Sacred Heart Parish Celebrates 200 Years

by Fr. Ed Jawidzik

2014 was a very special year for the parish of the Sacred Heart in Trenton, New Jersey. At a jubilee Mass celebrated by Bishop David M. O’Connell, CM, on October 12, the faith community celebrated 200 years since its founding in 1814 – the same year Francis Scott Key penned the words to what would become our National Anthem!

In 1729, a Jesuit priest, Rev. Joseph Greaton, SJ, arrived in Philadelphia, where he built a chapel, Old Saint Joseph’s on Willings Alley in about 1732. He took charge of the West Jersey mission extending from Trenton to Cape May.

Although the date of the first Mass celebrated in Trenton is uncertain, by about 1797, priests from Philadelphia were attending to the Catholics in Trenton. From 1811 to 1814, Mass was celebrated at the home of Giovanni Battisti Sartori, first U.S. consul to the Papal States and later Papal consul to the United States. The Most Reverend Michael Egan, bishop of Philadelphia, conducted a dedication ceremony on June 12, 1814, and named the Church of Saint John the Baptist after Mr. Sartori.

The Jesuits of Old Saint Joseph’s in Philadelphia cared for the parish from 1833 until 1837, when Rev. Daniel Magorien became the first resident pastor. Rev. John P. Mackin, appointed pastor in 1844, erected a larger Saint John’s Church. The Most Rev. Francis P. Kenrick, bishop of Philadelphia, laid the cornerstone on June 27, 1847. The church was open for Mass on Christmas 1847 and dedicated on August 17, 1848.

In 1851, the older church building was sold to Mr. Peter A. Hargous, son of Captain John Hargous, who with Mr. Sartori was instrumental in building old Saint John’s. This became the German Catholics’ place of worship, Saint Francis of Assisi Church.

Rev. Anthony Smith became pastor in 1861 and opened an asylum for orphaned children, who were cared for by the Sisters of Charity of Convent Station, then part of Madison. In 1866, Father Smith planned for a mission to Saint John’s in northern Trenton, Saint Mary’s of the Assumption. It became a parish in 1871 and Father Smith moved in and became the first pastor of what would be selected as the Cathedral Church of the new Diocese of Trenton upon its establishment in 1881.

On Sunday evening, September 30, 1883, a devastating fire destroyed the newer Saint John’s. Rev. Thaddeus Hogan erected in its place the parish’s third church, renamed by Father Hogan Sacred Heart Church, perhaps because a personal devotion Father Hogan may have had to the Sacred Heart, or because of the approximate 200th anniversary of the apparitions of Jesus to Saint Margaret Mary Alaquoque. The Church was dedicated on June 30, 1889 by the Most Rev. Michael J. O’Farrell, first Bishop of Trenton.

In 1854, Rev. John P. Mackin (see above) opened Saint John’s Catholic School. In 1874, Rev. Patrick Byrne built a new school building and in 1924, Rev. Peter J. Hart built another school building and a convent. The Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth from Convent Station have taught in the school since 1864. In 2003, after 149 years, Sacred Heart School closed its doors due to rising costs of education and declining enrollment.

Today, Sacred Heart Parish is a thriving faith community of 800 families with a vibrant worship life and excellent ministries to the greater Trenton community, under the devoted leadership of Father Dennis A. Apoldite, the parish’s nineteenth pastor. Happy 200th, Sacred Heart Parish!