

Assumption Parish History

In 1903, the *Reverend George Houck*, chancellor of the diocese of Cleveland, published a two-volume study of the origins of the Church of Cleveland entitled, '*A History of Catholicity in Northern Ohio and in the Diocese of Cleveland*'. In this extensive work, one-half page is devoted to '*Assumption Mission Church*' in Royalton, Cuyahoga County. After detailing the modest beginnings of the church, Fr. Houck concludes his article by explaining, "It (the mission) is not attached to Independence as a weekday Mission, which at present numbers about eight families."

Ninety-five years later, this struggling mission now boasts a thriving parish community of over 1500 families under the pastoral care of the Benedictine monks of Saint Andrew Abbey in Cleveland. The 140 year jubilee of the organization of the first Catholic community in Broadview Heights lends itself as an occasion to review the interesting, though erratic, history of Assumption parish.

In 1857, four years before Abraham Lincoln was elected President, Bishop Amadeus Rappe, first bishop of the ten-year old Diocese of Cleveland, organized the mission of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Royalton District of Cuyahoga County. Bishop Rappe met with the few Catholic families in the area and celebrated the Eucharist for them in the home of James Morrow. During the homily of the Mass, he revealed his plans for the establishment of a permanent Catholic parish in Royalton. He directed the faithful to secure a lot and to build a small church for their use. He promised to send priests from the cathedral to celebrate the sacraments regularly until a resident pastor could be named.

For the next three years, Mass was celebrated, without benefit of a church building, approximately once a month by visiting priests from the cathedral and the established Catholic parish in Liverpool (now Valley City). **In 1862**, *Bishop Rappe* appointed *Father T. J. Halley* of Grafton the additional duties of taking care of Assumption mission, an arrangement which lasted for the next six years. Within a year of his appointment, Fr. Halley bought a house and lot for \$500 and had the house remodeled into the first church of the mission. The first church building was located at the corner of the present *Royalton (Rt. 82) and Ridge (Rt. 3) Roads*. However, within a year, this location proved inconvenient and Fr. Halley exchanged the property for a parcel of land *on Broadview (Rt. 176) and Royalton (Rt. 82) Roads* which also had a frame building on it which was remodeled into a church. *This building served as Assumption Church until 1905.*

After 1868, various parishes of the area sent priests to minister to the faithful of Assumption mission: from St. Augustine's parish in Cleveland (**1869-1870**), from St. Martin's parish in Valley City (**1870-72**), from St. Mary's in Rockport, now Assumption in Brookpark (**1873-77**), from St. Adalbert's in Berea (**1877-79**), and from the parish of Olmsted (**1879-80**). For ten years, (**1882-92**) a priest from St. Mary's Seminary in Cleveland, Fr. J. A. TePas, traveled to the mission regularly to attend to the spiritual needs of the small congregation. However, shifts in population soon reduced the struggling mission to five families in 1892. **In April of that year, the diocese stopped assigning priests for periodic visits and in essence closed the mission.**

Assumption mission nearly ended its story with this premature abandonment by the diocese which lasted for eight years. However, in **September of 1900**, *Bishop Ignatius Horstmann* reopened the mission and assigned its care to St. Michael's parish in Independence. In **1905**, Fr. Michael Aust of St. Michael moved the site of the mission one mile south of Rt. 82 on Broadview Road. He

remodeled a house (**on Behal's farm**) into a church and then turned over administration of the mission to *Fr. Joseph Novak* of Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Cleveland.

More difficulties plagued Assumption mission and within three months of Fr. Novak's appointment, **the diocese again closed the church**. However, once again two years later, *Bishop Horstmann* found a way to reopen Assumption and provide priestly service when he convinced the Jesuit priests from St. Stanislaus Novitiate (presently in Parma) to send a priest once a month for Sunday Mass, confessions, and baptisms. The Jesuits actually ministered to the thirty families of Assumption by traveling the eight-mile trip from Parma twice a month from **1907-1913**.

Parish records from the first year of Jesuit administration, 1907, state that Fr. R. Meschenmoser, S.J. celebrated his first Mass at Assumption on Sunday, August 18. On November 2, twelve children made their First Communion at a beautiful liturgy in which Jesuit seminarians sang and served at the altar. The communicants had been given a two-day retreat in preparation.

