

SAINT COLUMBKILLE PARISH HISTORY

**By Deacon Eldon Lauber
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By the 1860's a small group of Catholic families had settled in the Papillion area. On occasion they were visited by a priest from Omaha. The first priest was Fr. John Curtis. Later on, Fr. William Kelly, the first priest ordained in the Nebraska Territory, also served them. The first Catholic families included Michael Dunn, John Gallagher, Patrick Buskly, Edward Nolan, Patrick Mulligan and Jay Dorsey. One of the memories of Edward Nolan was that mass was held in private homes or the Union Pacific Railroad Section house, and that his mother who was a Presbyterian made the communion hosts between two flatirons.

A few years later the families of Michael Tex, Thomas Sweetman, James Ryan, John Schram, and Louis Lesieur joined the parish. In 1876, Fr. James Martin, newly ordained assistant at St. Cecilia Cathedral, served local families. Irish-born Fr. Martin was assigned Pastor of Forest City, a settlement where the Elkhorn & Platte Rivers join, close to present-day Gretna. In 1877, a mission parish in Papillion which he called St. Columbkille, was assigned to him. Mass was said once a month for the next three years.

The first church was built in 1878 and cost \$1500.00; it had 16 pews and 13 families and was named St. Columbkille. It stood on the northwest corner of 5th & Washington.

In 1880, Fr. Martin was transferred and replaced by Fr. George Emblen. In 1881 Fr. John Wallace replaced Fr. Emblen and served until 1893. Masses were held the 2nd and 5th Sundays of the month. In 1881 there were 23 families consisting of 155 people. There was slow growth and by 1894, the parish had only grown by two families for a total of 25.

In 1897 a priest was assigned to St. Columbkille and to the mission church in Elkhorn. Travel was on the Union Pacific Railroad and services were held every other week. By 1907, they both had masses every Sunday. By 1917 Elkhorn had its own priest.

The first full-time priest and pastor of St. Columbkille, Rev. Henry Hoheisel, arrived May 10, 1897 and soon after a rectory was built. In 1904 an addition to the church was built. The church was incorporated on May 30, 1907 and was officially known as St. Columbkille. In previous years it had also been called St. Columba's and St. Columban's.

In 1912 land was purchased for a new church, school and rectory. In 1916 a new school was built named Sacred Heart Academy as Fr. Hoheisel had a devotion to the Sacred Heart. It was designed as a boarding school. The Benedictine Sisters of Atchison, KS agreed to provide the teachers. The first boarder came from Fr. Flanagan who later founded Boys' Town. He was a homeless boy by the name of Edward Clark who stayed from November 1916 until March 1918. Approximately one-half of the school enrollment of 62 was boarded there. A high school was added in 1918 and operated until 1931.

A new church was built in 1923 for \$40,000.00 seating capacity was 250. The cornerstone was laid June 17, 1923 and the first Mass was on December 23, 1923. The church was dedicated June 12, 1927. Fr. Hoheisel said his last Mass in December, 1939. In June 1940, a new pastor, Fr. Clarence Trummer, was assigned to St. Columbkille.

The school still had boarders and the cost was raised to \$1.00 per day per student in 1944. Many of the students came from South Omaha. The boarding was discontinued in 1946. Former students remember the large vegetable garden located in back of the school that extended from 5th to 6th Street. They recall especially the huge potato patch, and all the cultivating etc. that was done by hand.

In 1953 Fr. Robert Krajicek celebrated his first Mass at St. Columbkille. He was the first graduate of Sacred Heart Academy ordained to the priesthood. Fr. Krajicek lived in the parish and served in residence for many years.

In 1954 four stained glass windows representing the four gospels were installed in the sanctuary. They are now located in the shadow boxes in the present church. Fr. Trummer had a stroke in August of 1955 and died January 2, 1956.

In June 1955, Fr. John Stears became Pastor. Vatican II had arrived and changes were made in the Church. John and Don Schram built a new front altar for the church; it was first used on Christmas Eve 1964. In the early 1960's a convent was built for the Benedictine Sisters. However, the Order could not support adding a teacher to the Faculty. The first lay teacher was hired in 1962; school enrollment was 177 students. In 1965 six classrooms and a gymnasium were added to the older facility. By 1966 enrollment was 275. In 1976 a kindergarten class was added.

