Community that proved its mettle during Depression draws from neighborhood & beyond to share talents

Two things that haven’t changed over the past century at St. Joseph Parish: its Jesuit heritage and the devotion of its people.

The Capitol Hill parish celebrated its centennial last Saturday — 100 years and a week after Jesuit Father Francis Dillon gathered the founding parishioners for the dedication Mass in their new wood-frame church.

Last Saturday, with Archbishop Alex J. Brunett as the presider, Jesuit Father Christopher Weekly, pastor, celebrated Mass in the “new” church, built in 1909.

Here’s a thumbnail sketch of the last 100 years:

The church

In 1909 the current St. Joseph Church was dedicated at a reported cost of more than $450,000. But just the fact that it was built at all during that time was a major accomplishment that reflected the devotion of the parishioners, said Mary Linden Sepulveda, who compiled a history of the parish.

In all of her research, Sepulveda said she was impressed most with the way parishioners moved forward during the worst of the Depression to build their new church.

The stock market crashed the year before its construction, so earlier dedications were shelved.

A First Communion class joins in a May crowning of the Virgin Mary, circa 1930.

The school

St. Joseph School also is celebrating its centennial this year. It operated as a coed school until 1953. A school addition was opened in 1960 to accommodate a burgeoning enrollment that was to peak at 866 students in 1963-64. But factors including smaller families and suburban flight caused enrollment to drop to 476 students by the 1974-75 school year, and there was talk of closing the school and allowing the archdiocese to build a retirement home on the site.

The school survived, however, and under the leadership of Principal George Hofbauer, who is now in his 33rd year at St. Joseph’s, families drawn from the city and beyond because of its Jesuit heritage and social justice mandate have made the Second Vatican Council call to social justice a priority starting in the 1970s.

The ministries

St. Joseph’s was among parishes that made the Second Vatican Council call to social justice a priority starting in the 1970s.

St. Joseph’s has provided sanctuary or other assistance to refugees from Central and South America and Southeast Asia, while hosting a Tent City for homeless people in the Seattle area.

St. Joseph’s sister parish relationship with a community in El Salvador is nearing its 20th anniversary. The parish also provides meals and serves as an overflow shelter for homeless men from the St. Martin de Porres shelter in Seattle. And the parish’s former convent houses the Jubilee Women’s Center, which offers transitional housing for up to 27 homeless women.

St. Joseph’s Baby Corner, which last year provided more than $490,000 worth of donated baby items including diapers and formula to young families in need, has become a national model.

“St. Joseph’s has been a part in helping Roman Catholics in our area step up and become players in the political realm and cultural sphere,” Deacon Steve Wodzanowski, the parish’s pastoral associate, says.

“The parish is a site for people to feel like our parish has made the Second Vatican Council call to social justice a priority starting in the 1970s.”

The community

As a “historian by temperament,” the current pastor, Jesuit Father Christopher Weekly, looks back over the past 100 years and notes that the history of the parish parallels that of Catholicism in the U.S.

“When this parish was founded, Capitol Hill was mostly working-class families — often second or third generation Irish immigrants — and Catholics were not feeling much of a part of the political process of the time,” Father Weekly said. “But as Roman Catholics have been mainstreamed in the 20th Century (highlighted by President Kennedy’s election) we can look around our parish and see (St. Joseph School products) like (former Gov.) John Spellman and (Seattle) Mayor Greg Nickels...and feel like our parish has been a part in helping Roman Catholics in our area step up and become players in the political realm and cultural sphere.”

Deacon Steve Wodzanowski, the parish’s pastoral associate, says St. Joseph’s as both a “neighborhood parish” and a parish that attracts members from other parts of the city and beyond because of its Jesuit heritage and social justice emphasis.

“The power of our parishes is that they are set in a place of social justice.”

St. Joseph’s has been a part of helping Roman Catholics in our area step up and become players in the political realm and cultural sphere.”

Fr. Christopher Weekly

The Holy Names Sisters at St. Joseph School ate basket lunches brought from the nearby Holy Names Academy.