Mission church among oldest in archdiocese

St. Joachim Mission celebrated its sesquicentennial on the feast day of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha

BY GREG MAGNONI

St. Joachim Mission on the Lummi Nation reservation in Whatcom County counts itself the seventh oldest faith community in the Archdiocese of Seattle, and its mission history contributes to its unique character.

Like many mission churches, its Native American population has decreased over the years, and memories still linger of a time when the introduction of the Catholic faith brought an end to the traditional language and cultural practices of the Lummi people.

Today, however, the faith community not only endures but has begun to show signs of new life.

Nearly 200 people attended the 150th anniversary Mass for St. Joachim Mission on July 14 and 13 priests were on hand to concelebrate with Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, including current pastor Father Khanh Nguyen, former pastors Fathers Phil Bloom, Jack Buckalew and Tim Sauer; and Fathers Scott Connolly, Pat Davis, Paul Magnano, Pat Tvothy, Tom Marti, Qui-thac Nguyen, Vu Tran, and Father Viktor Cloquet, the only Native American priest in the Archdiocese of Seattle.

The Mass began with members of the Lummi Nation drumming in an entrance procession featuring clergy and a Knights of Columbus honor guard. Following the Mass, a chief of the Lummi Nation, Ts'll'i'xw (Bill James), presented Father Khanh with a framed papal blessing.

Father E. Casimir Chirouse, the first and best-known missionary pastor to the Lummi people. According to a parish history, the Lummis had petitioned for a priest as early as 1831.

“Nothing can stop the winds of the Spirit.”

AUXILIARY BISHOP EUSEBIO ELIZONDO

Henry Cagey, left, holds a wood carving of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha while his father, Jack Cagey, begins the drumming as part of a procession at the 150th anniversary of St. Joachim Mission Church Thursday, July 14, Blessed Kateri’s feast day.

St. Joachim Mission, Lummi Reservation

Founded: 1861
Households: 80
Street Address: 4195 Lummi Shore Road, Whatcom County
Phone: 360-384-3651

PASTORS:

Father E. Casimir Chirouse, O.M.I., 1860
Father John Baptist Boulet, 1878
Father Joseph Schmidt, 1919
Father John Hoen, 1923
Father Robert Dillon, 1926
Father Martin Duggan, 1929
Father Michael O’Callaghan, 1934
Father William J. O’Brien, 1936
Father William J. O’Brien, 1946
Father James J. Buck, 1949
Father Donald Conger, 1952
Father Joseph C. Dakinievicuus, 1954
Father Kevin R. Coyle, 1964
Father John O’Sullivan, 1965
Father Peter J. Duggan, 1972
Father Phillip Bloom, 1978
Father Jack Buckalew, 1981
Father Brian McGovern, 1990
Father Timothy Sauer, 1996
Father Khanh Nguyen, 2008

In his homily, Bishop Elizondo named each of the priests who had served as pastor of St. Joachim’s, beginning in 1860 with Oblate of Mary Immaculate Father E. Casimir Chirouse, the first and best-known missionary pastor to the Lummi people. According to a parish history, the Lummis had petitioned for a priest as early as 1831.

“The whole thing was started by a missionary push by the winds of the Spirit,” Bishop Elizondo said of the first efforts to bring the word of Christ to the native people living in what is now the northwest corner of Washington state.

“Nothing can stop the winds of the Spirit,” Bishop Elizondo said of the missionaries, priests, religious and lay faithful who have formed the mission church community over its 150 year history.

The original church was a log cabin structure built by Father Chirouse and members of the Lummi tribe at the mouth of the Nooksack River in 1861. The mission was originally attached to the Church of the Assumption in Bellingham and was transferred to St. Joseph Church in Ferndale in 1904. In 1882, the original log cabin church was replaced by the current structure. In 1921 the church was hauled by three horse teams over log skids in a move to its current location that took nearly six months.

Father John Baptist Boulet assumed responsibility for the parish when Father Chirouse was transferred to British Columbia in 1878. Although called to serve as the first pastor of the Church of the Assumption in Bellingham in 1889, Father Boulet continued to serve the Lummis at St. Joachim until he died in 1919.

One of the church’s unique features is a dual shrine to the Virgin Mary erected in 1961 for the centennial celebrating the construction of the original church. The shrine has an image of Our Lady of Fatima on one side and Our Lady of Guadalupe on the other.

BY KATIE GREENE

Like many faith communities made up of mostly Native American Catholics, the parish is working to attract parishioners while honoring the native language and traditions that were lost following the introduction of missionary schools and a growing number of English-speaking immigrants of European descent.

“It’s nice to hear the sound of babies crying at the back of the church,” said Thomas, who served on the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council that developed the vision statement “A Future Full of Hope,” which guided the archdiocese from 2004 to 2009.

For us “it’s still a future full of hope with a past of overwhelming gratitude,” he said.

Parish History

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Signs of new life

Bernie Thomas, a lifelong member of the parish whose parents were married at St. Joachim in 1946, offered a word of congratulation following the service.

“I kept my faith. It helped me to persevere,” she said. “I kept my faith. It helped me to persevere.”

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