A Brief History of St. Bartholomew Parish

St. Bartholomew Parish was established in June 1950 by the Most Rev. Hugh C. Boyle, D.D., the Bishop of Pittsburgh. Penn Hills, one of the largest municipalities in Allegheny County, was growing rapidly and many new housing developments were springing up throughout the township. A small group of Catholic families who had settled in Penn Hills, petitioned the Bishop to establish a parish in this area. The Erhardt family donated seven acres of land along Frankstown Road. The first pastor, Father Charles V. Kerr was appointed and began his duties June 28, 1950. The first Mass in the parish — attended by 34 parishioners — was offered in the living room of the Erhardt residence (opposite the present church) June 29, 1950. The same day, arrangements were made to rent the Penn Hebron Garden Club as a temporary Church.

In August 1950 the Ursuline Sisters began catechetical instructions for the children of the parish, and in fall 1950 the Holy Name Society and the Ladies Guild were established. A new house, adjacent to the church property was purchased in December 1950 as a temporary rectory. The young and growing parish was saddened by the untimely death of Father Kerr in February 1951, only eight months after his having been appointed pastor. Before he began the establishment of St. Bartholomew Parish, Father Kerr had been the assistant pastor at Holy Rosary, Homewood. Before the construction of the first parish building here, many of the early baptisms and several weddings were celebrated at Holy Rosary Church.

After the death of Bishop Boyle, the bishop, John Dearden, appointed Stephen C. Helzlsouer as the new pastor of St. Bart’s Feb. 7, 1951. Father Helzlsouer took up residence Feb. 15, and immediately awarded a contract for the first permanent structure in the new parish. This first building served as a temporary Church for the new parish, and the first Mass to be offered on the ground floor of the new structure was celebrated October 7, 1951. His Excellency, Bishop Dearden, officiated at the dedication of the new building Oct. 28, 1951.

Attendance at Sunday Mass jumped from 1,200 to 1,500 almost overnight. By the end of 1951, regular attendance was approaching 1,800 people. In June 1952, Father Robert J. McBride was assigned as the assistant pastor to Father Helzlsouer. During the school year 1952-1953 the Sisters of Charity provided religious instructions for the children of the parish. The debt on the first building was paid off in December 1952, and the bishop gave permission for a new addition that would contain a school. The future gymnasium of the school was prepared to serve as the third temporary church within the parish.

The Sisters of the Divine Redeemer from Elizabeth, Pa. were asked to staff the new school. However, since more than 450 children were registered, the curriculum for the first year of operation was limited to the first three grades. St. Bartholomew parish school was dedicated Sept. 5, 1954. A new convent to house twenty-four sisters was constructed and then dedicated in 1955. More and more Catholic families moved into the Penn Hills community. A second assistant pastor, Father George T. Leech was appointed by the bishop in 1956. Over the years, other assistant pastors were assigned, served for a number of years and then moved on. The school building was enlarged again, and then a third time. The school now has 28 classrooms, a gymnasium and cafeteria. St. Bart’s regularly fielded winning teams in football and basketball. Trophies by the score line the shelves and cases celebrating many winning teams over the decades. By 1963, all building program debts had been satisfied, and Msgr. Helzlsouer petitioned the bishop for permission to continue with the final phase of construction. Ground was broken in September 1964 and construction was begun on a permanent church and rectory. Monday, May 24, 1965, the new church was dedicated by His Excellency, Bishop John J. Wright. A Moehler pipe organ was installed. Mr. David Volker had been serving as organist and director of music for a number of years. Under his direction, St. Bart’s Men’s Choir became well known throughout the diocese. They were often called upon to perform for diocesan liturgical functions, sang at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., and recorded a long-playing record of sacred choral music.

In recognition of his service to the Church of Pittsburgh, Father Helzlsouer was made a Monsignor. He is remembered for his remarkable ability to remember the names of individuals and families throughout the parish, his drive to encourage each family in the parish to
Those Who Served at St. Bartholomew

Sisters who served as Principal at St. Bartholomew Grade School since its foundation are: Sister Comrada SDR; Sister Cecelia SDR; Sister Leona SDR; Sister Ignatius SDR; Sister Cornelia Marie SDR; Sister Laurentia SDR; and Sister Karen Brink, OSB.

Pastors: Father Charles V. Kerr; Father Stephen C. Helzlsouer; Father Walter Wichmanowski; Father James S. Ruggiero; Father James W. Garvey.

Assistant Pastors: Father Robert J. McBride; Father George T. Leech; Father Francis V. Marchukonis; Father William R. Bovard; Father Joseph D. Slater; Father Basil Lynch, TOR; Father Thomas D. O’Neill; Father Robert R. Werthman; Father Jeremiah T. O'Shea; Father Daniel A. Valentine; Father Samuel Esposito; Father Robert R. Coyne; Father Pierre M. Falkenhan; Father Dennis Wargo; Father David DeWitt; Father J. Francis Frazer; Father George W. Zirwas; Father George C. Newmeyer; Father Aaron J. Kriss; Father Thomas J. Galvin; Father Richard J. Mueller; Father Vincent F. Kolo. Father Diego Cadri (resident).

A Simple Question

In the 1840s, a group of boys was playing in the vicinity of Saint Patrick’s Church, Pittsburgh, and as usual, were making a great deal of noise. The pastor, Father Edward F. Garland, came out of the church. The boys, all but one, scattered. Father Garland asked the young lad why he didn’t run with the others. The boy replied that he didn’t run because he “was not a Catholic.” Father Garland asked, “Why aren’t you a Catholic?”

Father Garland’s question so embedded itself in the boy’s mind that when he was a student at the University of Virginia in 1853, he became a convert to the Catholic Faith.

Later the boy, Thomas A. Becker, became a priest, and then the first bishop of Wilmington, Del., and eventually the bishop of Savannah, Ga.

What a beautiful answer to a very simple question.

— From the files of Msgr. Francis A. Glenn

Gathered Fragments

In the 1860s, Harmar Denny, grandson of the first mayor of Pittsburgh, and Pollard Morgan, son to Captain Morgan, a commanding officer at the Pittsburgh Arsenal, were students for the Protestant ministry. They went to Oxford, England, for the completion of their studies.

They arrived in the full flowering of the Oxford Movement, the Anglican rediscovery of Catholic tradition, which had been launched by John Henry Newman and others. Like Newman, the Pittsburgers converted to Roman Catholicism, and they returned to Pittsburgh as Catholic priests.

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Pittsburgh’s Oxford Movement

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