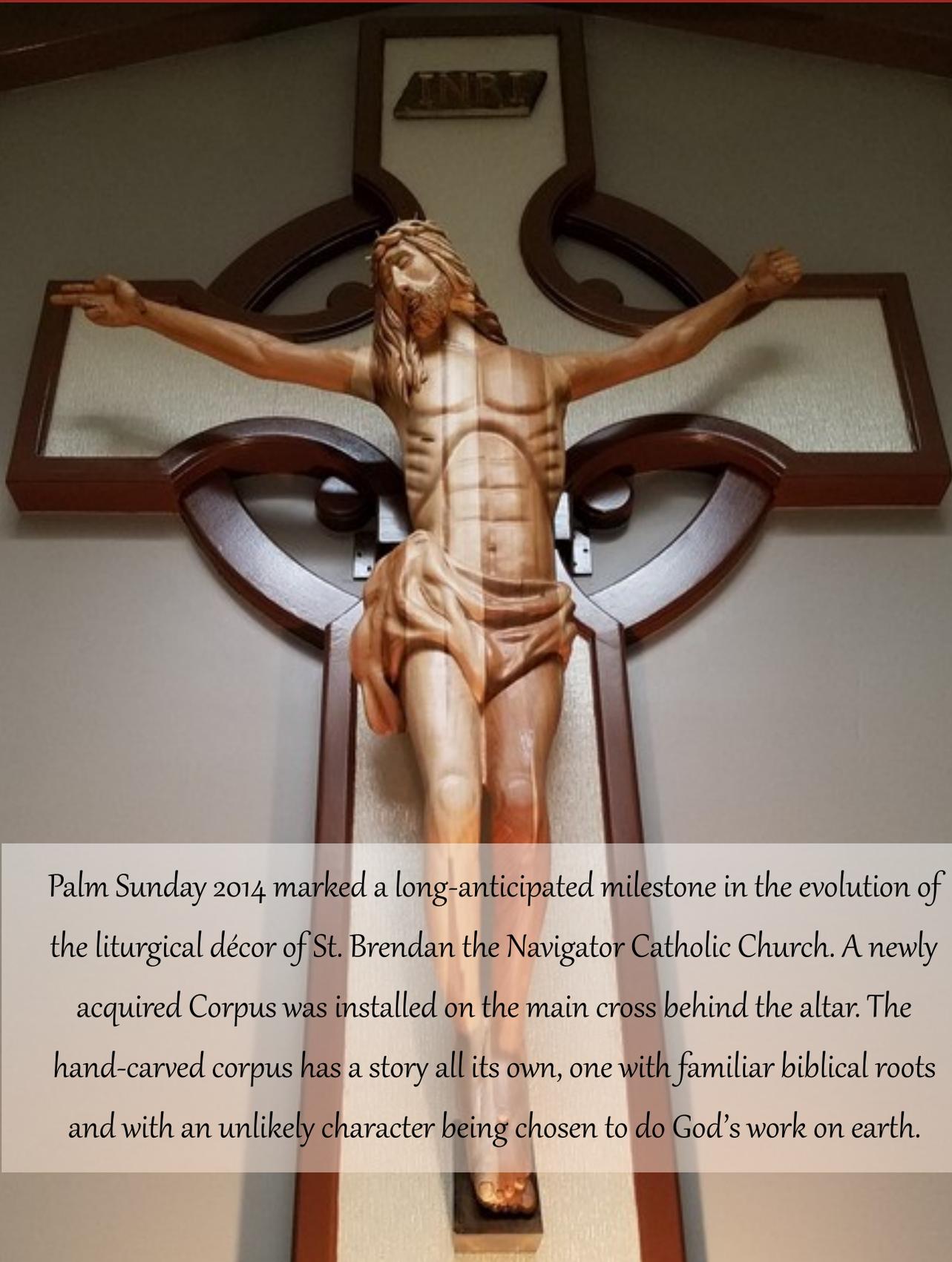


FIFTH
ANNIVERSARY
APRIL 2019

CORPUS CHRISTI



Palm Sunday 2014 marked a long-anticipated milestone in the evolution of the liturgical décor of St. Brendan the Navigator Catholic Church. A newly acquired Corpus was installed on the main cross behind the altar. The hand-carved corpus has a story all its own, one with familiar biblical roots and with an unlikely character being chosen to do God's work on earth.

INTRODUCTION

It began as a simple conversation.

At the conclusion of a baptism in 2013, the grandfather of the newly baptized approached Fr. Matthew VanSmoorenburg to ask if he might help our church with a significant donation. Fr. Matthew expressed his desire to complement recent altar enhancements with a new Corpus to attach to our existing Celtic cross.

From here, the story of the Corpus takes an improbable path from inspiration to creation.



