

RESOURCES:

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Perseverance in Faith: A History of the Catholic Church in Western North Dakota. Diocese of Bismarck, Centennial Edition 1910-2010. Page 142.

St. Mary's Parish Family Directory. United Church Directories, Galion, Ohio. 1997.

St. Mary's Parish Family Directory. Lifetouch Church Directories and Portraits. Galion, Ohio. 2006

In 1873, the Bismarck Tribune announced the construction of a Catholic Church in Bismarck. Thomas Fortune, a resident of the village, gave \$1,400, proceeds from a Fourth of July picnic, to Abbot Martin Marty to build the church. Bismarck was the first town built by the white settlers in western Dakota and St. Mary's Parish grew up with the town. In 1875 a tornado-ruined frame church was shipped in on the new railroad from Detroit Lakes, MN. It stood on west Main Street. St. Mary's was the first church built in Bismarck. Construction began in the fall of 1874 and continued through the spring of 1875. Catholics, as well as non-Catholics, worked on the building of St. Mary's.

St. Mary's Academy was begun in 1878.

Father John Baptiste Marie Genin accepted as his challenge the construction of the first Catholic Church in Bismarck, working side-by-side with the laborers. He apparently possessed the patience of the saint for who he was named. The priest encountered many difficulties with constructing the building, including the challenges of working with the unskilled labor force he personally supervised.

An historical account stated, "One great cause of annoyance was that when the building was raised and enclosed, it swayed to one side, and when, with great effort, it was restored to its proper equilibrium, it would sway correspondingly to the other side."

In the early 1880s, St. Mary's membership was approximately 30 families. The pews and altar were made by a parish member. To raise money for the first church organ, the early parishioners gathered for a quilt raffle and a church supper. An altar Society was formed, and each member was obligated to donate 20 cents quarterly to defray the costs. The first resident priest of St. Mary's was Fr. Chrysostom Foffa, O.S.B. He had been an Indian missionary at Ft. Yates and had visited Bismarck on occasion. In 1877 he was stationed there by Bishop Martin Marty. In his three year stay, Foffa added a wooden school, convent and rectory to the church.

The Benedictine Sisters came from Minnesota to staff the school. Their first students came from the Irish families that made up the Catholic population of early Bismarck, but many non-Catholics also attended since St. Mary's was the best school in town.

In 1881, St. John's Abbey in Minnesota began staffing St. Mary's. Fr. Paul Rittenmayer worked in Bismarck for several years. His successors, Frs. Alfred Mayer and Wolfgang Steinkogler, found the school building so dilapidated that they virtually closed the institution. The Sisters went back to Minnesota.

But Fr. Martin Schmitt, another Benedictine priest who became pastor in 1890, reopened the school and the Sisters returned. The parish was flourishing. This provoked a serious conflict in the parish, for some parishioners wanted a new church instead. They even held a fair to raise money for the purpose. By now Bishop John Shanley was involved. He called it a “rebel fair” and backed the priest.

The last Benedictine pastor of St. Mary’s, Fr. Clemens Dimpfl, arrived in 1896. With the help of the church’s trustees, he quickly acquired land on 8th St. and Broadway Ave. for a new church. In July 1897, the foundation for the new church was laid, and in October, a rough framework was constructed. The new frame building cost \$12,000 and was dedicated on September 25, 1898, by Bishop Shanley. This is the frame of the present brick building. The 1902 church yearbook read that the church was “substantially constructed, the foundation being solid rock. The main edifice is in the form of a cross, with an addition of a sanctuary and three sacristies on the north side. It is 125 feet long and has a tower of 114 feet. It is noteworthy that the stained glass windows were almost all donated by women. The most expensive is placed over the original main entrance of the church. It is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, portraying the image of the Miraculous Medal. It was given by Medora, the widow of the Marquis de Mores in his memory.

The Benedictions of St. Mary’s were actually pastors for much of central North Dakota. Fr. Clemens listed the following towns as missions-stations: Williamsport, Napoleon, Livona, Sterling, Dawson, Tappen, Menoken, Turtle Lake and Painted Woods. In 1906, he was released from outside responsibilities and kept “only” St. Mary’s, the Penitentiary, Fort Lincoln and the Indian School.

St. John’s Abbey had originally bought the block between 9th and 10th Sts. on Broadway for a college. Now St. Mary’s acquired that land for a school. It was a brick structure from the first, with eight classrooms on the first floor and the nuns’ quarters on the second floor. The top floor was for boarding students. The pastor saw to it that it was a solid building, with hardwood floors and steep ceilings. It cost \$25,000 and was dedicated in 1908.

It would be fitting to call St. Mary’s the “mother church of the diocese.” In 1910, Abbot Vincent Wehrle, O.S.B. of Richardton, became the first Bishop of Bismarck which was the center of the diocese in western North Dakota. This meant change for St. Mary’s, for Wehrle used it for his ProCathedral. St. Mary’s was given this title and served as the bishop’s church until a new cathedral building was built under Bishop Ryan and dedicated on August 30, 1945. He brought in Fr. M.J. Hiltner from Mt. Carmel, ND, as his Vicar-General. Fr. Hiltner also became pastor of St. Mary’s. The major building change during his time in Bismarck involved the erection of a new rectory. It is the one still in use today, though now houses lay staff offices and parish ministers.

In 1918, the rectory was built to become the home of the various priests’ who served St. Mary’s Parish. Today, the rectory houses a number of offices for the current parish staff.

