

Parish History



The 1840's – A Time for New Beginning

The history of St. Mary of the Assumption parish developed alongside the history of Lawrence, Massachusetts. The thousands of immigrants who came to the New World in search of freedom, opportunity and a safe environment for their families also search for a church to worship their Creator.

St. Mary parish is a symbol of the priests, religious and laity who labored in the Merrimack Valley for over 150 years with fervor and ardor. Our parish church is a monument to the humility and generosity, as well as to the Christian piety and devotion of its people, religious and priests. All the hard work, prayers and courage made the people of Lawrence and St. Mary of the Assumption a community of God-loving people.

The Merrimack Valley was instrumental in the development of one of the largest textile centers in the world. The Catholic immigrants who came to the Merrimack Valley in 1846 played a major role in the development of the textile center and in the City of Lawrence.

As time passed, the immigrants came from different countries making our city and parish community

rich in cultural diversity. Hundreds of Irish immigrants came to America to begin a new life and to raise their families in the land of freedom. They were so happy to be here that they took jobs wherever they could. They worked on the farms, in the valley, and in all the mills throughout the city to support their families. The Irish people soon discovered that life was not easy in the New World. They noticed immediately the discrimination directed towards them simply because there were Irish immigrants, and they belonged to the Catholic Church. The history of discrimination against the Boston Catholics, as well as those living in the Merrimack Valley, is well known. It was these courageous, God-loving, hardworking people that established the foundation of our magnificent parish.

Sowing the Seeds of Catholicism

Rev. Charles French, who was born in Ireland, was the first Catholic priest to minister in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He was the son of a Protestant minister. In those days, only Protestant heirs could collect from their father's property, so Rev. Charles French and his brother Edmond, who later became a Catholic Bishop, could not collect from the family estate.

Father French came to Lawrence as a missionary in 1846 to care for the religious needs of Irish families. He spent all his time helping the Irish people, and encouraging them not to lose hope. Because Catholics in Lawrence at the time had to walk to Lowell if they wanted to go to Mass, in 1846 Father French built a small wooden church for Catholic worship on Chestnut Street near the site of the old Immaculate Conception Church.

Rev. James H.D. Taafe, a significant person in the history of the Catholic Church in Lawrence, was born in 1800 in County Mayo, Ireland. He was a Friar in the Dominican community. Father Taafe traveled to India with an uncle who was a British army officer, and lived there for several years. He returned to Ireland and entered a Catholic seminary to study for the priesthood. He served as a Superior of the Dominican community for eight years at the Immaculate Conception Church, the first Catholic Church in Lawrence.

One of the most distinguishing traits in the character of Father Taafe, was his wonderful spirit of charity. During the winter of 1857, the people of Lawrence suffered with continued unemployment. Father Taafe worked together with the first Pastor of St. Mary, Father James O'Donnell, O.S.A., to help the people of their parishes.

But the great outlet of his charity was the Catholic Friends Society. The Friends had about one thousand members helping the poor. We understand the charity of this Society when we compare it to the present day St. Vincent de Paul Society. Father Taafe was the president of the Catholic Friends Society. He was director of the male Sodality and founder of the Male Sodalist Cornet Band.

Building the First Churches

In 1854, he began building a new church. Father Taafe had a new bell put in the church tower in 1861. He built the "Protectory of Mary Immaculate", an orphan asylum and home for invalids. On the completion of the asylum, it was placed under the charge of the Sisters of Charity, of Montreal – Grey

Nuns, and dedicated on February 9, 1868.

Father Taafe died a little over a month later. He is buried in the same lot at St. Mary-Immaculate Conception Cemetery as his friend and co-worker, Father Charles Ffrench.

The Catholic Church began to grow beyond St. Mary-Immaculate Conception.

Rev. M.J.L. Doherty, who served under Father Taafe, was appointed administrator of the Immaculate Conception Church. During this time, he oversaw the building of St. Michael Church in North Andover, Massachusetts that was dedicated in March of 1869.

