



St. Francis of Assisi Church

A Descriptive History 1850-2018

Produced by the St. Francis Communications Commission May 2018

Welcome

On behalf of our Pastor, Fr. Jack Sheaffer, the parishioners of St. Francis Church welcome you to our church! After years of hard work, dedication, and many prayers, our dream of a new church became a reality in 2004. This handout can be used to frame our historical background and provide a walking tour of our church. The following pages provide a historical reflection about the roots of Catholicism in Belchertown, a list of the many Pastors who have guided our parish, and a detailed description of the layout of our church building and many of the articles you will find throughout. On the last page is a diagram indicating description points. We hope you enjoy our church and feel as much at home in it as we do!

The Roots of Our Parish, St. Francis of Assisi

As early as 1850, Father William Blankinship would travel once a month from Cabotville (center of Chicopee, MA) to the mills of Thorndike (Palmer, MA) to offer Mass to residents and mill workers. When there was no Thorndike Mass, the faithful would walk the fifteen miles to Cabotville after working the mill on Saturday, and would return after Sunday Mass.

An early recollection states that in 1870, Mass was celebrated in the Dougherty home on Old Springfield Road. By 1879, Reverend Bartholomew McKeany, pastor at St. Bartholomew's in Bondsville would offer a monthly Mass at the Riley home which was situated on what would become the state school property.

From 1911 to 1918 Reverend Thomas Kennedy (St. Bartholomew's, Bondsville, MA) celebrated Mass in the Old Town Hall. Through 1923, Reverend James McGrath (St. Bartholomew's, Bondsville, MA) celebrated Mass there as well.

The growing parish population warranted their own structure and on October 19, 1922, Father McGrath purchased the property on Park Street for \$6000. (This property is now known as the St. Francis Parish Center.) His task was to renovate the building to house a distinct Catholic Church in Belchertown, MA.

The growing church population was eager to put their stamp on a building that began as the Brainard Meeting House in 1834; went on to host a Baptist Church from 1842 to 1900; developed into the Town Community Center; and turned into a vacant building once Lawrence Memorial Hall opened. The elaborate, first altar was donated by Dr. Eulick Sullivan in memory of his son Eulick Francis Sullivan and that is how our church came to be dedicated under the patronage of St. Francis of Assisi. The original stained-glass windows and furnishings were donated by the parishioners who were eager and grateful to have their own church. In 1924 final payment was made on the renovated building.

St. Francis of Assisi Parish Pastors

1925-1928	Reverend James Dunphy
1928-1934	Reverend Leo Rock
1934-1935	Reverend R.E. Power
1935-1938	Reverend Edmund T. Curran
1938-1942	Reverend George B. Healy
1942-1944	Reverend James J. Donoghue
1944-1951	Reverend Andrew Sullivan
1951-1969	Reverend George Dudley
1969-1972	Reverend Joseph Burke
1972-1978	Reverend Thomas Pierce
1976-1996	Reverend John Ayers
1996-2016	Reverend Vernon Decoteau
2016-present	Reverend Jack Sheaffer

The Catholic population and the parish of St. Francis of Assisi has grown as rapidly as the town of Belchertown has. During the past 93 years, the parish has been blessed to have had many dedicated and visionary Pastors, Parochial Vicars, Curates, and Assistant Priests assigned by the Bishops of Springfield to guide the faithful parishioners and understand the needs of a flourishing parish. We are grateful that these dedicated priests have focused on our parish's needs and have helped our Lord to provide.

The Evolution of St. Francis Parish Property as Recorded in Researched Archives

Our parish has grown from the humble beginnings of monthly Mass in a mill factory room to now being able to attend Mass in our magnificent Church on Jabish Street. This growth has at times been difficult, rewarding, but always phenomenal.

1922	Park Street building and property purchased by Father McGrath; vacant building renovated to be a Catholic Church.
1924	Park Street mortgage paid off.
1928	Land purchased adjacent to the Park Street St. Francis Church and Rectory constructed.
1944-1951	Church renovated and basement space converted to become the Pine Room gathering space.
1969-1971	Church renovated to reflect the changes brought on by Vatican II; aluminum siding added.
1981-1982	To increase seating capacity, structural church renovations moved the choir loft from the rear of the main floor to newly discovered second floor space; entry/exit aisle patterns were redesigned by adding a center aisle; wainscoting around inside perimeter was added; new white and natural oak pew structures replaced fading gray original pews; and the flooring was refinished.