A number of Bohemian immigrants settled in the area and bi-lingual confessions (also in Polish) were common during the Jesuit days of the mission. For instance, on March 5, 1908, Cleveland's first auxiliary bishop, Joseph Koudelka, a native of Czechoslovakia, heard twenty-eight Easter season confessions in Bohemian, conducted a Marian devotions, preached a sermon, and officiated at Benediction. Summary statistics completed at the end of 1908 show that in the year the Jesuits traveled to Assumption mission twenty-nine times, heard 303 confessions, baptized 7, gave 11 children First Communion, buried 3, and witnessed one wedding.

It is interesting to note that simplicity of the operation of the mission by looking at the financial report for the year ending December 31, 1907. Total cash receipts were \$261.99 (including \$50.48 from the Sunday collections and \$61.33 from the mission picnic). Expenses amounted \$165.02 (including \$20 for a horse and buggy and \$15 for a Christmas Crib).

During the six years of Jesuit administration Assumption mission was revitalized and experienced noticeable growth. Recognizing this success, *Bishop John Farrelly* appointed *Fr. Michael F. Shannon* as the first resident pastor of the newly declared parish in **1913**. He would remain at Assumption until his retirement in **1938** a pastorage of twenty-five year.

Father Shannon saw the need for a new church as the parish grew and in **1929** he purchased the present property of the parish on Broadview Road and built a stone-trimmed brick church in the Romanesque style, seating 325 people. The fourth house of worship remained in use for forty years, until it was converted into the present church social hall in **1969**.

In **1938**, *Fr. Thomas Gaffney* was appointed the second pastor of Assumption parish by *Bishop Joseph Schrembs*. At the time the parish had about 100 families. The Broadview Heights area grew rapidly in the next twenty years, and in **1958** Fr. Gaffney added wings to the church to accommodate the large number of Sunday worshippers. In that same year, he built an eleven-classroom school and invited the Sisters of the Incarnate Word to staff it. The sisters have continued to operate Assumption school to this day. Fr. Gaffney died in 1962 after twenty-four years as pastor.

Masses were added, being celebrated in the lower hall below the church to accommodate the weekend crowds. Fr. Schneider gave the interior of the church a major overhaul with new lighting fixtures, a new paint job, new windows and refinished pews.

Fr. Schneider recognized that these improvements were only temporary answers to the problem and soon he began plans to build a new church. However, tragedy struck Fr. Schneider two years after he assumed the pastorate of Assumption. A growing illness put him in and out of the hospital for the next two years, and eventually resulted in his untimely death on August 28, 1966 at the age of fifty-seven. His devotion to Assumption can be seen in the fact that seven days before his death, he insisted that his sister bring him to the parish picnic, his last public appearance.

On September 29, **1996**, *Fr. George Lawrence* became the fourth pastor of Assumption. Bishop Clarence Issenmann expressly assigned him to the project of building the long needed new church.

After a year and a half of discussion and designs, plans for the modern, bell-shaped worship building were approved and construction began after groundbreaking ceremonies on **February 11, 1968**, attended by 300 parishioners. *Bishop Issenmann dedicated the handsome new structure on August 17, 1969*. With seating for 1100, the air-conditioned church boasts a striking forty-four foot high stained glass depiction of Mary's Assumption into heaven.

Fr. Lawrence continued to guide the growth of Assumption until Bishop James Hickey named him pastor of Holy Trinity parish in Lorain, Ohio in February, 1977.

With the completion of the new church, the next goal for Assumption parish was the strengthening of community spirit as the ranks of parishioners continued to grow with new housing developments in the area in the late 1960's and 1970's. The role of the priest was vital in such an undertaking, and unfortunately, the diocese, along with the rest of the church, was simultaneously experiencing a shortage of clergy. With the spiritual welfare of the people of Broadview Heights in mind, *Bishop James A. Hickey invited the Benedictine monks of St. Andrew Abbey in Cleveland to take over administration of Assumption Parish in March 1977*.

The monastic community accepted the challenge and on March 16, **1977**, *Abbot Jerome Koval* and *Bishop Hickey* announced the appointment of *Fr. Augustine Yurko, OSB*, prior of the abbey, as pastor of Assumption parish. Fr. Augustine was installed by the abbot on Palm Sunday, April 3, at a parish liturgy. On June 9, *Fr. Ronald Mahnke, OSB* arrived from the monastery as the associate pastor. Since **1970** *Fr. William Matyas, OSB* had been a weekend assistant and had provided the parishioners of Assumption with their first experience of Benedictine pastoral ministry.