In 1869, Fr. William Orr was assigned to take Father Doherty's place at the Immaculate Conception Church. With the support of his people, Father Orr saw the beginning of St. Patrick Church in South Lawrence, a wooden structure that was dedicated on March 17, 1870.

In 1872, Father Orr bought land at the corner of Essex and Union Street in Lawrence where he built the original St. Laurence O'Toole Church, Site of the present Corpus Christi Parish. Archbishop John J. Williams dedicated this church on July 12, 1873.

The first Pastor of St. Mary Church was the Rev. James O'Donnell, O.S.A. Father O'Donnell was born on April 13, 1806 in County Tipperary, Ireland. After receiving his degrees in philosophy and theology, he was ordained a priest in New York in 1837.

He was assigned to St. Augustine Parish in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Because of the social problems in Philadelphia at the time, he had to flee the city to save his life. He traveled to Europe for a few months to avoid the "know-nothing" mobs in Philadelphia.

The Augustinian community assigned Father O'Donnell as the first past of St. Mary Church in 1848. After his arrival to Lawrence he celebrated his first mass in what was known as "Merrimack Hall" on the corner of Common and Jackson Street. This hall was in need of serious repairs.

Father O'Donnell soon procured land on Haverhill Street in Lawrence, and here he built a wooden chapel where he celebrated Mass on the first Sunday of January 1849. This is considered to be the first Mass celebrated in St. Mary Church. The wooden chapel was not completed. Snow was falling on the people as Father O'Donnell spoke from a pulpit, which was nothing more than a stack of shingles.

The wooden church proved to be inadequate and Father O'Donnell began construction of the stone church on the outside of the chapel, which was completed in 1853. Seven years later, this building was discovered to be inadequate was and extended to Oak Street. Bishop Fitzpatrick blessed the new church on January 10, 1861. This building became St. Mary Boy's School.

Father O'Donnell worked every day helping the poor of the parish. He founded several parish associations to help the young people. He formed St. Mary Young Men's Society for the intellectual and moral improvement of the young men in the parish.

Welcoming the Sisters of Notre Dame

On August 20, 1859, five Notre Dame sisters arrived in Lawrence from Cincinnati, Ohio. Through arrangements made by Father O'Donnell, they took up residence in a small wooden house on the site of the former St. Mary High School. This was their home for thirty-three years.

Until this day, the parish experiences the effects of the pastorate of Father O'Donnell, especially in the ministry of the Sisters of Notre Dame, which continues to the present time.

St. Julie Billiart founded the Sisters, in Namur, Belgium, for the primary purpose of educating the young and working with the poor.

For 140 years, the Sisters of Notre Dame have positively influenced the lives of thousand of students and parishioners in our parish.

Through their contact with the children of the grade school and the young girls of St Mary High School, they have created a strong bond of friendship, kindness and deep respect for Catholic values.

Because of the long association with the young girls of the parish, the Sisters have seen many young women enter the religious life in various religious Orders of the Catholic Church. They have seen many women take on responsibilities with their families and in other aspects of society to continue the ideals of St. Julie. The Sisters still serve our parish in the grammar school, and in the Notre Dame Education Center, which primarily ministers to the new immigrants of Lawrence. We will be grateful always for their labors in education, and for aiding in the development of the spirituality of those with whom they came in contact.

Two years after the arrival of the Sisters of Notre Dame, the first Superior of St. Mary Convent, Sister Constance, founded the Sacred Heart Sodality, a group of thirty-three unmarried women. The membership was kept at thirty-three to commemorate the years of the life of Jesus. In 1880, the men of the parish were invited to join the sodality. In later years, for one reason or another, the men withdrew from membership.

Bonding Together in Sodalities

It is noted with interest that as far back as the first years of the parish, the laity have been encouraged to be involved in the parish. In 1861, Father O'Donnell established The Holy Family Sodality, and the Blessed Virgin Sodality.