- 1990-1996 Overcrowding during Masses resulted in need for expansion. The Pastor launched fund raising activities with the goal to purchase additional adjacent land and expand the church footprint. Land behind church that included a building on Jabish Street was purchased; unfortunately, it was determined that the land purchase could not be altered to accommodate additional church structure. The Jabish Street structure was eventually purchased by the Knights of Columbus to accommodate their organization.
- 1996-2016 In 1996, the church interior was refurbished and updated, but it was still too small for the rapidly growing parish. A pledge program to recruit donations for new land and a new church was developed. The newly established Building Committee selected and purchased land for the new church; managed primary fund-raising pledge program; worked to review and accept architectural plans; oversaw the new church building project; and dedicated the new church on Jabish Street in 2004. The Pastor went on to implement a church mortgage pledge campaign; and to work with the parishioner team to fund-raise, review, and accept architectural plans to build a new rectory behind the new St. Francis Church. The completed rectory located on the Jabish Street campus was dedicated in 2010. Within this timeframe, the Park Street building became the St. Francis Social Center and the old rectory was converted into parish office space. In early 2016, the Jabish Street entrance rock enhanced arches and carriage lighting plan was developed and the new organ committee was organized.
- 2016-present The Jabish Street entrance way project was completed and the new organ and pipes were selected, installed and dedicated in 2017. With the guidance of our Pastor, future projects continue to evolve to meet the needs of our active parish.

Church Property

When the new St. Francis Church was in the planning stages, important decisions were made about obtaining and installing sacred religious items from area churches and convents that were in the process of closing or melding. Many of these donated treasured articles were accepted and now have a second life within the walls of St. Francis Church. Although many items had rich origins in other parishes, they now continue to live on for future generations in the parish of St. Francis. Items and their origins are identified through this narrative.

The original church on Park Street on the Town Common is now the Parish Center. It houses various parishioner working groups and the Pine Room hosts many parish related breakfasts and dinners, as well as the Food Pantry Mission. The original rectory which is next to the church now houses the parish offices.

As you turn into the new church property from Jabish Street, the arched stone carriage lamp holders invite you to the driveway that prepares you for worship as it leads you into the 21-acre property, with its remarkable vistas of the Quabbin Reservoir and Swift River Hills to the east. The 218-space parking lot leads you down as an invitation to the entrance of the building. To the right is a drop off area that has handicapped parking along with parking spaces for Eucharistic Adoration adorers and clergy. This area has a walkway around the south side of the building to the chapel entrance. Nearby you will notice a large statue (24) of the Blessed Virgin Mary (moved from Park Street) and a bench in honor of the unborn child which was donated and placed there by the St. Francis Knights of Columbus.

To the left, you see wonderful open spaces for parish events and future growth of the parish. You will notice a glorious windowed gazebo (Made possible through a generous anonymous donation.) that houses 6-day devotional and 15-hour votive candle displays. (25) Nearby you will discover the devotional garden (26) to our patron St. Francis of Assisi (The

statue of St. Francis previously resided in the main entry way of our original church.) along with additional handicapped parking spaces.

The rear of the church features a beautiful partially wooded area that culminates with a scenic pond. A crucifix received from the Sisters of the Good Shepherd overlooks the pond. This scenic pond abuts the new stone trimmed rectory. The well-manicured rectory grounds have been used in the past for the annual church picnic; Father Vern's 40th Ordination anniversary celebration; to propagate bees and honey; parish centered celebrations and receptions; and even for a replicated Downton Abby Tea Party!

Church Interior (Using the diagram)

As you enter the church from underneath the portico through the front center doors, you pass through a small entry foyer (1) protecting the interior building from the outside temperatures. Here also on the opposite sides are the restrooms (2) and a small drinking water fountain. As you proceed through the entry foyer, you enter into a large Gathering Space (3) which houses the Baptismal Font. The large chandelier from our original Park Street church hangs over the Baptistry and is visible from the outside, through the large windows over the entry foyer. In the balcony area above the entry foyer are four statues. These statues are of the four evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—and were received from Mount Carmel Parish Church in Ware, which was closed and demolished in 1999.

As you look to the left of the Gathering Space, you will see the wall-mounted Ambry (4), containing the vessels of the Oil of the Sick, the Oil of Catechumen, and the Sacred Chrism, used in the celebration of various sacraments. You will next find the Vesting Sacristy for the priests (5), followed by the Founder's Memorial Tree (6), noting all donors of the parish who contributed towards the construction of the church. Flanking the tree are two plaques that list the members of the Building Steering Committee and the Fundraising Committee, respectively.

As you look to the right, you will first notice the dedication plaque (7). To the right of the Tovey Room (Named after a generous family benefactor.) door you will notice a large framed announcement case (23) which is overseen by the Communications Commission. The Tovey Room, is a meeting room (8) with a conference table, large screen television, sink, and cabinets that serves as a place for meetings, small fellowship gatherings, RCIA dismissal teachings, classroom, and as a bridal room for weddings. Lastly, you will see a cabinet on the left side wall (9) that contains the past and the new memorial books, recognizing the contributions of our parish predecessors, along with other contributors to our new church, including those memorialized by the "brick" campaign.