In 1970 Fr. Robert Steinhausen replaced Fr. Stears as Pastor. The first parish council was formed in 1971. The parish continued to grow rapidly and by 1975 had 980 families. In 1978 the school officially was named St. Columbkille School. The first lay principal, Bob Voboril, was hired in 1980.

The first associate pastor, Fr. Melvin Beckman, arrived in 1971. Fr. Theodore Richling replaced him after two months. Fr. Richling served until 1974 and was replaced by Fr. Gerald Leise. In 1977 Fr. Harold Buse became associate pastor; he served at St. Columbkille until 1981.

The parish continued to grow, as did the LaVista and Springfield areas. The number of Masses increased to nine per weekend. In 1980 Archbishop Sheehan established St. Joseph Parish in Springfield and made it a mission of St. Columbkille. The Social Service Center in LaVista was added in 1973, a gift of Dr. James and Bette Hezel.

The parish staff grew as full-time people had to be hired to replace part-time volunteers. In 1975 Lynn Landgren retired after sixteen years as choir director and was replaced by Karen Conoan. In 1977 a part-time secretary, Pauline Henkensiefken, was hired and in August 1981, Judy Lauber was hired as full-time secretary.

In 1977 the present church site was purchased from Jane Hogan for \$150,000.00 which was a terrific bargain, even at that time. There were restrictive covenants to overcome in order to build a church on the property. Eighty-some signatures were required; the last one came on the final day of the option to buy the land. (And she was a parishioner.)

In 1977 the pastor, his mother, and Fr. Buse moved to the new rectory. The old rectory was made into the Religious Education Center and Sr. Mary Schumacher was hired as the first full time R.E. Director, a position formerly held by volunteers. In 1979 Fr. Steinhausen and the parish council appointed a building committee for a new church. They were: Richard Scheer, chairman, Frank Bianco, vice-chairman, Bette Hezel, Mike Kinney, Dave Koenigsman, Eldon Lauber, Tom Satchell, Al Schmid and Bernard Schram. In May 1979 the architectural firm of Bahr, Vermeer & Haecker were hired to design the new church. Low bidder for the new church was Petersen Brothers Construction Company of Omaha. That bid was \$1,419,000.00.

Groundbreaking was held on November 9, 1980. The rectory was moved to its present site and construction was started on the new church. In June 1981, Fr. Pat Henry became the new associate pastor. In July of 1981 an Art & Environment Committee of 20 people of diverse ages and philosophy was formed to commission the art and environment of the new church. Decisions were made by consensus; the idea behind this format was that if these 20 could agree, then the probability of the parish at large accepting these important decisions was greatly enhanced. The first major decision made was the departure from a corpus, to the Risen Christ. This came from the theme suggested by the Pastor Fr. Robert Steinhausen, *Out of Darkness Light*. Rudy Torrini, a noted artist from St. Louis was commissioned to do the sculpture at a fee of \$10,000. The laying of the cornerstone was March 26, 1982. The first prayer service of any kind was held for the construction workers of the new church and was also on March 26, 1982. The first mass was held on March 27, 1982. The church was dedicated on April 17, 1982, Archbishop Daniel Sheehan presiding, with more than 1000 in attendance.

Seating capacity for the church is 750 in the pews, but with seating in the Alcoves, Chapel, Cry Room and chairs, the church will seat approximately 1000.

Local artists were used for the art and environment of the church. They were Dave Fitzpatrick of Omaha who did all the handcrafted wood, Tabernacle, Book repository, altars, chairs, ambos, and credence tables. Steve Polchert of Ralston crafted the pottery, communion vessels, candleholders, lamps and the pottery on the Tabernacle and Book Repository. Jonathan Hotchka, S.J. from Creighton University, sculptured the corpses on the processional cross and in the reconciliation rooms. Beth Irwin, a parishioner, crafted the terra cotta medallions on the baptismal font. John Henry from Ohio, a brother of associate pastor, Pat Henry, designed the processional cross; Dave Fitzpatrick and Steve Polchert handcrafted it. Dedication of the sculpture "*The Resurrection*" by Artist Rudy Torrini of St. Louis was on April 17, 1983. All of the Artwork in the church is original and one of a kind, except the four Gospel windows and the Stations of the Cross that were brought over from the former church.