The mission of the Holy Family Sodality was to sanctify the home and preserve its stability. The Catholic home was seen as the basic social unit where children learned from their parents and siblings.

The Blessed Virgin Mary Sodality was an association of Catholics whose members united under the special patronage of Mary. The young men and women of the parish comprised the main body of the

Sodality. The purpose of the Sodality was to live exemplary lives as Christians through a profound devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Social functions such as whist parties, plays and lectures were also enjoyed.

Father O'Donnell built a church for the Catholics of Andover, Massachusetts where he celebrated Mass every Sunday.

He died on April 7, 1861.

The Tribune reported that:

"It is recorded that the City wept and bewailed the loss of an honest and upright citizen. The Editors in this city, throughout the State and in the various corners of the Nation made record of his death".

The Augustinian Community assigned Rev. Ambrose A. Mullen, O.S.A. as the second Pastor of the St. Mary parish in 1861. He served the parish during the entire Civil War. Through hard work and strong faith, he led his people and continued the good work of Father O'Donnell. Father Mullen was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1827. He received his early education in New York and entered the Augustinian Novitiate in Tolentino, Italy. Upon his return from Italy, he was ordained a priest in 1857.

Father Mullen served as Professor of mathematics at Villanova College and later became President of Villanova, which in 1842 was one of the first apostolates the Augustinians established in the United States.

Although Rev. Louis M. Edge, O.S.A., St. Mary's third Pastor, only served five years, his short tenure was extremely significant in our history. It is Father Edge who is primarily responsible for the building of our present church.

Father Edge was born in 1825 in County Tipperary, Ireland where he received his early education. Father came to the United States in 1847. He entered the Augustinian order in Philadelphia in 1853.

He studied Theology at Villanova College. The Bishop of Philadelphia, who today is known as Saint John Neumann, ordained him a priest.

Founding the St. Vincent de Paul Society

In August 1865 Father Edge came to Lawrence as the third pastor of St. Mary Church. He immediately conceived the idea of building a beautiful new church. The people supported him and his ideas, plans and hard work began. Archbishop John J. Williams laid the cornerstone of the new St. Mary Church on August 19, 1866.

Shortly thereafter he opened a school for young boys under the care of the Sisters of Notre Dame and converted the old church into a boy's school. In 1867, Father Edge established the St. Vincent de Paul Society to help the poor of the parish.

The St. Vincent de Paul Society is "Catholic Action" at its best. The members very quietly respond to the

needs of the poor in the parish. This may take the form of providing clothes for the poor, Christmas presents for children who would receive none, paying the rent for the unemployed, providing furniture for those who lost everything in a fire, helping with medicine and doctor bills, etc. This Society has continued for over 130 years in our parish because of the generosity of men like Fr. Edge in the 1860s, William X. Wall in the 1970s, Father Jim Elliott in the 1980s, Father Bob Hickey in the early 1990's and Jose McDonough, Helen Whitman, John Stundza, Leo Rancourt, Al Willett, and Father Frank Barr, O.S.A. at the present time.

Sadly, however, Father Edge never saw the results of his hard work in building the new church. He went to Philadelphia to make arrangements for its dedication. While there, the open carriage he was driving overturned and he was seriously hurt. He developed a serious head injury from that accident, and died on February 24, 1870.

Father Edge's body arrived in Lawrence for his funeral four days later.

Following the death of Father Edge, Rev. Thomas Galberry, O.S.A., who was serving as provincial of the Augustinians at that time, became fourth pastor of St. Mary parish.

Father Galberry was born in County Kildare, Ireland in 1833, came to the United States and entered Villanova College in 1849. He was accepted into the Augustinian Order in 1852, and was ordained a priest on December 20, 1856 by Bishop John Neumann who was later canonized a saint in the Church. Upon his arrival in Lawrence, Father Galberry directed the completion of the new church building. He celebrated a solemn High Mass on the occasion of the blessing and the raising of the cross on June 18, 1871.

