Preserving And Honoring The Past For Future Generations:
Bishop Lawrence E. Brandt Dedicates Diocesan Heritage Center for the Diocese of Greensburg

by Jerome M. Zufelt

Bishop Lawrence E. Brandt blessed and dedicated the new Diocesan Heritage Center at the Bishop William G. Connare Center near Greensburg on May 13, 2014. During the dedication, the Bishop praised the precious legacy left by the people who built the church in the Diocese of Greensburg and the immense debt owed them by the diocese.

After the dedication service, diocesan priests and the members of the Bishop's Commission for the Diocesan Heritage Center toured the new facility to see a temporary exhibit of diocesan artifacts. An official opening date for the Heritage Center has not been set.

"The new center will serve to collect, preserve and display the cultural and archival patrimony of the diocese," Bishop Brandt said at the dedication. In his remarks, the bishop said he was deeply touched by the "heroic faith witness of our forbearers often given under immensely difficult and trying circumstances."

"If we forget the past from where we have come, we will not recognize who we are in the present nor be able to confront successfully the challenges of our future," he said.

The Heritage Center was inspired by St. Pope St. John Paul II's establishment in 1988 of the Pontifical Commission for Preserving the Patrimony of Art and History and by Bishop Brandt's experiences of the rich history of the diocese's parishes.

The bishop states on the Diocesan Heritage Center page on the diocesan website (www.dioceseofgreensburg.org) that "[The history of the parishes] has always impressed me because it shows the tremendously deep faith and generosity of the people who built and founded our parishes at great sacrifices."

One of the bishop's many parish visits was to the 200th anniversary of the log church dedicated to St. Patrick that was built in 1806 at Sugar Creek in Armstrong County, which still stands, after several renovations, as the oldest church west of the Alleghenies.

While the Diocese of Greensburg is relatively young, having been established March 10, 1951 by Pope Pius XII, the roots of Catholicism were planted in southwestern Pennsylvania more than two centuries earlier. Several parishes were already more than 100 years old when the diocese was established.

One of the first Masses west of the Allegheny Mountains was celebrated near Brownsville (Fayette County) on July 1, 1754, by French priest Father Denys Baron for troops and Indians on their way to meet young George Washington at the Battle of Fort Necessity near Uniontown. That Mass is memorialized in a stained-glass window at the historic Church of St. Peter in Brownsville, which was dedicated in 1845 and continues to serve Catholics there.

The history of the four counties (Armstrong, Fayette, Indiana and Westmoreland) that now make up the Diocese of Greensburg includes some of the most prominent Catholic pioneers in the nation. These include St. John Neumann, a Redemptorist priest from Pittsburgh who helped establish what is now the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Greensburg in 1846, and Benedictine Father Boniface Wimmer who came to Latrobe from Bavaria and established the Benedictine community at Saint Vincent Archabbey in that same year.

The Heritage Center will house artifacts, pictures and documents that reflect that rich history. The items will come from the current diocesan archives at the Pastoral Center in Greensburg and from parishes and parishioners throughout the diocese. The Heritage Center will also be available for research.

Bishop Brandt, who helped organize the Diocese of Erie's sesquicentennial celebration in 2003, has noted that now is the time to gather the important pieces of diocesan history before they are lost, destroyed or forgotten.

In a presentation to diocesan priests before the Heritage Center dedication, Father Justin P. Pino, archivist-historian for the Diocese of Erie, discussed the importance of preserving and keeping historical records and artifacts.

Father Pino said that we are all called to safeguard the priceless treasure of the church’s cultural heritage and to demonstrate “how we as faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ have responded here in this local church.”
Bishop Lawrence E. Brandt Dedicates Diocesan Heritage Center for the Diocese of Greensburg (continued)

"A diocesan museum or heritage center is not a time machine" Father Pino said "but is a family album that again reveals to us the experiences, the stories, and the witness of a community that professes and believes as we do."

"An archive, a heritage center … is something that is never complete; it enforces the realization that what we preserve is not related to things gone, but is also concerned with things to come," Father Pino said.

The Bishop's Commission for the Diocesan Heritage Center will advise Bishop Brandt and his successors in that work. The members of the Commission include: Cindy Busch, Dennis and Karen Cadwell, Robert Davis, Margaret DiVirgilio, John and Kim Dolan, Matthew Gorsich, Paul Hart, Sarah Loughran, Shirley Makuta, Sister of Charity Catherine Meinert, William Merchant (chair), Judith O'Toole, Dr. James and Helene Paharik, Denise Pencola, Patricia Smiy and Richard and Christine Zappone. 

Ex officio members are: Msgr. Larry J. Kulick, Msgr. Richard G. Curci, Fr. Jonathan J. Wisneski, and Jerry Bertig.

Artifacts, Greensburg Diocesan History Center.

Rev. William J. Lechnar showing exhibits to two lay people.

Artifacts, Greensburg Diocesan Heritage Center.

All photos: Mary Seamans. Courtesy: Diocese of Greensburg