THE SETTING

In 2013, Angola State Prison was the largest maximum security prison in the United States, with more than 6,000 offenders. Once known as the country's bloodiest and most hopeless maximum security prison, it had been reborn in the early part of the century under the guardianship of Warden Burl Cain. A man of great faith, Cain knew that without moral rehabilitation, his inmates would never find peace. Theology classes led by the New Orleans Theological Seminary followed as did the construction of several small chapels within the walls of the prison. Where once only despair thrived, tiny seeds of hope were now beginning to take root.

THE CAST



The donor informed Fr. Matthew that he knew a prisoner in Louisiana who was a talented wood craftsman - one who had never taken on a project of this size but who was skilled with carving life-like images. Inspired by the redemptive possibilities, Fr. Matthew decided to give the prisoner a chance to perform the work.

"My name is Marty James Hebert. I am from the town of Franklin in south Louisiana. When I was 21 years old I got into a fight with a man and killed him. In 1995 I was convicted of 2nd degree murder and sentenced to mandatory life in prison (Angola Louisiana State)."

WORK COMMENCES

Working closely with the Pastoral Council, photo images were forwarded to the prisoner and work began in the early months of 2014.

"When I was asked to carve the life-sized Jesus for the crucifix, I had some doubts ... I never worked on anything so large and so life-like. I enlarged a picture I was given and made a pattern of it. But I also wanted to carve my interpretation of the physical aspects of Jesus. He worked as carpenter and therefore would have been strong, but

in the last years on earth as He was traveling and teaching He would have eaten modestly, taking only what His body needed...The face was the most challenging. I used all my imagination in how I could make it command a sense of peace.”

Once the Corpus was complete, Fr. Matthew made plans to transport the carving to our church. Through their generosity of time and willingness to travel a bumpy 1,200-mile round trip ride via rented box truck, parishioners Mike and Diana Artzer set out



on a purposeful journey to bring “Jesus” to St. Brendan’s. Their trip included tours of the Angola facility including the death row area and the execution rooms, a meeting with the assistant warden and even an overnight stay in a guest cottage known locally as the “Sugar Shack.” The Artzers were impressed by the hospitality extended to them by everyone they met as well as the sense of pride and ownership the inmates showed in their work.



“I am a Christian, I have a Catholic school education. I have prayed for many years in prison for God to help me and I believe the gift I have is His answer. I have a talent to make wonderful art with my hands and with it the ability to bring joy to those who have an eye to see it.”

THE LESSON

Once safely delivered to Cumming, the Corpus was temporarily displayed in the Narthex on the Third Sunday of Lent 2014. That day parishioners listened to the Gospel story of the Samaritan woman at the well. Fr. Matthew reminded them that Jesus frequently made choices that seemed to go against what others expected Him to do. Jesus engaged in dialogue with the Samaritan woman, asked her for a drink and then offered her “living water.” With this parable as the backdrop, it seems fitting that the parish would acquire a Corpus hand-carved by a prisoner serving a life sentence. This prisoner was a carpenter by trade, the same profession shared by Jesus, and through a strong conversion experience, he now uses his woodworking talent to glorify God.

“I am not a great artist like Michelangelo but I did put my heart and soul into 10 weeks of work. I hope it gives reverence and hope to all who see it.”



Several skilled craftsmen securely suspend the Corpus in front of the cross with special care being taken not to harm the existing Celtic cross. Work continued through Friday and Saturday with the imminent date of display set for April 13, 2014: Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord.

On Palm Sunday, as the Word of God was proclaimed in the stories of Christ’s passion and crucifixion, parishioner’s eyes were unable to move away from the new image of Christ with them, watching over them. Above them now rested the representation of the ultimate sacrifice: the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for a fallen world and the sacrifice we are called to make to truly follow Him.

THE AFTERWORD

*An Update from Marty James Hebert, Artist and Prisoner
(March 2019)*



“I am Marty James Hebert, the prisoner in Angola who carved the Corpus for St. Brendan’s Catholic Church. I feel honored to write a letter for the 5th anniversary commemorating its blessing.

I would like to thank Father Matthew and all the parishioners for the many letters I have received sharing your feelings of the carving I made. I am humbled to learn the Corpus has touched your hearts. I remember back when I was working on it, I would begin each day with a prayer asking God to grant me knowledge and to guide my hands so I could serve His purpose.

I have received letters from people telling me looking at the Corpus gives them a sense of peace from their daily troubles. I have received letters from people of different races each telling me to them the Corpus looks like their own people. Perhaps God’s will was for me to carve this Corpus in an image everyone can relate to, and to see an image that reminds everyone of the power of God’s love for us. If this was God’s will for me, then I believe I served Him successfully.

I would like to thank Father Matthew and all the parishioners at St Brendan’s for their prayers and for providing me with the opportunity to serve our Lord in such a grand manner.”



With special thanks to Jane Smith, Mike Artzer, and Larry Peterson, and to all the parishioners of St. Brendan’s who lovingly call this parish home.

