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St. Patrick in Norristown celebrates 175 years



Father William Murphy, pastor estimates more than 1,200 families are part of the St. Patrick parish family.

By Lou Baldwin
Special to The CS&T

NORRISTOWN — A hundred dollars was a lot of money in the 1830s, well beyond the means of most Irish immigrants. That was the founding population for St. Patrick Church, Norristown, the mother parish for Montgomery County. Many of the founders were drawn to the area for work in construction of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad.

According to parish history, when Patrick Flynn donated that sum for start up costs in 1834, in gratitude founding pastor Father David Mulholland placed the parish under the patronage of St. Patrick. This probably also pleased Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick, who was coadjutor bishop for Philadelphia at the time.

Before the parish was founded Father Charles Carter came up from St. John in Manayunk to celebrate Mass, first at the local Episcopal Church and then at Flynn's home.

The first church, completed in 1839, was built at Washington Street above Cherry Street on land donated by mill owner Bernard McCready. The parish flourished, and a new, larger church at Lafayette and Cherry streets was completed in 1864, during the Civil War.

The Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary arrived in 1875 to run a parish school, which flourished to the point that in 1941 a parish high school opened, the forerunner of Kennedy-Kenrick High School.

In the 1890s the parish was forced to relocate once more because construction of the Pennsylvania Railroad directly in front of the church made the site virtually unusable. The parish sued and was awarded \$24,000 by the courts which helped Father Thomas Shannon to build a church and school on the present site at 700 DeKalb Street.

This beautiful church was dedicated in 1907. When Cardinal Justin Rigali celebrated the 175th parish anniversary Mass on Jan. 10, the Mass was bilingual, English and Spanish, and that is fitting.

Complementing the Irish roots, as early as the Civil War African-Americans were part of the parish family, and by 1895 Father Shannon was arranging for confessions in Polish, Hungarian, Italian, French and German. By the 1970s Hispanics began arriving, at first from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Costa Rica and El Salvador. There are also Haitians, Africans from Cameroon and Chinese. But hands down the largest single ethnicity today is Mexican, which now comprises the majority of the parishioners. To accommodate this, the parish has two weekend Spanish Masses.

Jack Wolper's family moved into the parish in 1935 when he was in third grade, and he finished school there. Family roots go further back; his uncle, Pat McNamara, was a carpenter who helped build the church.

"The school had a nice environment and the I.H.M. sisters were very thorough," Wolper said. His wife Doris came in 1943 when her family arrived from Canada, and their six children all attended the school, which has since closed.

"It's always been a good parish. Priests and nuns hated to leave," Wolper said. The parish is multinational, but still very friendly and the people get along with each other, he and his wife agreed.

Therese Kehoe's family arrived in 1945. Although she's seen many families move away, "It's unbelievable the number of people who no longer live here who come back for Mass," she said. "All my children still live in Norristown and all were married at St. Patrick's; they wouldn't go anywhere else."

Oraida Garcia and her husband Raimundo are Cuban and among the earlier Hispanics to arrive in Norristown.

"We came about 1972," she said. "Then there was a Spanish Mass only once a month." In addition to Mass there was a Spanish prayer group, retreats and activities for kids.

"It's a wonderful parish. Father Murphy's homilies in Spanish are really good," she said.

Multi-ethnicity leads to multiple festivals. There is an annual Irish festival, a Mass of the Golden Rose for Our Lady of Knock; a December celebration for Our Lady of Guadalupe; a fair for Cinco de Mayo; and a celebration of the feast of St. Patrick.

Father William Murphy, who has been pastor of St. Patrick's for seven years, estimates he has about 1,200 families, but it's hard to pin down a precise figure because many of the immigrant people come from areas where registering with a parish is not the custom.

Social outreach has always been part of the fabric of the parish and the Patrician Society, which is similar to a St. Vincent de Paul group, assists people in many ways. **The Missionary Sisters of Charity, Mother Teresa's congregation, occupies the parish convent and parishioners volunteer with their program (shelter for women and children, 610-278-9089, 630 DeKalb Street, Norristown, PA 19401).** There is also outreach to several nursing homes in the area.

Disciples in Mission is thriving with six groups that meet monthly, but weekly during Advent and Lent. The Fortnighters, another group, contrary to their name, meets weekly. There is the Spanish prayer group, Circulo de Oración, and the Spanish Masses are so well-attended seats had to be added to the choir loft. At this point the parish is relatively stable, but new arrivals still come from afar.

"We began with Irish immigrants; St. Patrick's has always been welcoming. We are alive and very active," Father Murphy said.

Lou Baldwin is a member of St. Leo Parish and a freelance writer.