Architects. The final church design was selected after reviewing many options and sketches. It fulfilled all the requirements and was within the budget the congregation felt it could afford.

The final design was the familiar and always acceptable form of a cross. The exterior design was Modernistic English Gothic. It was in the very early stages in studying the design, that the building committee and architects decided to omit the typical high tower and spires, which so often appeared in this style of church. Not only would there have been considerable danger with the weight of the bells that went with that design, but it would have been significantly more expensive. An innovation was created with the idea of placing the belfry, with all three bells, in the back of the building. This idea has proven to be successful, however at that time a provision was made that a tower could be added at a future date. It would be joined to the church, but independent of the main structure.

When the church was finished in 1939, it included about 460,000 face and common brick, and 94,850 pounds of structural steel, of which 79,000 pounds were used in the roof framing alone. Of the trusses used, one of the largest weighed 8,300 pounds. The length of the building, excluding steps or landings, is 148 feet 11 inches. The total width of the building through transepts is 63 feet. The height of the roof above the front walk is 55 feet 2 inches. The top of the cross above the front walk is 66 feet. The height of the ceiling above the first floor is 42 feet 2 inches.

The cost of the building, exclusive of plumbing, electrical work, and the stained glass windows, was approximately \$80,339.60. The cost of the stained glass windows was \$11,500. The windows were purchased from Emil Frei, Inc., in Saint Louis, Missouri. Discussion and design work lasted for months before decisions were made on the subjects, colors, symbolisms, and designs to be used in each window. All the windows were constructed in the Munich, Germany studio, except for the six in the Sacristies. Those were fabricated in Saint Louis. The windows are described as Munich style stained glass, which is characterized by a strong contrast between light and shade, rich ornamentation, and much artistic detail. Fortunately the windows were shipped from Munich before the onset of World War II. The studio where they had been made was destroyed during the war. Additional history and a complete description of each window were written in 2006 by Mr. Artie Berry. It is available on DVD or in a PDF file. You can contact the church office for



more information.

It was a very happy day on May 12th, 1939, when Bishop John B. Morris came and solemnly blessed the new church that stood proudly and beautifully as a sentinel on the corner of North B and North 18th Streets. After the 9 a.m. blessing, Father Peter Post offered up a Solemn High Mass of Thanksgiving. In attendance, with the Bishop were Monsignors John Healy and Francis Allen, Chaplains to the Bishop, Monsignor Albert Fletcher, and Fathers Thomas Buegler, Louis Deuster, Alcuin Kubis, Basil Egloff, Edward Desmond, Richard Eveld, Edward Chrisman, Ambrose Branz, Athanasius Zehnder, Gregory Kehres, Augustine Linbeck, Joseph Laughlin, Thomas Prendergast and Cletus Post. The only thing missing on this auspicious occasion, were the beautiful stained glass windows. The window openings had been covered as the stained glass windows had not yet been received. Records show the windows were later installed in sections on five different occasions from September 15th to December 7th, 1939.

A series of happy occasions of silver jubilees and First Mass celebrations occurred in quick succession during the following years, and eventually updates and improvements had to be made. In May 1947, the church kneelers were covered with Holstein Tile nosing of uniform design and color to blend with the pews. The cost for this much needed installation was \$1,506.50.

One of the most precious and historic accompaniments in the church are the relics. There are forty two different relics, each from a different saint. They are beautifully and protectively encased in the altars and are a great blessing for Saint Boniface.

On Sunday, January 1st, 1950, parish zoning, as was required by Canon Law, started in Fort Smith. In the summer of 1948, a census was taken in order to give the Bishop an idea of how many Catholics lived in the city, and where they lived. He used this information to set boundaries for each parish. In May, 1967, another census was taken. It resulted in territorial boundaries being changed again on August 9th, 1968.

In 1952, extensive work was done on the church. The exterior walls were waterproofed, vinyl tile was laid down the aisles, and the interior was painted and redecorated.

A famous artist, Joseph Felix Falkenbach was commissioned to paint murals in the church. Mr. Falkenbach had been trained in famous art centers in Munich and Dusseldorf, Germany, and had been decorating churches all throughout the United States. Under the direction of the contractor, Mr. Clemens Rath, who was also an artist trained in German schools, the murals were created.

