

PARISH SPOTLIGHT

By John Bohuslaw

Church of the Assumption

Two solid rocks at a time

Early parishioners of Assumption Church in Ansonia, is 183 feet long and 115 feet wide.

The church, made of granite quarried in Ansonia, is 183 feet long and 115 feet wide. A parish history states, "The foundation goes down to a great depth: the walls at the base bang 6 feet thick."

Built on an extremely steep slope, the church floor is only a few feet above ground level when one walks in. But the altar is dramatically three stories higher than the entrance.

Co-pastor Father George P. Burnett said, "The early parishioners would work all day at the local factories and at night haul granite from the quarries in their wagons, two solid rock at a time. They would dig the foundation and net the rocks."

Such was the determination of 4,000 parishioners who would begin building the "stone monarch" in the 1890's.

But by then the parish already had an earlier history of getting things accomplished in a big way.

The first Irish Catholic laborers came to work in the local manufacturing mills in the mid-19th century.

Under the direction of Father Patrick J. O'Dwyer of neighboring Derby, they gave of their spare time initially building a frame church. The foundation was dedicated on Aug. 15, 1867, and the finished

church was dedicated on Aug. 23, 1868.

On June 25, 1870, Father O'Dwyer became the first resident pastor, administering to more than 1,000 parishioners.

The wooden-frame church would be used until 1909, when

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the Italian Catholics of Ansonia organized Holy Rosary Parish and the structure changed names as it became the place of worship for the new parish.

For some reason, parishioners of Assumption Parish continued to use the church for the 8 a.m. Sunday Mass even after they had built the granite structure. Later, in 1955, the wooden-frame church was finally sold to Holy Rosary Parish.

By 1886 the Sisters of Mercy had arrived and had begun "conducting an academy" for youngsters in the convent. This was at about the same time that Father Joseph Synott was appointed third pastor.

"It was his vision of having a church which would match the

cathedral in Hartford," said Father Burnett, "a grand church!"

Charles Keely, the leading Catholic church architect of the day, designed the granite church. He had already designed 16 Catholic cathedrals in the United States, including those in Chicago and Boston, and more than 500 other churches.

Construction began in 1889 and finished in 1907. Bishop Michael Tierney dedicated the structure.

While walking inside the church, Father Robert F. Condron, co-pastor, said, "It continues to look and feel like an old cathedral."

The 20th century saw the parish flourishing in size and expanding its ministries.

A parochial school was dedicated on Aug. 21, 1910, and it opened the following month. It is still operational today.

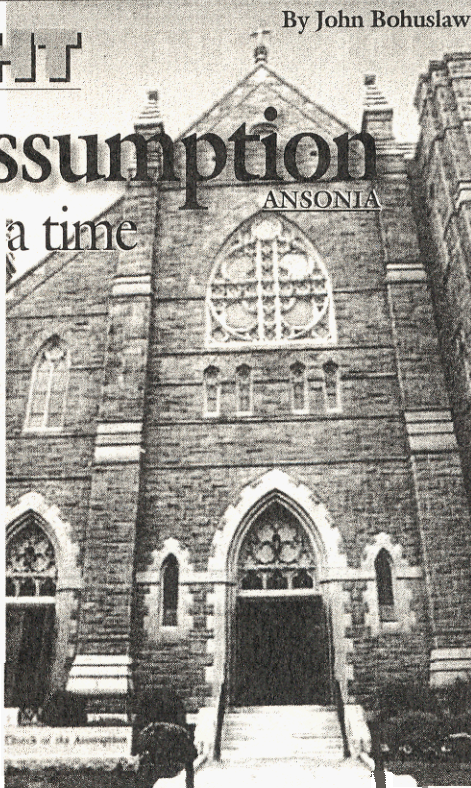
The church was renovated. Bishop John P. Nilan dedicated it in 1934.

In 1955, the parish decided to build a new convent to replace an old house that was originally purchased in 1907 for use by the Sisters of Mercy.

The sisters planned to move from the old convent to the new one on Aug. 17, 1956.

When the school closed its doors for the semester, the sisters stored their furnishings in the school building temporarily and went on their summer assignments.

