

St. Mary's launches \$5 million capital campaign to restore and renew historic church

BY RICK SNIZEK
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NEWPORT — The historic house of worship, where the marriage took place that produced an American First Family, leading to the storied ideals of Camelot, needs some tender loving care as it approaches its bicentennial.

St. Mary, Our Lady of the Isle Roman Catholic Church, a beacon of faith and hope in the City-by-the-Sea since its founding in 1828, has launched an ambitious, \$5 million capital campaign to support the restoration and renewal of its historic church and campus.

Titled "Remembering our Past, Building Our Future: The Bicentennial Campaign," the funds raised will support critical restoration projects at St. Mary's, the parish church of the oldest Catholic parish in the Ocean State, which will celebrate the bicentennial of its founding in 2028.

Father Mark A. Sauriol, pastor of St. Mary's, recently joined campaign chair Chuck Kenahan in leading several gatherings in the church's bucolic courtyard designed to inform parishioners about St. Mary's urgent infrastructure needs, including structural repairs to ensure long-term preservation, and enhancements to accessibility and safety.

"As stewards of this extraordinary house of worship, we are called to honor its history while ensuring its strength for future generations," said Father Sauriol. "This campaign is not just about bricks and mortar. It's about laying a solid foundation for the next 200 years—deepening our fellowship, preserving our sacred spaces, and expanding our ability to serve."

Father Sauriol said he was deeply grateful for the blessings, prayers and countless ways that his flock already give of themselves for the life of the parish, calling special attention to the efforts of more than 125 volunteers who gave of their time over the summer to launch the capital campaign.

"I truly feel blessed to be here," he said.

Bishop Bruce A. Lewandowski, C.Ss.R., attended one of the sessions, offering the opening prayer before praising the efforts of Father Sauriol in caring for the needs of his parish.

"Father Mark is amazing," he said to a round of applause for the pastor.

"I want to thank you for your leadership and pastoral care of the people here and for your vision and foresight, for looking not only to the needs of the church in the present but the future. Our diocese is grateful to you, for your ministry and your priesthood and for the powerful example that you offer to all of us. Count on my prayers and support for you and your parishioners in this wonderful campaign that you've launched."

Bishop Lewandowski spoke of how he especially liked the part of the campaign's prayer that calls us all the body of Christ, and that we are all one together.

"What it reminds us of is that we're all family, we're all together, and that really not one of us alone is as good as all of us are together. And that together in forming the body of Christ, great, awesome, amazing, and wonderful things can happen."

"This is our oldest parish, and we want to see it have a brilliant future and you're making that happen. So, God bless you, may God watch over you and always keep you in his care."

In 2023, the St. Mary's Preservation Committee hired DVBW Architects to complete a review of the church, rectory and parish

center. The study included three-dimensional laser scans, infrared thermography and high-resolution photography, and many areas of immediate and long-term need were identified, especially along the church's roof and upper windows, where the slate tiles and stonework have deteriorated.

Kenahan, a member of the finance council, has been working closely with Father Sauriol, and a cadre of volunteers, to promote the ambitious capital campaign.

He said that since he came to St. Mary's, Father Sauriol has had a vision of opening the church to more people beyond the local parish community.

"When the doors opened, people came. He did it for worshippers, he did it for tourists, he did it for the curious, and he also obviously also did it for our neighbors in need," Kenahan said.

"We now realize, through this Ambassador Program, that we have truly a global presence. People come from all over the world to see this. As stewards, we must not only restore the church, but we need to share it with others. I actually think this is our true calling, to share and inspire others."

In 2022, the pastor launched the parish's Ambassador Club program, with a goal of making "this beautiful church accessible to the people of God who visit from all over the world," Father Sauriol told Rhode Island Catholic at the time. "People were coming by and trying the doors to the church at all hours. I couldn't walk from my car to the rectory without someone asking if they could go inside to say a prayer. It was heartbreaking to say the church was locked outside of weekend Masses, funerals or weddings."

That summer, thanks to the efforts of more than 50 parish ambassadors, the doors to St. Mary's were kept open all week long, welcoming 300 new visitors a week to the historic and storied house of worship, perhaps best known as the church where future U.S. President John F. Kennedy wed Jacqueline Bouvier beneath its soaring arches in 1953.

Kenahan said that the proceeds of the last capital campaign, in 2001, replaced the roof, which was to last for 25 years.

"And here we are 25 years later," he said, holding up a deteriorated piece of roofing material brought down for examination by the contractors in the review process.

Tom Dolce, of Guidance in Giving, which oversaw the \$50 million capital campaign for the Diocese of Providence, is leading the St. Mary's campaign.

Dolce asked the gatherings at St. Mary's to serve as cheerleaders for their historic parish to the local community and beyond and to pray for the success of the campaign.

"Five million dollars is a lot of money, but we know your parish can do it," Dolce said, noting how some overseas donations from those who've enjoyed their visits to St. Mary's had already been pledged.

Bishop Lewandowski said he had great confidence in the pastor's leadership and for the selfless efforts of so many at St. Mary's.

"I'm grateful for the leadership of Father Mark and his team here, they have great vision and enthusiasm, and I think their campaign is going to be a great success," said the bishop.



Photos: Rick Snizek

'REMEMBERING OUR PAST, BUILDING OUR FUTURE': The historic St. Mary's Church in Newport, the wedding site of John F. Kennedy and Jackie Bouvier, has launched a \$5 million Bicentennial Campaign to fund crucial infrastructure repairs. The effort seeks to restore the building's roof and stonework, ensuring the parish can continue its ministry and welcome visitors up to its 200th anniversary in 2028. Bishop Bruce A. Lewandowski, C.Ss.R., recently visited the parish during one of the campaign's informational sessions.