Largely Hispanic parish celebrates centennial

Sacred Heart has seen many changes in its 100 years, but a generous faith remains constant

TACOMA
BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

Sacred Heart Parish in Tacoma marked its centennial Sept. 9 with a 10 a.m. Mass celebrated by Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo.

One of the co-chairs of the parish’s centennial celebration, Patty Pitsch, 83, has had family at Sacred Heart since the beginning. In fact, it was her grandmother who petitioned Bishop Edward O’Dea to open a parish in Tacoma’s Hillsdale neighborhood, which was then called Bismark.

“A lot of changes have taken place” in the parish over the years, said Pitsch. “It is very diverse now.”

Large Hispanic population

Many of the recent changes at Sacred Heart can be traced to the early 1980s. In 1980, the parish school closed, leading young families to move to other parishes where their children could enroll. And in 1983, the parish became home to the Hispanic Catholic community. The change accelerated during the 10-year pastorate (1996–2006) of Father Vince Pastro, who had previously done Hispanic ministry full time.

“During that time, the Hispanic-Latino community at Sacred Heart, which was already large, grew by leaps and bounds because of immigration from Mexico,” Father Pastro said in an email to The Progress.

Sacred Heart also become the home of Tacoma’s Vietnamese Catholics in 1995. That community grew especially quickly following Father Tuan Nguyen, who had previously done Vietnamese ministry, said the community averages 25 baptisms each month, and the Sunday noon Mass in Spanish often draws 700 or 800 people.

Time and talent

Much of the community is “very-low-income families,” Lopez said, so the parish’s income is quite low. But parishioners “are very open and willing to help and volunteer in many, many ways. This is saving the church a lot of money. A lot.”

As an example, she and Father Nguyen cited the church roof, which was recently in need of repair. The parish couldn’t afford to hire a company to fix it, so several of the men of the parish volunteered to do it themselves. Others prepared food for the workers, and soon the roof was done.

“I admire the people,” said Father Nguyen. “They really dedicate themselves.”

And with several old buildings to maintain, there’s always a need for volunteer help.

Four years ago, the parish started a push for annual parish cleaning and maintenance. All the parish groups pitch in time, supplies and expertise to clean and paint throughout the campus. Three teams of volunteers have continued cleaning the church each weekend on a rotating schedule. Another group handles lawn care.

“They are very willing people, very generous, very willing to help,” Lopez said of the parishioners.

They are also committed to their cultural heritage, said parochial vicar Father Francisco Cancino, noting that many parishioners come from the Mexican state of Michoacán.

An annual devotion to Jesus, Lord of the Rescue, involves giving away homemade bread.

“They put it into little plastic bags, and then the custom is to throw that to the people from the second floor of the school building,” said Father Cancino. “It is a sign that the Lord has given us much, so they are giving in return what they have got from the Lord.”

Hundred-year history

Sacred Heart Parish was established in November 1912. Margaret Cline (the grandmother of the centennial co-chair) had petitioned Bishop Edward O’Dea to establish a parish for the working-class people of the area, according to a parish history.

The bishop directed Father Mathias Kreutzer to take a census of the Bismark district of Tacoma, now called Hillside. Father Kreutzer found 35 Catholic families and was told to proceed with the formation of the parish.

Masses were celebrated in Woodmen’s Hall at East 64th Street and McKinley Avenue until the church building was completed in July 1913. The land, at East 46th and McKinley, cost $4,600, and the 400-seat church cost $3,500.

A parish school was opened in September 1929, during the pastorate of Father Robert Ryan. It was served by the Sisters of Providence until its closing in 1980.

In 1954, during the pastorate of Father Charles Kelly, construction began on a new church building to accommodate the growing community. The church was blessed by Archbishop Thomas Connolly on March 20, 1955. At the time, The Progress declared the Romanesque church “one of the most beautiful ecclesiastical edifices in the archdiocese.”

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