Dedicating the New Saint Mary Church

Archbishop John J. Williams solemnly dedicated the new St. Mary Church on September 3, 1871. Its statistics are still impressive. St. Mary Church cost over \$200,000.00 to construct. It is of Gothic style architecture and it is constructed of granite brought from the quarries of Maine and New Hampshire. The dimensions of the Church are like a cathedral: The length of the building along Haverhill Street is 210 feet; it is 80 feet wide, except at transept where it is 102 feet wide. The steeple is 225 feet high. The top of the Cross which surmounts it is 235 feet from the ground which makes it fifteen feet higher than the Bunker Hill Monument.

Father Galberry's career in the priesthood was also impressive. In 1872, he became President of Villanova College. On March 15, 1875, Father Galberry was named by the Holy Father to be Bishop of Hartford, Connecticut. Archbishop John J. Williams of Boston installed him on March 19, 1876 as the fourth Bishop of Hartford.

Most Rev. Thomas Galberry, O.S.A., Bishop of Hartford, Connecticut, died on October 10, 1878 at the young age of 45. He had served as Bishop for only two years.

When Father Galberry was named President of Villanova, Rev. John P. Gilmore, O.S.A. succeeded him as

pastor of St. Mary parish. Father Gilmore began his service at St. Mary on July 2, 1872. In his nine-year tenure, Father Gilmore oversaw many physical improvements to the Church. He continued the plans of building a rectory (friary) begun by Father Galberry. The Augustinians moved into their new rectory (friary) on October 5, 1873.

Father Gilmore installed a full chime of sixteen bells in 1874, making St. Mary Church of Lawrence the only church in Massachusetts with a full peal of chimes. Archbishop John J. Williams blessed the chimes on Sunday, December 13, 1874, and they rang for the first time on Christmas Day of that year.

They had been installed by the William Blake Company of Boston. Bell No. 1, for example, weighed 3200 pounds. At the other end of the chime, Bell No. 16 weighed 130 pounds. All bells together weighed 14,730 pounds and for generations, the chimes, Lawrence's own "bells of St. Mary's" gave all the parishioners who have given of their savings to make them possible, a strong sense of pride. The bells cost approximately \$10,000.00.

A significant period in the history of St. Mary parish was when Rev. William H. Fitzpatrick was assigned as the new pastor of the Immaculate Conception Church on June 22, 1875. He became unhappy with the problems that challenged him, and eventually asked the Archbishop for another assignment.

Expanding Augustinian Responsibilities

The Archbishop of Boston offered the ministry of the Immaculate Conception Church and its mission, St. Laurence O'Toole, to the Augustinian community.

Father Galberry, the Augustinian Provincial at the time, accepted the offer of the Archbishop. The Augustinians became responsible for the spiritual care of all Catholics north of the Merrimack River. At the time, the Augustinians were also ministering to the spiritual needs of Catholics in the mission of Methuen and Andover. Father Gilmore was the first priest from St. Mary to celebrate Mass in Methuen. This took place on Christmas Day in 1876 in the Methuen Town Hall.

During his pastorate he accomplished many things.

Father Gilmore erected a small wooden church in 1878 in the Tower Hill section of Lawrence, named St. Augustine, under the jurisdiction of the Augustinians of St. Mary parish. The first Mass was said at the corner of Water and Doyle Streets on Christmas Day, 1879.

Father Gilmore opened St. Mary's new parish hall on October 12, 1870. About a year later, on September 19, 1880, he opened St. Mary's new school. The school had a beautiful chapel on the first floor in addition to a parish hall. There were sixteen classrooms on the second floor. There were also several rooms on the third floor. In September 1881, Father Gilmore was assigned to St. Mary parish in Waterford, New York and Rev. Daniel D. Regan, O.S.A., who was serving at the Immaculate Conception Church, was assigned as the sixth pastor of St. Mary Church. Father Regan served for five years.