His successor was Fr. John Slag, who also assisted Bishop Wehrle. Fr. Slag, who arrived in 1921, was responsible for adding the brick veneer to the church in 1923. 1927 was the 50th Anniversary of the parish, so the school children contributed enough to purchase a two manual pipe organ for the church. “The year 1927 witnessed the solemn celebration of the whole parish of 50 years of faithful service and loyalty rendered to Almighty God,” Father Slag wrote in the church’s history. “It is a glorious manifestation of steady growth and progress.” Bishop Wehrle wrote in the foreword to the history, “For me, personally, working as a priest for years among the pioneers of the west has been a fountain of joy, because I could witness, how in western

North Dakota the biggest number of Catholics preserved the light of faith in all its brightness and raised God-fearing sturdy families..." There were 310 families in the parish at that time.

Meanwhile, St. Mary's school was bursting at the seams. A high school department was begun in 1916 and it continued to grow. There were over 500 students in 1927, taught by 24 Benedictine Sisters. In 1931, an addition was build which doubled the size of the school. It cost the parish \$65,000.

If Fr. Slag was intense, his predecessor was the opposite, easy going and know to start singing an Irish ditty at a moment's notice. Fr. Robert Feehan became the pastor of St. Mary's in 1933. His pastorate lasted 41 years, until 1974. He was the prototypical Irish pastor – kind, social, even a notable tenor! Innumerable young priests assisted him at St. Mary's and all of them got a good start in their priestly careers from him. His appeal was universal. Catholics and non-Catholics alike enjoyed his company so much so they held "Bismarck Thanks Monsignor Feehan Day" in 1969 "just because..." Msgr. Feehan took charge of the church during the height of the Depression, when both people and parishes struggled to survive. He had an undeterred faith in the impossible becoming probable, the probable becoming reality. He died in his rectory from heart failure on September 9, 1981, at the age of 83. He is buried at St. Mary's Cemetery.

Bismarck itself underwent important changes during his long tenure. After the Second World War, it triples in size. Many of the newcomers were Catholics from the surrounding hinterland. This meant that St. Mary's changed from an Irish to a German-Russian ethnic group. It also meant that new parishes had to be created. Cathedral parish was separated in 1946, St. Anne's was founded in 1957 and finally Ascension Church was built on the south side in 1974.

Meanwhile, St. Mary's itself was growing and changing. A new convent was built on the same block as the church in 1958. It housed 15 nuns. In keeping with the responsibilities to the church, St. Mary's Parish Council and parishioners embarked in 1971 on a remodeling project of the church building. The objective of the remodeling effort was to simplify the interior with the same color scheme – white- and add more modern motif with new fixtures and wood battens – narrow strips of wood flooring. The church was blessed on July 11, 1971, during a morning Mass by the Most Rev. Hillary B. Hacker, then Bishop of Bismarck.

Today St. Mary's is the oldest parish in Bismarck. Nevertheless, it is not withering away or basking in past glories. Fr. Ted Gustin, who came here in 1974, indicated that the parish has fully integrated the pastoral vision of Vatican II and is experiencing revitalization. He was already familiar with the parish, having served as assistant pastor.

In 1977, the old school and its lot were sold to St. Alexius Hospital, and a new school was built north of the church. The school building and parish center were constructed to include nine classrooms, a library, office and a large multi-purpose gym/parish hall. Today St. Mary's Grade School has over 200 students and 15 lay teachers.

Fr. Gustin said that the parish council is no less than 20 members: "We hope that we have the largest Parish Council in Christendom!" The Council has undertaken the Evangelization program (1980) as it way into the future.

This program has as its purpose and goal the creation of neighborhood units in which parishioners can get to know each other. In this way, an anonymity of the city parish is somewhat broken through, and human community can form.

Out of this approach have come several specialized groups in St. Mary's Parish: three prayer groups, one Scripture study group; a pre-school religion group; and a group for divorced, separated and widowed spouses.

Fr. Charles (Charlie) Heidt became pastor in 1988 after Fr. Gustin. "Beyond the self-evident beauty of the church, this building speaks more of the people and their commitment of faith. I'm sure when they started they only filled a few pews. What hopes they must have had. What dreams they must have had. We have a beautiful church because of them." When Fr. Charlie looks at his parishioners, he recognizes "the tremendous working of the Spirit. I am so overwhelmed with what the Spirit is saying. They might give me credit, but I give credit to the Spirit."

Many renovations have taken place at St. Mary's. The parish began another remodeling of the church building in the early 1990s with an ambitious fund-raising goal - \$520,000. Consultants tried to dissuade the church from such a large goal. The parishioners explained of the needs and approximately \$500,000 was donated to the fund drive by the time remodeling began. The goal of the refurbishing was to restore the church to its original gothic architecture, characterized by its vaulted ceiling and pointed arches. In this church, our spiritual home, a people of common faith have gathered for 100 years to hear the word of the Lord. Under its Gothic arches and ornate stained glass windows, they have shared hopes, dreams and disappointments as they sought consolation and assurance of a power far greater than their own.

In 2003, St. Mary's Parish completed renovation, under the direction of Fr. Charlie Heidt, of the priest's residence, gathering space, multi-purpose space and music/art room, handicapped access to the rectory and sanctuary and new restrooms. The grounds were landscaped and new concrete walks and decorative planters were installed. The priest's residence was remodeled to accommodate the arrival of our newest pastor, Fr. Bruce Krebs. (2004-2008)

Fr. Gene Lindemann, a native of Dickinson, became pastor in 2008. In 2013, Fr. Gene was named Monsignor by Pope Benedict upon the recommendation of Bishop David Kagan. Msgr. Gene continues to shepherd our parish family as well holds a number of ministerial roles at the Diocesan level.

In August 2014, Fr. Robert Shea joined our staff as associate pastor. Fr. Robert, a Hazelton farm boy, also teaches religious studies courses at St. Mary's Central High School and is the Diocesan Ethicist.

In 2014, St. Mary's Parish had a membership of over 1,200 households.