

125-year-old parish had a rough start

St. Michael's first five pastors were basically run out of town



The original church building was built in 1886 by Father Michael McCauley.



St. Michael Parish's current church building was completed in 1986 and dedicated by Auxiliary Bishop Donald Wuerl.

SNOHOMISH
BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

Archbishop J. Peter Sartain will join St. Michael Parish in celebrating its 125th anniversary on Sunday, Dec. 11 at the 8:30 a.m. Mass in Spanish and the 10:30 a.m. Mass in English.

The different languages reflect a parish community that is "tremendously diverse, with a growing multicultural nature," said Father Joseph "Jay" DeFolco, who's been St. Michael's pastor since 2003.

"The community is a real blending," he said.

On the one hand, some farming families trace their roots to ancestors who helped settle the area in the 19th century. When parishioners Peter Bartelheimer and Kyla Thompson got married



Father Jay DeFolco

recently, "they rode off in a tractor for their honeymoon," said Father DeFolco. "That's our community — our old-timers, those who have been here for generations, that captures who they are."

New developments

But on the other hand are recent arrivals — young families, professionals and immigrants — drawn by the area's affordable housing. The parish of 970 households has appreciable Hispanic, Filipino, Vietnamese and African-American membership.

The parish lost about 200 families when its longtime mission, Holy Cross in Lake Stevens/Granite Falls, became a parish in its own right in 2004, but the parish has since replaced those members plus more, said Father DeFolco.

The opening of a parish school in the fall of 2007 has been a boon for the community, he said. Young families used to register at other parishes to get in-parish school tuition, but now St. Michael School, which has grown to

95 students, draws families from Snohomish, Lake Stevens, Granite Falls, Monroe and Clearview.

Traditions old and new

St. Michael's is a "friendly, welcoming, open community," said Dolores Wagner, a parishioner since 1969.

That's helped by the parish's Dinner for Eight program of casual dinner parties for rotating groups of parishioners throughout the year.

"You get to know people socially that maybe you see at church but they're sitting on the other side of the church, but suddenly you can become acquainted and maybe you're friends," said Wagner.

St. Michael's is also a parish of big traditions, both old and new.

On Nov. 13, the parish hosted its 42nd Annual Turkey Dinner. Each year the event draws hundreds of people from the community, and proceeds go to support the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

And for the past couple years during Holy Week, said Father DeFolco, the parish has staged a dramatization of the events of Good Friday, complete with centurions on horseback and crucifixions on full-size crosses. "It's a very major production," he said.

Overall, "there's very positive energy in the church at this time," said Judy Bartelheimer, a parishioner since 1970.

The early years

The first regular Masses in what is now Snohomish County are thought to have been celebrated by Father E. Casimir Chirouse, who came to Tulalip from the Yakima Valley in 1857, according to a parish history. He built a church at Tulalip Bay and a school for Native American children.

After a church was built in La Conner in 1872, Father Don Mansueto — who was assigned to serve an area extending from Seattle north to Canada and east to the Cascades — often celebrated Masses in Snohomish.

Father Louis Kusters came to Snohomish in 1883 as a missionary and

hoped to build a church on property donated by E.C. Furgeson. He was unable to do so, and continued to celebrate Masses in homes and at the Alhambra Theater.

In 1886, Father Michael McCauley came to Snohomish as its first resident pastor and began building a church with his own money. A skating rink was purchased and dismantled, and the materials were used to build a 55-by-28-foot church with an 80-foot steeple. The church and rectory were built at a cost of \$1,600.

The church was originally dedicated as Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Exactly when and why the name was later changed to St. Michael is unknown.

A rough town

Snohomish in the late 1800s was not exactly a friendly environment for Catholics. An anti-Catholic group called the American Protective Association was active in the area, working to intimidate Catholics, blacks, Jews and Asians.

"Many times it was necessary for the men of the parish to stay at night to protect the church and rectory from vandalism and the constant threat of arson," notes a parish history.

Father Francois X. Guay, who arrived as pastor in 1890 after Father McCauley's health deteriorated, was dragged out of bed one night in July 1891 by an angry, drunken mob. He was stripped, tarred and feathered, and ordered out of town. After that incident, Bishop Aegidius Junger placed the parish under interdict, and for three years the parish had no pastor.

Things weren't much easier for Father Peter Van Holderbeke, who was named pastor in 1894. He was frail and suffered from epileptic seizures, which some parishioners misinterpreted as chronic drunkenness. Operating on that assumption, two angry women of the parish besieged him one day in his parlor and beat him until his face was bloody. He was transferred to Aberdeen and died shortly thereafter.

The fourth pastor, Father John Ed-

win O'Brien, who came in 1900, was also forced to flee the town for his own safety. His replacement, Father A.T. Bourke, was "tormented by members of the parish and the community, and experienced frequent break-ins of the parish rectory," according to a parish history. After four years, he asked Bishop Edward O'Dea to transfer him to a smaller parish.

Forty-year pastorate

In 1906, St. Michael finally got a pastor that stuck. Father Tryphon F. Van de Walle, or "Father Van," as he was often called, would remain at the parish for 40 years.

Lifelong parishioner Bob Heirman, 79, whose grandparents came to St. Michael's in 1905, remembers Father Van de Walle as "a devout man." He recalled a time he skipped Saturday morning catechism class to go fishing and had his cover blown by his cousin Shirley Ann.

"Next morning, Father Van during the 8:30 Mass, he delivered the homily, and right at the end of the homily I'm sitting in there in the middle of the church with my dad, and he clears his throat and he said, 'And by the way,' he said, 'the catechism class is going very well, except for Robert Hermain, who said he had to go fishing.' ...

"I had it coming. I premeditated it," Hermain told The Progress during a recent interview. "He truly loved me — he was trying to keep me on the straight and narrow. And his picture hangs in our home in three different places."

Father Van de Walle undertook a complete renovation of the rectory upon his arrival, and in 1920 he undertook a major renovation of the church, giving the building a form that would remain largely unchanged until 1986, the parish's centennial, when a new church building was completed.

The first Masses at the new church were celebrated on Christmas Eve 1986, and the building was dedicated by Auxiliary Bishop Donald Wuerl on Jan. 18, 1987.