

Madalene Parish celebrates 50th anniversary

Madalene Parishioners celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Church of the Madalene Jan. 19 with a jubilee dinner to honor pastors, associate pastors, Benedictine sisters who taught in the school and charter members. As part of the celebration, a back-to-school night was held Jan. 17 for former teachers and students. Father James D. White, diocesan historian, wrote a history of the parish. Following are excerpts.

At the end of World War II, there were many young men and women who had already had their lives shaped by great and impersonal forces far away, forces that had taken shape in Europe and Japan and that had led to the vast conflagration of war. Now, with the war over, these young people were ready to marry, pick up their educations that had been interrupted or deferred, and settle into peacetime life.

Except that there were no houses for new families to move into. In 1945 Tulsa was still a very small city. It had had its time of growth between 1900 and 1930, but since the Depression there had been no gain in its population. At the end of the war the city limits were at 31st Street on the south, roughly along Lewis on the east, Apache on the north and - on the west, along the Sand Springs Line and on this side of Southwest Boulevard across the river in what was then still called Red Fork.

But all this was going to change. Developers were soon platting new subdivisions, the first to be seen in Tulsa since the late 1920's. The main growth was to the east and south, as reflected in the creation of new parishes for Tulsa's Catholic community - the Madalene (1946), Sts. Peter and Paul (1950), St. Mary's (1953), and St. Pius X (1954). Another spur to Catholic growth was a new bishop, Eugene McGuinness, who took office in 1945. An activist builder, he encouraged parish development and expansion wherever possible.

The greater part of the first post-war Tulsa parish was carved from neighboring Christ the King Parish, with Birmingham Avenue the dividing line. A smaller part was taken from the south end of St. Francis Xavier parish. The boundaries were outlined by Bishop McGuinness in a letter he wrote to the new pastor, Father James McNamee, on April 12, 1946.

James McNamee was born in County Longford, Ireland, and came to this

ideas, the permanent church was a building regarded as extremely modern. It was honored the following year with an award by the Oklahoma chapter of the American Institute of Architects.



Madalene Parish is 50 years old.

Perhaps its most remarkable feature was the terra cotta crucifix which still hangs over the altar. It is the work of Oklahoma artist Father John Leo Walch, who had been an assistant pastor at Christ the King when Father McNamee was living there. Madalene members helped him make the cross and install it, and they also designed and built the stations of the cross.

Although the Mass schedule required four services on Sunday morning, and regulations of the time did not permit Saturday evening Masses, no assistant priest was assigned to Father McNamee until 1955, when Father Joseph Carroll was given the post. Augustinian monks from Cascia Hall School helped take up the slack until then.

In 1968, after 22 years at the Madalene, Father McNamee was granted a leave of absence. He then served three years as administrator of an experimental parish, before retiring in 1972. He died Aug.

30, 1975, in Tulsa at the age of 73.

He was succeeded at the Madalene by Father John J. Sullivan, who had just returned to Oklahoma from eight years as director of the Extension Lay Volunteers, a program which he had designed to place Catholic college graduates in positions of service throughout mission areas of the United States. A gregarious man, he brought with him one newly-ordained priest, Father Dennis Dorney, and another priest, Father Thomas Biller, who had begun to suffer the effects of multiple sclerosis.

Although he was personally popular, his pastorate was marked by division in the parish over the closing of the parish school, which occurred in 1970. Costs which could no longer be contained by the unrealistically low rate of tuition to which Catholics were then accustomed, and the resulting slump in school patronage, were major causes for the closing. Another was a sense that the school had become the tail that wagged the dog, that too many parish resources were being devoted to educating a few, when many more needed to be reached.

When the school closed, the parish turned to an aggressive system of religious education under the direction of Sister Marie Pierre Fleming,



country at the age of 17. An uncle who was a priest in Missouri steered him to the Oklahoma diocese, and in 1925 he became one of the first two priests ordained by Bishop Francis Clement Kelley. As an assistant pastor at Holy Family Cathedral, he had a hand in establishing a parish for African American Catholics on Tulsa's north side, St. Monica's. He also worked in Okmulgee and Edmond before entering service as an Army chaplain in 1943.

He would always be known as a man of vision and, often, as a center of controversy. In 1935, for example, he created a stir nationwide by writing an article in the diocesan newspaper in which he advocated the use of English in the liturgy, at least in mission areas like Oklahoma. He would later be a frequent adversary of the establishment press, particularly in the field of social justice.

His first task as pastor of the Madalene was to create a place of worship for his parishioners, who numbered about 200. In the immediate post-war period, construction materials were at a premium, and so a year passed before Bishop McGuinness, on April 15, 1947, broke ground for the first parish building. It went up quickly, though, and was dedicated on Oct. 29, 1947. It was a single-room structure which doubled as a church on weekends and as a two-room school between times. The two "rooms" were created by hanging a curtain between them. Two Benedictine sisters taught two grades apiece.

The next buildings were the two that now serve as the convent and rectory, though their functions were reversed at the time, with the convent providing space for a community of four sisters. These were both opened in 1948.

As the parish grew, and the first baby-boomers reached grades one, two, and three, the school had to be expanded. A four-room addition in 1949, a two-room addition in 1951, and a final one of another two rooms in 1955 were desperate efforts to keep up with a burgeoning school population. Throughout the 1950's, the school carried some 350 students in eight grades - an average of forty-four children per class.

The centerpiece of the parish complex was built in 1953, and the bishop dedicated it on Dec. 10 of that year. In line with the pastor's cutting-edge

O.S.B., who continues to serve in this post today.

After four years at the Madalene, Father Sullivan was notified that he had been appointed bishop of Grand Island, Neb. His episcopal ordination took place on Sept. 19, 1972, in an elaborate ceremony before 4,500 persons in Tulsa's Assembly Center. Five years later he was promoted to the diocese of Kansas City, Mo., from which he retired in 1993.

Files in the chancery archives show that throughout much of Father McNamee's tenure there were numerous cases of Catholic families who had outgrown their homes in the Madalene and were relocating elsewhere in the city. Most of the letters are requests for permission from the bishop to retain their membership at the Madalene, or else (in the case of new arrivals) to take up membership there in preference to newer, less well established, parishes.

Beginning in the 1970's, however, this trend began to reverse itself. Other parishes, themselves now settled, began to seem more attractive. The move to the outlying areas continued, and some older neighborhoods found new admirers. The parish founded in 1946 on the edge of town was now in the city's center. The neighborhood, and the neighbors, were getting along in years.

This was the situation that the next two pastors, Monsignor Cecil Finn and Father Daniel Perlinski, would have to contend with between 1972 and 1996. Monsignor Finn was in his mid-60s when he came to the Madalene, having been ten years at Christ the King next door. He combined a mild demeanor with astonishing vitality and athleticism, and set a lively pace for a series of young associate pastors through the 1980's. He enjoyed robust health for so long that, when he was suddenly stricken with a series of strokes, his illness seemed all the harder for his friends and parishioners to bear.

Father Perlinski likewise brought decades of priestly experience to the Madalene when he arrived in 1988, notably as pastor in Krebs, at St. Francis Xavier in Tulsa, and at Claremore, where he built the present church, and as longtime director of the Diocesan Development Fund. Upon Father Perlinski's retirement in 1996, Bishop Edward J. Slattery appointed Father Daniel Mueggenborg to the Madalene pastorate, at the same time naming him diocesan director of education.