The "*Benedictine Family Spirit*" took an immediate hold on the people of Assumption, and on **August 28, 1977**, *close to a thousand people turned out for a revival of the annual parish picnic*. Fr. 'Gus' soon restored the Holy Name Society and supported the publication of a monthly newsletter, '*The Namer*.' Salaries of the teaching sisters and lay teachers in the parish school were raised. The Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and their related organizations were revived, and a Hi-Club was formed for the young adults of the parish.

Arriving one year before the Benedictines, *Sister Fabian Quigley, SIW*, would serve as principal of Assumption School for twelve years until her transfer in 1988. This is the longest term of any of the eight Incarnate Word Sisters who have held the principal's position since 1958.

The spiritual life of the parish received a vital boost of enthusiasm with the introduction of the "Christ Renews His Parish" renewal program in 1979. The first men's renewal took place on the weekend of May 19-20, and the first women's weekend was October 6-7.

The Benedictines brought their love for worship and liturgy to Assumption. On September 18, 1979, the first group of lay Eucharistic ministers was commissioned allowing laity of the parish a

more active role in the sacred Eucharistic liturgy. *Dick Thonnings* brought energy and enthusiasm to many a Mass as choir director at Assumption for over 30 years from 1974-1995 when illness forced him to step down. He was joined in 1977 by organist *Phil Herout* who continues to add beauty and solemnity to liturgical services with sacred music.

In June of **1982**, *Robert Bubnick* was ordained as the first permanent deacon from the parish. Over the years *Deacon Bubnick* has preached at many Masses and helped coordinate numerous liturgical celebrations at Assumption. The presence of the abbot and monks of the monastery at special liturgies has also added beauty and dignity to the community prayer life of the parish. *Fr. Joachim Pastirik, O.S.B.* brought his sense of humor and artistic talent to the Assumption Parish community as a weekend assistant from **1978-1991**.

Under Fr. Augustine's direction a second Saturday evening vigil Mass was added and pamphlet racks for religious literature were placed at all four entrances of the church. A yearly Day of Recollection, often involving a bus trip, was begun for the *Altar and Rosary Society*.

In September of **1980**, Assumption parish was split for the fifth time in its history as the diocese announced the establishment of a new St. Matthias parish. Two hundred and twenty-seven families from Assumption were assigned membership at St. Matthias. The two parishes coordinated the sharing of facilities and some programs such as Pre-Cana Marriage Preparation.

Also joining the parish staff during Fr. Augustine's term as pastor were long-time secretary *Jane Melinis* and parish cook and housekeeper *Almeda Butler* who has served the Benedictines with dedication and a joyful heart for over twenty year.

The physical plant at Assumption also underwent changes after the arrival of the Benedictines. Fr. Augustine resurfaced the parking lot and added a new drainage system. A new public address system was installed in the church along with a new pulpit and tabernacle. The kitchen in the old church hall was completely renovated. In **1980**, a football field complete with spectator stands and concession booths was built on the back area of the parish property. Finally, in January of **1981**, a major renovation of the parish house resulted in the addition of three offices, two bedroom suites, and a multi-purpose meeting hall with seating for 100. From 1980-1982 a kindergarten and preschool were added.

On June 1, 1981, *Abbot Jerome Koval* resigned as administrator of the monastic community at St. Andrew Abbey and became associate pastor at Assumption parish. For the next twelve years until his untimely death on September 18, 1993, Abbot Jerome's exuberance, energy and deep faith would touch parishioners of all ages. Always a welcomed visitor to the parish school, his contagious smile would elicit giggles and raised hands in his popular religion classes. He was a source of compassion and strength on many women's renewals and found an active role for retired men of the parish by organizing the Senior Servers. His impromptu singing and joke-telling made him a favorite MC at parish functions and variety shows.

When *Fr. Gus* reached the retirement age of seventy in **1983**, *Fr. David Vizsolyi, O.S.B.*, was appointed the new pastor. Recognizing the continued growth of the parish, Fr. David began planning for a new parish family center and an addition to the school. In May, **1990** he saw this project reach completion as the *Assumption Family Center* with a full gymnasium and social hall was dedicated. Also blessed were a new fellowship room, and hall office space in the adjacent school. Prestige Catering took over directing rentals of the new hall for private parties and celebrations. Former weekend assistant, *Fr. William Matyas, O.S.B.* was assigned to replace *Fr. Ronald* as associate pastor in **1985**. He would remain as a popular member of the parish staff for

the next twelve years combining a legendary sense of humor with a serious interest and involvement in the joys and sorrows of parish families.

