

THE HISTORY OF SAINT MAURICE PARISH

The history of Catholicism in Bolton owes its beginnings to the Revolutionary War era when the French General Rochambeau encamped his army here in town, bringing with him a chaplain, who was believed to celebrate Mass.

The beginning of the present parish owes to a chapel founded by the Rev. William J. McGurk, then pastor of St. James Church in Manchester. He had purchased land at Bolton Center for his mother, who in 1898, took in girls afflicted with tuberculosis into her home to restore back to good health with farm fresh eggs and produce. There, in a temporary house chapel, Mass was celebrated for the known first time in Bolton. It was the carriage shed on this property that was converted to a summer chapel in 1904. Here Mass was offered in the warmer summer months for the townspeople, who then ventured to St. James Church in the winter.

The size of the carriage shed proved inadequate for the growing community, with the men often standing outside during Mass. In 1938, a new, larger chapel was built on the McGurk property, with mostly volunteer labor provided by the Maneggia family and employees of Bernard McGurk, brother of Rev. McGurk. Much of the lumber and other building materials were donated by these families, with loads of sand and stone provided by Giovanni Pesce. This new chapel was completed and blessed in July of 1938. The chapel was serviced by the Rev. John F. Hannon, pastor of St. James Church, Manchester. The chapel was elevated to the status of a station, and the name, St. Maurice, was given in honor of the patron saint of Maurice F. McAuliffe, then Bishop of Hartford. Celebrating Mass during the summer months continued until 1950, when through the efforts of many families, including the McGurk, Maneggia, Hassett, Hutchinson, and Aspinwall, it was made possible to raise the funds to secure a heating system. Much of the support was made through voluntary labor. Mass was now offered year round. Until September 2, 1953, the state of Connecticut was served under one diocese, that of Hartford. On that historical date, the state was divided into three dioceses, with St. Maurice Station now part of Tolland County, under the direction of the Diocese of Norwich. St. Maurice became separated from its parent parish, St. James, now in the Archdiocese of Hartford. On May 1954, the Most Reverend Bernard J. Flanagan, the first bishop of Norwich, elevated the status of St. Maurice from a station to a parish, with Sacred Heart Church in Vernon as its Mission. The Rev. J. Ralph Kelley was appointed as St. Maurice's first pastor. On May 19, 1955, the Diocese of Norwich issued a document declaring the corporation of St. Maurice. The document was signed by the Most Rev. Bishop Flanagan, Fr. Kelley, as well as Mr. Anthony Maneggia and Mr. Bernard Sheridan, laymen belonging to the congregation.

As the congregation of St. Maurice continued to grow, the chapel proved inadequate in size, and once again the Catholic men were standing outside. Due to the foresight of Father Hannon, land was purchased earlier on Hebron Road. On April of 1956, Father Kelley broke ground for the new church on this site. On Ascension Thursday, May 30, 1957, the cornerstone was laid and the church blessed by Bishop Flanagan. Saint Maurice was the first church to be built in the new diocese. After the dedication, Bishop Flanagan administered the Sacrament of Confirmation to the first class to receive this sacrament in Bolton. Fr. Kelley organized the first youth group named the Holy Name Society. Within a year, the growing mission of Sacred Heart was elevated to the status of parish, with Father Kelley assigned there as pastor. On June of 1958, the Rev. Bernard McGurk, whose family was instrumental to the beginnings of this parish, was appointed the next pastor.

In June of 1965, Father McGurk was transferred, and was succeeded by the Rev. Robert W. Cronin. During Father Cronin's appointment, the balance of the parish debt was paid and with the growing needs of the parish, the Parish Center was built in 1969-1970. This modern, two-level building, with a view of the hills across Eastern Connecticut, provided the much needed space for the many parish activities. A new gold-leaf tabernacle was designed by Mrs. Helen Veitch, under the specifications given by Father Cronin, and was hand-crafted professionally.

Father Cronin was transferred in 1980 and succeeded by the Rev. Clifford Curtin. The seven years of Father Curtin's appointment brought changes to the interior of the church, including new Stations of the Cross and a statue of our Risen Lord erected on the sanctuary wall. Father Curtin was succeeded by the Rev. William Olesik, on May of 1987.