In what some might describe as a remarkably tragic and yet fortuitous stroke of coincidence, a



Church of the Assumption

spectacular fire destroyed the old convent a week later. It also severely damaged the new convent's rear wall.

The flames were so intense that every piece of firefighting equipment in the city was used and 12 firemen were injured battling the blaze.

While no official reason has ever been given for the fire, the local fire chief said at the time that the wrecking company that was tearing down the old convent had been using acetylene torches to salvage the plumbing. Soon thereafter, a janitor saw smoke pouring from openings in the old structure.

It would take almost a year to repair the new convent prior to its dedication in April by Hartford Auxiliary Bishop John Hackett.

The uninjured and intrepid 16 nuns nevertheless already had moved into the unfinished convent the previous September, before the beginning of fall classes.

In the 1960's the church basement was converted into a parish hall in which many of today's ministries meet.

By the 1980's the parish census fell to 1,200 households and the school saw attendance decrease to fewer than 250. Father Condron said the census has been holding steady at about 4,000 for the past decade. He reported that many young families are moving into the parish as some of the "old-timers leave."

Attendance at the school has been rising; it appears ready to top 250 again.

Trustee Dan Hogan has been a parishioner for 50 years. He said that in recent years it's not just the school, but the parish, too, that has become active and vibrant since the two co-pastors arrived 20 years ago.

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"They are quite a team," said Mr. Hogan. "While one is tackling the daily hard problems like finance, the other will be out visiting the sick. They are good at what they are doing. The parish has never been stronger."

He reported that the church and buildings are kept in excellent condition, the finances are stable and, most of all, the parish leadership remains strong.

Mr. Hogan described the co-pastors working together, side-by-side.

As was true at the church's beginning, the parish is built on a solid foundation, two solid rocks at a time.

ENDS IN FLAMES



Once proud mansion of Wallace family, old Assumption Convent, facing North Main Street, scorched by parish in 1907 from Thomas and Ellen B. Wallace, ended its career in flames Wednesday afternoon. Building was over 70 years old.

FIRE DESTROYS CONVENT
— In photo and caption at right from the *Evening Sentinel*, flames engulf and destroy the original Assumption convent on July 1, 1955. The intensity of the fire also severely damaged a new adjacent convent building in the process of construction.

Church of the Assumption
6 North Cliff Street, Ansonia, CT 06401

CO-PASTORS

Father George P. Burnett • Father Robert E. Condron

DEACONS

Deacon John Brady • Deacon Joseph DiPiro

MASSSES:

Sunday vigil: Sat. 4 p.m. • Sunday: 7:30, 9:30, 11:30 a.m.

PREVIOUS PASTORS

Father Patrick J. O'Dwyer ~ 1870-76

Father Hugh T. Brady ~ 1876-86

Father Joseph Synott ~ 1886-1926

Father Eugene L. Sullivan ~ 1926-28

Father Walter P. Kennedy ~ 1928-52

Msgr. John T. Hynes ~ 1952-65

Father Raymond A. Mulcahy ~ 1965-75

Father Ernest J. Coppa • Father Thomas A. Missett

TEAM-PASTORS ~ 1975-82

Father Ernest Coppa ~ 1982-85

Tea shot in his honor

Former pastor Father Ernest Coppa, who died in 1985, was heavily involved in trying to restore the economic vitality of the depressed Naugatuck valley.

He may be best remembered for his efforts to keep jobs in Ansonia as a member of the Naugatuck Valley Project and the Valley United Way, a coalition of leaders from churches, labor unions and valley communities.

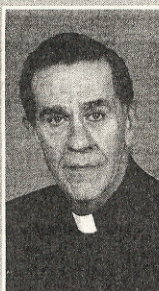
His pastoral assignments included membership on the archdiocesan personnel board, which makes recommendations on clergy appointments, and the Catholic Family Service Board. He also was an instructor for the archdiocesan marriage tribunal.

His love for golf prompted fellow priests to hold an annual commemorative golf tournament in his honor. It is only open to clergy, and continues to be a popular annual event.

CO-PASTORS



Father Robert F. Condron



Father George P. Burnett