In the Beginning: A Workshop for Parish Historians

By Carl Ganz

The annual parish historians’ conference hosted by the Diocese of Metuchen Historical Records Commission was held at the Diocesan Center in Piscataway on November 21, 2015. Over 50 parish historians were in attendance. For many years the Metuchen Diocese has encouraged parishes to appoint at least one parish historian. Of the 89 parishes in the diocese, 70 parishes have done so. The conferences have traditionally been seminars on such practical topics as how to operate a parish archives or how to preserve patrimony. Recently, the Commission has been organizing pilgrimages to Catholic historical sites in the state of New Jersey and presenting more academic topics. This year, the group hosted Msgr. Raymond Kupke, pastor of St. Anthony's Parish in Hawthorne, New Jersey, and Adjunct Professor of Church History at Immaculate Conception Seminary at Seton Hall University. Msgr. Kupke has served as the archivist of the Diocese of Paterson for the past 40 years and is the author of *Living Stones: A History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Paterson*.

Msgr. Kupke gave two presentations to the group. The first was on the subject of church hierarchy in the United States, explaining the development of the Catholic Church in the American colonies and how the first bishop - John Carroll - was appointed to the Diocese of Baltimore, which then comprised the entire US east of the Mississippi. Focusing next on the growth of the Church in New Jersey, Msgr. Kupke recounted the early Catholic settlements in the state and the ministry of the Jesuits operating out of St. Joseph's Parish in Philadelphia, especially that of Fr. Ferdinand Farmer who traveled New Jersey on horseback for 30 years, ministering to the scattered Catholic population.

In his second presentation, focusing on the contributions of the bishops of New Jersey, Msgr. Kupke explained the growth of the immigrant church through the creation of the Diocese of Newark in 1853 and the state’s subsequent division into a total of five dioceses to reach its present boundaries. He recounted some of the various men who served as bishops over the past century and a half.

After lunch, Bishop Paul Bootkoski, having recently submitted his resignation as Bishop of Metuchen, recalled his elevation to the episcopacy and his years in the diocese. The Bishop spoke about his life in the service of the Church, from the realization of his vocation to the priesthood to how he learned of his elevation to the episcopacy.

The Diocese of Metuchen Historical Records Commission is tasked with preserving the historical records of the parishes in the diocese and assists its parish historians in doing the same. It meets four times per year at the Diocesan Center in Piscataway. For more information about the work of the Commission, please contact Rev. Peter Cebulka at Kephas53@gmail.com.