Failing health forced *Fr. David* into early retirement in **1991** and a premature death on May 25, 1994 at the age of sixty-eight. He was succeeded by our present pastor, *Fr. Christopher Schwartz, O.S.B.*, a former popular history teacher at Benedictine High School and prior of the abbey. In the past seven years, *Fr. Chris* has continued to maintain the Benedictine tradition of joyful, dedicated service to the people of Assumption parish while also adding his creative ideas for expanded ministry and growth in spiritual life.

With a growing parish of over 1900 households, the new forty-five years old pastor went to work getting to know his people and listening to ideas for greater outreach and effective organization. In **1990** *St. Carol Tobler, S.I.W.* was named principal of Assumption School and with *Fr. Christopher's* cooperation guided the school through the new diocesan Futuring process. This involved an in-depth self-evaluation and the use of outside professionals to plan goals for continued improvement in Catholic education. The parish school serves nearly 300 students in grades one through eight.

In **1995**, the Assumption Altar and Rosary Society under the leadership of *Marge Rodak*, launched a drive to raise funds for a statue of the Holy Family for the front of the Parish Family Center dedicated to the memory of the late Abbot Jerome Koval, O.S.B. Noted sculptor Sandro Bonaiuto, who had family ties to Assumption parish, was commissioned to construct the statue which was dedicated in the summer of 1996 by *Abbot Roger Gries, O.S.B.* with Abbot Jerome's sister Anne Zak of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in attendance.

In **1995**, with illness forcing the retirement of *Dick Thonnings, Laura Salasek* and *Barbara Szabo* were named co-directors of the choir. In 1996, *Fr. Chris* brought the Life Teen program to Assumption parish in cooperation with St. Matthias parish. Monthly youth Masses and service projects involving Catholic young adults of both parishes have successfully evolved.

In August of **1996**, *Fr. Chris* addressed the needs of a growing Parish School of Religion program for children in public schools by hiring *Mrs. Lisa Radey* as Directory of Religious Education for preschool to Grade Eight which involves almost 400 children weekly.

The parish staff changed again in the summer of **1997** as *Fr. Clement Zeleznik, O.S.B.*, veteran noivemaster at the abbey and a well-known spiritual director, was appointed to replace *Fr. Ronald* as associate pastor. *Fr. Ron* known for his challenging homilies and reservoir of knowledge on a variety of subjects, served as an associate at Assumption for two terms, 1977-1985 and 1993-1997, for a total of twelve years.

Fr. Chris added another new face to the parish team with the arrival of *Sister Therese Horan, O.S.U.*, as pastoral associate in September, 1997. With a special focus on the homebound and elderly, *Sister Therese* has energetically launched a Ministry of Praise through which shut-ins at home or in local nursing homes participate in a prayer ministry for the parish. She has also directed the development of a bereavement group called the Hands of Hope, coordinated by *Debbie Boyle*, which reaches out to those recently affected by the death of a loved one.

In October of **1997**, *Fr. Christopher* began work on an addition to the social hall kitchen to enable it to serve more people especially through its successful Lenten Fish Fries, Pierogi sales, catered events, and the annual parish picnic. He has also completed putting a new roof on the church and

resurfacing the parking lot. In 1997, as Assumption School marked its Fortieth anniversary, a full-time librarian, *Elaine Kopniske*, was hired and the library was computerized.

The spiritual life of Assumption parish continues to develop as Small Faith Communities, spearheaded by the late *Gina Boyle*, continued to share faith in small discussion groups as part of a diocesan-wide program. Life in the Spirit renewal weekends also began in 1996. As the parish marks the completion of its *140th Anniversary* year on **Saturday, April 18, 1998**, an enthronement of the Blessed Sacrament in a special chapel for perpetual adoration will take place providing still another opportunity for parishioners to actively get involved in the spiritual life of the Assumption faith community.

Current projects also include the transformation of the Parish Council into a Pastoral council following diocesan guidelines. This will include establishment of parish commissions for worship, social concerns, and evangelization.

The Holy Spirit which brought together the first families of Assumption parish in **1857** for Mass with Bishop Rappe in the home of James Morrow, continues to draw together a wonderful family of believers in the closing years of the twentieth century. As members of the eternal procession of the Catholic Church through history, the parishioners of Assumption are prepared to step into the new millennium renewed in the Holy Spirit's power to continue to bring the world under the rule of Jesus Christ.