Welcoming Lawrence's Legendary Leader

In 1886 the parish saw the beginning of close to four decades of service as pastor by Rev. James T. O'Reilly, O.S.A. Father O'Reilly was one of the most prominent priests who ever served the Catholic Church in the Merrimack Valley. When people discuss the history of the Church in Lawrence, they immediately think of Father O'Reilly. His leadership, his courage and his love of the people of Lawrence made him a community giant.

Father O'Reilly was born in 1851 in Lansingburg, New York. He was the son of Michael and Mary (McGrane) O'Reilly.

After completing his undergraduate studies at Villanova College in 1861, he entered the Augustinian Novitiate. He received his degrees in Philosophy and Theology and was ordained to the priesthood on March 15, 1874 at the very young age of 23.

Father O'Reilly was professor of mathematics at Villanova College, then served as Pastor of St. John parish, Schaghticoke, New York from 1879 to 1886, when he was assigned as pastor of St. Mary parish.

At this time, there was an increase of German immigrants in the city. Father O'Reilly responded to this need in 1887 with the beginnings of the Assumption parish.

In 1891, ground was broken for the convent building for the Sisters of Notre Dame on the corner of Hampshire and Haverhill Streets. The convent opened for the Sisters after blessing ceremonies were led by Archbishop John J. Williams and Father O'Reilly on December 21, 1893. It was only the beginning of a long list of his accomplishments here.

In 1897, Father O'Reilly made a complete renovation of the exterior of the Immaculate Conception Church and added a new tower. Just a few years later, in 1920, the basement of the Immaculate Conception Church had to be renovated because of a fire.

In 1897, Father O'Reilly oversaw the building of St. Monica Church in Methuen, at a cost of \$16,000.00. He also bought land for a parochial school for the future of that parish.

In 1898, he built a beautiful shrine to our Lady of Good Counsel on Haverhill Street behind the Church and also added a new parish office within the rectory.

On October 1, 1898, St. Laurence O'Toole Church was made a separate parish with its own Augustinian staff. Father John M. Fleming, O.S.A., its first pastor, began to build a new church at East Haverhill and Newbury Streets. That church was completed in 1908.

Father O'Reilly oversaw the construction of St. Rita Parochial School at the corner of Hampshire and Arlington Street under the care of the Sisters of Notre Dame and the Xaverian Brothers. It opened on April 15, 1902.

In the spirit of the early days when the parish ministered to new immigrants, Father O'Reilly formed the St. Anthony's Syrian Maronite Catholic parish in 1902. A year later, he helped form the St. Francis Lithuanian Catholic parish. In 1905, he formed Saints Peter and Paul Portuguese Catholic Church.

In 1910, he erected a new brick school for girls on the site of the old convent on Oak Street. This building later became St. Mary High School.

In 1922, Father O'Reilly spearheaded the building of St. Augustine Church and school at the corner of Ames and Lowell Street in Lawrence to serve the religious needs of Catholics living in the Tower Hill section of Lawrence.

His influence was felt far beyond the church. He spearheaded the I.W.W. (International Workers of the World) Protest Parade on April 12, 1912 in which 40,000 people marched under his personal leadership. It is still commemorated as the Bread and Roses parade.

In 1922, Father O'Reilly helped to bring about a settlement of the textile strike in Lawrence. When over 20,000 unhappy workers were on strike, the city's major industries were crippled for six months.

In spite of all this civic participation, he never forgot his parish.

In 1914, he had installed a new organ. In 1923, he remodeled and renovated the interior and exterior of St. Mary Church.

Organizing the Cadets

In addition to responding to the spiritual needs of the various ethnic communities, the purchase of land, and the construction of new buildings, it was under Father O'Reilly's pastorate that the Xaverian Brothers began their service in this parish, and that St. Mary Cadets, the May Procession, and the Parish Calendar all began.

To be continued...