The mural above the main altar represented the Holy Trinity. Pictured, were God the Father holding a globe as Creator of Heaven and Earth, and the Son, Jesus Christ, with a thorn-crowned head and halo, and His Sacred Wounds, as Our Redeemer. The union of love between father and son was represented by the embracing of arms. Over this hovered the Holy Ghost, the third person of the Blessed Trinity, in the form of a dove.

A rainbow in the painting symbolized the peace between heaven and earth. The rays of light coming forth from the throne of clouds leading down to the altar represented the power and grace of God descending upon the priests to the people. On both sides of the main altar, a green curtain had been painted in a strong and Gothic style technique.

Above the two side altars were adoring angels on bended knee. On the left side, above one angel, was the inscription "Adoramus Gratias", which means we adore, we give thanks. On the right side, above another angel, was the inscription "Reparamus Petimus", which means we repent, we pray. It should be noted that the pastor decided to paint over these murals in the late 1960's.

In 1954, an improvement to the church basement was made. A floor was laid with asphalt tile and the ceiling was covered with fire resistant ceiling tile.

During the summer of 1956 the church and church basement were air conditioned. Three units with a total of 49.8 tons were installed by Charles Hummel and E.H. Wells Air-Conditioning Company. The total cost was \$14,413.

In the latter part of 1960, the church was once again water-proofed. This was done by the V.A. Gramlich Company at the low cost of \$2,831.60.

In 1962, architect Kenneth F. Cockram was hired to prepare plans and specifications for covered doorways and walkways around the church. Two bids were accepted and General Contractor Joe F. Cook Jr. from Fort Smith was chosen. He submitted the lowest bid of \$9,795.38. Contracts were signed on September 4th 1962 by the pastor, Father Maurus Gerke, and Bishop Albert L. Fletcher. Construction began by the end of the month and was completed in February 1963. Architect fees were \$489.77.

When Vatican II started in the early 1960's, much changed in the church, as reforms and updates were made. One of the most noticeable changes was in the language of the Mass. In the beginning, English was phased in slowly, and Latin was phased out slowly. By 1969, the complete Mass was said in English. The altar was moved toward the congregation and priests said Mass facing the parishioners.



Lay persons were also invited to participate more directly in the celebration of the Mass through the development of Lector and Eucharistic Minister Programs. When the Diaconate Program started in Arkansas, parishioner Ralph Bogner joined the first class. He became an acolyte and was only thirty days short of being ordained as a Deacon. A second member of the parish, John Burns, became a member of the third class that started in 1994. He went through formation and was ordained on Pentecost Sunday, May 31st, 1998, by Bishop Andrew J. McDonald. Chuck Hankins became the third Deacon from Saint Boniface. He was in the fourth class. The Diaconate program lasts for four years and the education received is equal to a Masters Degree in Theology. It is also noteworthy to mention that all the Deacons currently in Fort Smith have ties to Saint Boniface Parish and the Benedictine influence.

According to parish records dating back to 1967, Father Maurus wrote to Rambusch, a lighting engineering company in New York City, concerning the lack of lighting in the church. He was asking how to make improvements without much expense. The company suggested that the lantern lights be refigured and lowered. They were originally hung in the form of a cross and it was suggested that they should be re-hung in two rows centered over each long row of pews. It was also noted that additional recessed and rotopot lighting was needed. Financially, the pastor felt it was not the right time to make all the improvements and decided to wait. In the early 1970's, the formation of the lights were changed and additional lighting was added.

It eventually became imperative that the church have a handicap accessible ramp. In the summer of 1979, one was built on the north side of the church. When the cement was being poured, two statues from the church and the two angels that had been displayed in the main entry hall of the school were laid on the ground and covered by the ramp. These statues were in need of extensive and costly repairs. With the enactment of Vatican II, there

was a movement to do away with ornate items and these were removed from use.

During the early 1980's, Father Hilary had work done on the side altars. The pedestals were removed and the altars were shortened.

On a Wednesday evening during Holy Week in 1981, a hailstorm hit the parish buildings. There was major damage to the stained glass window in the choir loft. After its repair and re-installation by Emil Frei, Inc., on Christmas Eve in 1982, it was decided to cover all the church windows with protective Plexiglas. Crossbars were also installed to reinforce the choir loft window and the other two large windows as they had started to bow.