The church won many architectural awards in 1983 for design and use of masonry. The communion vessels and church furniture were featured in the *North American Bishop's Guidelines for Art & Environment in Catholic Worship*. The communion vessels have been used in several Archdiocesan celebrations, including *Loved and Sent* in the 1980's and the installation of Archbishop Elden Francis Curtiss in 1993.

In 1983, Fr. Lloyd Gnirk, became a priest in residence. Fr. Pat Henry left in 1984 and was followed by Rev. John Fiala. In 1987 he was replaced by Fr. Paul Zaccone. In 1988 Fr. Augustine Mulanjanany also served as an associate pastor. In May, 1987 the last Benedictine Nun, Sister Delores Dolezal left St. Columbkille School. In July of 1988 Marge Koenigsman replaced Sr. Schumacher as Director of Religious Education. In 1990 Fr. Keith Rezac was assigned as associate pastor. Also coming to serve as an associate was Fr. Jim Bartek. A major addition to the school was added in 1990. Susan Ronk replaced Bob Voboril as principal. In 1992 Dorothy Cubrich became principal.

On February 7, 1993, Fr. Steinhausen died suddenly, and in June 1993 Fr. Steven J. Stillmunks became the 5th pastor of St. Columbkille with Fr. James Bartak assigned as his associate.

In November of 1994 a blessing of the Sacred Heart statue and the new front doors of the church was held. In 1995 the Steinhausen Center was built. Also in 1995 another addition to the school, along with new offices for the school and religious education was built as enrollment continued to grow. At that time Christine Overkamp replaced Dorothy Cubrich as School Principal. In May 1995 the Mary Mother of Christ statue was blessed and in June 1995 a blessing of the votive candle stands was held. The statue of Mary and the Sacred Heart statue were made by Sculptor Rudi Torrini of St. Louis.

In 1995 Fr. Joseph Weiss, S.J. was assigned as an associate at St. Columbkille. Fr. Mark Tomasiewicz was assigned in 1996. He was replaced in 1996 by Fr. Leo Rigatuso. In 1996 there was a major addition to the school and religious education facilities. It was named the St. Columbkille Education Center and was dedicated in January 1998.

In 1999, Fr. Charles Jurgensmeier, S.J. replaced Fr. Weiss as associate at St. Columbkille. In May 1999, Bill Heese was hired as Building and Grounds Coordinator, Also in 1999, Margie Altman replaced Marge Koenigsman as Director of Religious Education. In June 2001, Fr. Francis Nigli was assigned as associate pastor. In 2001 Judy Thome replaced Margie Altman as Director of Religious Education 2001. In October 2002, Chris Essink was hired as Secretary for the Business, Development and Athletic Office and in 2007 she also became the parish bulletin editor. In October 2003, Pam Yenko replaced Karen Conoan as Liturgy Director, Nicole Chambers was hired as Music Director, and Laura Miller replaced Katherine Foord as Youth Formation Director.

In August of 2003, Fr. Stillmunks was transferred and Fr. Francis Nigli became Parish Administrator. Sister Jean Marie Fautus was hired as the director of Adult Formation in 2003. Fr. Damian Zuerlein became the sixth pastor of St. Columbkille in June 2004, Fr. Nigli was transferred, and Fr. Gerry Welsh was assigned as Associate Pastor. In June 2005, Fr. Vitalis Anyanike replaced Fr. Welsh as Associate Pastor. Dan Justin replaced Laura Miller as Youth Formation Director in January 2005. In November 2006, Mary

Jane Zeller replaced Dan Justin as Youth Director. David Batter replaced Nicole Chambers as Director of Music and Liturgy in December 2006. In June 2007, Fr. Anyanike was transferred and Fr. Damien Wee was assigned as Associate Pastor. Also in August 2007 Deacon David Krueger was hired as Stewardship Director. In June 2009 long-time Business/Development and Athletic Director Bruce Tangeman resigned. Judith O'Connor was hired as Religious Education Office Manager in July 2009. In June 2010 long-time School Principal Christine Overkamp retired and Sr. Jean Marie Faltus stepped down as Director of Adult Formation and RCIA; she remains as Director of Spirituality Alive. In July 2010, Dr. Cheryl Blue became the new School Principal. Also in July 2010, Nicole Cook was hired as Coordinator of Disciple Formation.

