

Features

# Corpus' changes make for colorful centenary

By Rob Cullivan

When J. Foster Warner, an acclaimed architect, designed the original Corpus Christi Parish building in the 1880s, his plan allowed for the future remodeling of the second-floor church into classrooms should the first-floor school become overcrowded.

This plan reflects a philosophy the parish has maintained throughout its 100 years on East Main and Prince streets — that of being able to adapt to the needs of the times. Dynamic pastors have inspired their congregations to serve the diocese and the neighborhood in ever-changing ways but always with zest and compassion, despite great financial difficulty and inner-city transformation.

In the summer of 1888, the area's Irish and German families were excited over the prospect of having their own church and school, according to Grace Murray's 1978 parish history. The immigrants had been attending St. Mary's and St. Bridget's and longed for a parish within walking distance of their homes. Father James J. Leary, assigned to be the first pastor; met with the new parish trustees for the first time in August of 1888 to lay plans for the use of the building then being constructed.

The parish rapidly grew as Main Street's businesses expanded. By 1898, it had outgrown the original building, and Father Leary began a fundraising drive to build anew. Contributors numbered over 400, although more than 80 percent of them could only give \$5 or less.

Corpus Christi began to reach out to the wider community as early as 1903, when the present church building was completed. The Ladies Aid Society made clothes for poor children and helped the ill and the elderly.

Irene Schroedel has been a parishioner at Corpus Christi since 1908, when her family moved into the neighborhood. "In those days, a priest was a priest. We more or less worshipped them," she recalls of the new century. "The Church seemed much stricter. You'd never think of missing Mass. And we'd all get dressed up to go."

Then, as today, debt plagued the parish. In the first decade, parishioners held a Great Parish Fair to raise funds for the church, rectory, and an enlargement of the school. Adults vied for the prize of a horse in one contest, while the youngsters competed for a pony and a cart in another. The fair raised more than \$11,000 and met the desired goals.

The parish's second pastor, Monsignor D.J. Curran, administered Corpus Christi from 1901-1922, overseeing the formation of the Young Ladies' Sodality, the League of the Sacred Heart, the Holy Name Society for men and the Altar and Rosary Society for women. Through most of the parish's history, these groups allowed the laity to participate in its life and direction. Lay ministers were not needed in those days, "because we had enough priests who could take care of the people," reflects Father Thomas F. McVeigh, pastoral assistant from 1939-1958.

"The societies were mostly spiritual. They were involved in beautifying the church especially the altar care," Father McVeigh points out, noting that the Holy Name Society was often called upon to support such diocesan projects as St. Bernard's Seminary and the var-



Bishop Matthew H. Clark prays during the consecration.

ious high schools throughout the area.

Monsignor John Francis O'Hern administered the parish from 1923-1929, leaving to become the diocese's bishop. That same year the stock market crashed, and Corpus Christi's people suffered from the general unemployment that followed. Murray's history quotes Monsignor O'Hern's successor, Monsignor William Hart, discussing those times: "Unemployment, enforced idleness for many, reduced income for others — not a home in the parish escaped the dire effects of the depression."

Bishop O'Hern responded to the crash with a \$3 million diocesan building campaign to employ those without work. Still, many parishioners were in need and their only recourse was to ask Monsignor Hart for his aid, whether it was food, money or an occasional odd job. Their benefactor "was a very kindly man. He wasn't loud or outspoken," Schroedel observes.

By 1938 the parish numbered more than 5,000 members, so many that St. Ambrose Parish was built on nearby Culver Road to take in the overflow.

Moreover, Father McVeigh recalls, ministering to the parish in those days left little time for outreach efforts. "There wasn't all the going after the social angle. We had enough poor right in the parish," Father McVeigh recalls.

Ruth McLaughlin, a member since 1948, recalls the Corpus Christi of that era as "a wonderful parish. There were programs that included all the people in the parish, young and old," McLaughlin says.

McLaughlin's six children attended the parish school, where Lucia Unger taught math and science to the upper grades from 1957-1977. Sister Anna James, the school principal, had approached Unger about teaching temporarily.

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Jim Smith (left) presents 'keys of life' to liturgical dancer Diane Breslin, during the offertory of Corpus Christi's June 5 centennial Mass.



Father Jim Callan celebrates Mass before the grandeur of Corpus Christi Church's original altar and stained-glass window.



Father Enrique Cadena embraces an altar girl during the sign of peace of the liturgy celebrating the parish's first 100 years.