In 1998, Saint Boniface was notified that Subiaco Abbey was no longer able to supply a Benedictine pastor for their parish. This was a devastating blow, as its Benedictine heritage was immensely important to the parishioners. An end had come to the parishes' long tradition of Benedictine leadership. Bishop Andrew McDonald assigned a Diocesan priest as the new pastor.

2002 was a year for remodeling. All the statues, Stations of the Cross, and nativity pieces were restored. This was all done by donations and the donors names or namesakes are identified on brass plates in the church. Gold inlays on the altars were restored and new carpet was laid. The altar floor was replaced with hardwood flooring and the communion rails were removed. A wood floor was also installed in the baptismal area.

During Easter week in 2003, new outside doors were installed. The old wood doors had been damaged by the elements in their sixty five years of use. One of the double doors on the west side also had bullet holes in it. Custom made doors were built and installed by parishioner Kenny Kaelin to match the style of the original doors.

Many restoration projects were handled in early 2008. Most of these had been put on hold for years and could not be put off any longer. Tackling the pews was the largest project. After many quotes and much discussion of their historical and intrinsic value, the pews were removed the last week in March and shipped to Kivett's Inc., in Clinton, North Carolina to be restored. The pews, along with four altar server kneelers, the wedding kneeler, confessional kneelers, and offertory gifts table were refurbished. New matching pew kneelers and book racks were also made. While the church was empty, Bill Reith Construction brought in scaffolding to be used for cleaning and conditioning the wood around the ceiling. All the lighting fixtures were removed for cleaning and new electrical work was installed at a cost of \$16,798.14. While this work was on going, Mass was being held in the Hall. New carpet costing \$36,022.03 was installed next, and folding chairs were brought in to be used for the Masses until the pews were re-installed near the first

of May. According to the contract, the cost for the pews, including removal, shipping and installation was \$66,861.

During that period, the speaker system was repaired at a cost of \$2,429. A water line also had to be installed in the church basement at a cost of \$4,010.

The once predominately German parish has broadened to include many cultures including Asian and Hispanic members. A Spanish Mass is offered weekly on Saturday afternoons.

One of the worst hailstorms to hit Fort Smith was on the evening of April 9th, 2008. Major damage occurred all over the area, in and near downtown. Fortunately for the church, Plexiglas had been installed over all the beautiful stained glass windows, and the storm only caused minor damage. There was still much damage to the church however. A new roof had to be installed, and awnings and Plexiglas were replaced. Insurance covered most of the cost for these repairs.

Another major improvement was the beautiful new sign on the south side of the church that was installed to replace the old metal marquis. This sign, 9 feet tall, 13 feet wide, and 1 foot deep, is framed in brick to match the church. A colorful picture of the

parish's patron saint, St. Boniface, is depicted in marble showing him cutting down an oak tree worshiped by the pagans. The story, as told on a brass plate attached to the sign, says that Thor, the god of thunder, did not strike Saint Boniface dead as the pagans would have believed. Because of that one act, he was instantly able to convert many of the pagans. A large glass case is also included listing Mass schedules. The cost for this sign was \$22,942.09.

An interesting story is told about this sign. It was installed only a week before the hailstorm hit. Parishioner Frank Klein, who was instrumental in the sign's creation, was extremely concerned that this new sign had been damaged beyond repair. The very next day he discovered, to his disbelief, that there was not one dent or scratch on it anywhere; however, the sidewalks and ground around it had marks where they had been heavily pelted with extremely large hail. He believes that Saint Boniface had embraced his new sign, and protectively wrapped his arms around it. For those who have heard the story, they also believe in this little miracle.

As you have read, it takes a lot financially to build and maintain a parish. A few of the monthly expenses include a subsidy of \$2,400 to the Diocese of Little Rock, \$10,000 for the school, utility costs ranging from \$2000 to \$4000, and cost of staff and supplies. Support from the parishioners has always been readily and generously given, and greatly appreciated. Continuing with your generous support of time, talents, and treasures will enable your church, your school, and your Saint Boniface family to thrive and grow in Christ.