A preschool was approved for the 2002-2003 school year and was named Sacred Heart Preschool. Julie Crnkovich was named director. There was a full enrollment of 60 students. Enrollment for the 2009-10 school year was 60. The number of classes offered for 2010-11 has been reduced to three and enrollment is 45 students.

In 2001 design work was begun on design of a new bell tower. The old bell, a gift of the Schram families to the previous church, had been refurbished and was re-dedicated on June 5, 2002 with groundbreaking for the site of the bell tower also held on that day. In 2003 construction of the tower was completed and on September 18, 2003 the bell was once again calling the community to worship. In September 2004, the new bell tower, a statue of our Patron Saint Columbkille, and a new courtyard were dedicated.

In 2003/04 the parish priests moved into housing purchased adjacent to the parish and the entire rectory became parish offices. In January 2006, cabinets were donated and are located in the Social Level of the church for displaying photos, documents and historical artifacts of the parish.

As of September 2010, there are 2,741 families registered in the parish (8,784 people). Enrollment in the elementary school in 2009-2010 was 506; current enrollment for 2010-2011 is 496. In 2009-2010, enrollment in the Religious Education Program was 494

students; enrollment in the 2010 summer program was 243 and current enrollment in the nine-month program for 2010-2011 is 374.

The parish has been blessed by men answering the call to the Permanent Diaconate. Currently 12 Deacons serve the parish: Bill Hill, Steve Jordan, David Krueger, Eldon Lauber, Frank Mascarello, Jerry Overkamp, Russ Perry, Bob Stier, Brian Thomas, Duane Thome, Eric Vande Berg and John Zurek. We are grateful to these men and their wives for their time, leadership and the many ministries they provide to the parish.

Along with the Pastor, Fr. Damian Zuerlein, and his Associate, Fr. Damien Wee, a strong support staff serves the parish. Deacon Eldon Lauber, *Pastoral Associate*, Jan Bode, *Finance Director*, Dr. Cheryl Blue, *School Principal*, Valarie Galing, *School Administrative Assistant*, Judy Lauber, *Parish Office Manager*, Judy Thome, *Director of Religious Formation*, David Batter, *Music and Liturgy Director*, Julie Crnkovich, *Pre-school Director*, Sister Jean Marie Fautus, *Spirituality Alive*, Deacon David Krueger, *Director of Stewardship*, Nicole Cook *Coordinator of Disciple Formation*. Bill Heese, *Maintenance/Grounds Coordinator*.

The parish is blessed by the many men and women who serve on the Pastoral Council, Finance Council, Stewardship Council, School Advisory Council, Home & School Association, Knights of Columbus, Fish Fry Committee, Women's Guild, St. Vincent de Paul Society and the many other organizations, groups and ministries of the parish, as well as teachers, catechists, secretaries, musicians and all the many other wonderful people who give so much of themselves to make St. Columbkille a very special place.

In June of 2002 the Parish celebrated its 125th anniversary. God has indeed richly blessed St. Columbkille Parish in the past 137 years. It is indeed amazing that we have only had six pastors in our 137 year history. This shows the wonderful bond between them and the people. Under their guidance the Parish has grown in its ministry to God's people while becoming one of the larger parishes in the state.

We are thankful for all those early pioneers, priests, nuns and others who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith for the vision, sacrifices and traditions they have passed down to us. We are also grateful to the priests, deacons, nuns and all the members who preceded us for the gift of themselves while they were among us; may God bless them and their endeavors. Our prayers and hopes are that the parish will always continue to meet the challenges that come before it, and that it may thrive and continue to serve our loving God and His people in the Papillion and LaVista communities for many more years to come.

There are so many more stories, events and people to thank that have been omitted because of brevity which I deeply regret. Please forgive any inaccuracies or errors on my part. May God continue to bless St. Columbkille Parish!

“Go and Make Disciples”