Under Father Bill's twenty year guidance, the parish was made fiscally sound and the Parish Center debt was paid off. The church was made handicapped accessible, and a handicapped accessible restroom was installed in the upper level of the Parish Center. The parish welcomed the computer age. Father Bill initiated the Tithing Program in 1992. This allowed the parish to provide much needed financial assistance to the poor and disadvantaged both locally and missions serving work both in this country and overseas. Fr. Bill was transferred in February 14, 2008, and for the first time in the history of this parish, no decision had been reached in terms of a replacement.

The lack of a permanent pastor brought many challenges to the parish; however, with that, a feeling of resiliency. With coordinators previously established for each ministry group, there was continuity of service with a rotation of priests serving weekend Masses from other parishes. The parish received the appointment of an interim pastor, the Rev. Anthony Gruber, in late March 2008. Despite his brief appointment, Fr. Gruber brought a healing presence of experienced leadership and understanding, coupled with patience and a good sense of humor.

The year 2008 brought many changes to the parish and the diocese. Due to the decrease in the number of available diocesan priests, a decision was reached to yoke the parishes of St. Maurice with its former mission church, Sacred Heart in Vernon. Father Stanley Szczapa, pastor of Sacred Heart Church, was appointed to pastor both parishes in June, and he was formally installed as pastor of St. Maurice on the 26th of October. Earlier he had served as a deacon at St. Maurice under the pastorate of Fr. Cronin. The parish also received the temporary appointment of a parochial vicar, the Rev. Anthony DiMarco, from July 1st of 2008-2009. Fr. Tony brought the love of the sacraments, and stressed the importance of the sacrament of Reconciliation and the Right to Life movement. Fr. Stan brought a willingness to listen to the parishioners about the concerns of yoking. He established a Finance Council. The parish was enhanced by an active WEB site.

Within two years, the parish was unyoked from Sacred Heart. On November 15, 2010, The Most Reverend Michael Cote, Bishop of Norwich, appointed Father Wojciech Pelczarski, S.D.S. During his appointment, the Catholic traditions of recitation of the Rosary, Divine Mercy Chaplet, the Liturgy of the Hours and Eucharistic Adoration were reinstated. The statue of St. Maurice, original to the old chapel, was found and erected in the sanctuary. The Parish Center library was dedicated to Fr. Cronin in February 2011. On Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2015, the parish celebrated its 60th anniversary as a corporation with a special Mass celebrated by the Most Rev. Bishop Cote. The blessing of a commemorative granite bench located behind the Church marks this special time in parish history. Restoration of the Tabernacle to behind the altar was completed in November of that year. During the Jubilee Year of Mercy, in January of 2016, a newly painted image of Divine Mercy arrived from Poland. It was positioned in the alcove of the sanctuary. Fr. Wojciech was transferred on September 15, 2016 and succeeded by the Rev. Leon Susaimanickam.

Saint Maurice Parish is blessed by a multitude of ministries. These ministries build faith community by responding to God's call to be welcoming, to grow more deeply in our personal relationship with Him, to learn more and become teachers of our faith, especially to our children, and to answer God's call to love and grow in holiness.

The row of terra cotta statues depicted in the sanctuary tower: **Sts. Peter and Paul**, representing the earliest age of the Catholic Church; **St. Anne**, mother of Our Lady; **St. Maurice**, patron saint of the parish; **St. Patrick**, patron saint of the Diocese of Norwich; **St. Gregory**, patron of the architect who helped design the church; **St. Bernard**, name saint of Bishop Flanagan; **St. Anthony**, Italian saint chosen for the many parishioners of Italian descent; **St. Joan of Arc**, patron of the French Army, to commemorate the passage of General Rochambeau through Bolton; and **St. Pius X**, who was the most recent of the 10 saints at the time of church construction and restorer of the liturgy.

Encased in the limestone altar is a metal box containing authenticated relics of 2 martyrs, **St. Maximinus**, a Roman martyr of the 4th century, and **St. Felicitas**, a martyr of Carthage, 3rd century.

Excerpts taken from The Story of Catholicism in Bolton, The New Church of Saint Maurice, written by Mrs. William Minor and Mrs. John McDermott, year unknown.

Catholics in Eastern Connecticut, Fr. J. Ralph Kelley, The Diocese of Norwich: 1985.