As your eyes are drawn towards the doors to the Sanctuary, you note the large expanse of glass surrounding the doors. Not only does this allow a visual invitation to communion, but also allows the natural light to pervade from the Gathering Space into the Sanctuary, while at the same time enabling the Gathering Space to be used for overflow crowds at Christmas and Easter, and for babies of the parish when necessary.

As you enter the Sanctuary (10), you are drawn to the Altar and the height and woodwork of the space. The pew configuration supports a fan-shaped enthronement around the altar to reflect the true feeling of "gathering at the table." The pews, coupled with individual chairs for the choir and additional flexible seating, provide a seating capacity of 650. The altar itself was received from the Sisters of the Good Shepherd following the closing of their facility on Tinkham Road in Springfield. The rear wall of the altar is made of cultured stone, with a refurbished crucifix (of German origin) received from the Passionist Monastery in West Springfield. The Holy Spirit Window located above the altar is a gift from the children of the parish weekly collection envelopes. The 12-foot diameter window faces east and was influenced by our patron St. Francis of Assisi's passage of the "Canticle of the Sun."

Looking to the left of the altar, you will notice the cantor stand and then the musical instruments and seats for our choir (11). Father Vern enlisted parishioners to begin to work as a committee on raising funds for and locating an organ.

Through these fund-raising efforts and memorial contributions in Father Vern's memory, a new organ was installed in the Spring of 2017. Here you will also see an entry way to a ramp (12), which gives access to the altar area for those who are physically challenged.

To the right of the altar, you first see a large pulpit (13). The featured tablets of St. Peter and St. Paul were gifts received from the Sisters of Providence in Holyoke. They are framed in the marble that once was the communion rails that accompanied the altar from the Sisters of the Good Shepard Chapel. The Sanctuary Lamp (14) is from St. Adalbert's Parish that was located on the South Belchertown and Bondsville town line.

To the right of the pulpit you see the antique-like glass that provides a window into the Holy Face of Jesus Eucharistic Adoration/Daily Mass Chapel (15). This small chapel houses the tabernacle and is a place for private prayer and devotion. The tabernacle is illuminated by special lighting so as to be visible from the Sanctuary. This chapel seats up to 44 and is used for daily Mass, Adoration, and other smaller special liturgies. The chapel has its own small entry vestibule, a restroom, and access to the work sacristy that lies behind the altar. It is also accessible from the Sanctuary altar area. The stained glass window depiction in the back of the chapel is based on the imagery of Jesus' face on Veronica's veil. The Ambo and Crucifix in this chapel comes from the our prior church, along with the statue of our Blessed Mother Mary, which originated from the Marian Shrine at Medjugorje.

As you continue to look around the Sanctuary, you will notice the statues and Stations of the Cross that line the walls all around the Sanctuary. The statues of the Holy Family and our patron St. Francis of Assisi, from our prior church, along with the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph, received from the Sisters of the Good Shepard, are intertwined with the Stations of the Cross, also from the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

On the eight pillars around the Sanctuary and in four places in the Gathering Space are found 12 dedication/consecration candles - symbolizing the 12 Tribes of Israel and the 12 Apostles. It is at these places that the walls of the church are anointed with Sacred Chrism. The candles are lit during the dedication ceremony; on the anniversary of the dedication; and on major feast days, such as Christmas and Easter.

The windows that flank each side of the Sanctuary provide a wonderful vista of the beautiful landscape and views of the surrounding parish property and beyond. Over time, as funds become available, some of these windows may receive stained glass. All the lower windows throughout the building allow for the placement of candles for seasonal display. You can view stained glass depictions of St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi respectively in the two round rose windows at the top of each side wall.

As you walk down the center aisle of the Sanctuary towards the altar, stop at the right pew closest (22) to the altar. Here you will notice the Presidential Seal for President George H.W. Bush and his wife Barbara. While in Kennebunkport Maine, Father Vern met them and was often invited to play the piano and sing at Walker Point and other venues attended by the President and his family. The President and Mrs. Bush would always make a generous donation to Father Vern's "construction" project; the pew's details honor these special contributions.

The Reconciliation Room is located in the left rear corner of the Sanctuary (16). This room is located here to assure as much privacy as possible. This room also functions as a religious library. Adjacent to this room is the sound, video and light equipment room (17) that houses some of the controlling equipment. There are various input/output ports throughout the building to allow for video and sound recording. The building is also wired for cable and internet access.

Located in the right rear corner is the Acolyte Vesting Room (18) where liturgical participants, such as altar servers, lectors, and Eucharistic ministers, prepare and/or vest prior to the liturgy. This room along with the chapel can also serve as additional confessionals for larger reconciliation services. Adjacent to this room is a small storage room. (19)

Unseen is the mechanical room (20) and work sacristy (21) spaces behind the altar, along with some attic space on either side of the Gathering Space. Lastly, a duct tunnel runs from the back to the front of the church on each side of the building, supporting the heating and air conditioning of the building.

