

OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP CATHOLIC CHURCH

STERLING, OKLAHOMA

“THE FIRST 100 YEARS”

1904 – 2004

In the early 1900's, there was no Catholic Church building in the area, so Mass was held in parishioner's homes in and around Sterling. The first priest was Father Anthony Van der Grinten. The first church building was established in 1904 under his guidance. Some of the pioneer families assisting in the building were: Ille, Doebel, Casey, Schulte, Fehring, Scheetz, Stottman, Lutonsky and Jacobi. There was a need for the ladies to help with the upkeep of the church and the first Altar Society was organized. All ladies of the church were members. Mrs. Ben Fehring was elected President, and Mrs. Charles Doebel was Vice-President. The first rectory was built shortly after the church, with Father Van again in charge.

The congregation consisted mostly of farm families, who were good workers and knowledgeable of carpenter and construction work. As time passed and the church grew, there was need for a school. In 1916, the first school, a one room building with grades first through eighth was built. When the school opened, it was taught by the lay members of the parish. Oscar Jacobi, Ada Link, Mary (Fehring) Bells, Christine Scheetz and Mrs. Stever were the first teachers.

After Father Van, the parish was served by Father Nicholas Schmitt. Father Van der Grinten returned for a year in 1920, then Father Doering served from 1922 to 1927. Father James F. Wagoner was appointed our pastor in 1927 and served until 1938. Father William Love, OSB, served for several months in 1938.

On December 22, 1928, the church was destroyed by fire, along with many church records. Within a short time, action was taken to build a new church. This time the contract was awarded to C.J. Cannovan of Rush Springs, under the supervision of Father Wagoner. On October 8, 1929, the new church was dedicated to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. The dedication ceremony was celebrated by Monsignor Depreiter, with Fathers Wagoner, Blaise OSB, Van Der Grinter, LaRague, and Tieran, a Fort Sill chaplain, assisting. Also assisting was Deacon H.B. Manselant of Hugo, Oklahoma. This church building still stands on the church property. Some of the old pioneers that helped build this parish have children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren here today.

The first school that was built in 1916 was closed in 1939. Soon after that closing, plans were being made for a new school building. The men of the parish built the school, donating many hours of labor. Father Michael McNamee (Father Mac) arrived in December of 1938 and stayed until 1947. He served as foreman for the building of the school. He also had a new rectory built about the same time, all to his expert specifications. The school opened in 1944. It was voted to have the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood, from the convent in Wichita, Kansas, as teachers. A nun's home had to be built for them to

live in during the school year. In the summer months, they returned to their convent in Kansas. There was a two-story home built on the premises. In the first year of the school only first through eighth grades were taught, with 52 students enrolled. Shortly after, the ninth through twelfth grades were added.

The school was funded by donations and an annual carnival, held on the school grounds each fall. Game booths were sponsored by the Knights of Columbus members and other men of the parish. The Altar Society ladies prepared and served a meal for a small donation. The most popular game was bingo. Usually a beef would be donated by a farmer and raffled off. Around 1949, Preston Williams, a parishioner, donated a 10" console TV to be given away to a lucky winner. The winner was Helen Marie Fehring. The carnivals were all lots of hard work, but also provided lots of good times and good memories!

The school day began with Mass at 8:15 for all students that were able to attend. Classes were held from 9:00 until 12:00, resuming at 1:00 and lasting until 4:00. Students participated in all activities: 4-H, Basketball, Baseball and Softball. At that time there was a Catholic League that we participated in. The league consisted of St. Mary's, Lawton, Chickasha, Anadarko, Canute, Elk City and Our Lady's, Sterling. We also took part in the annual Youth Rally in Oklahoma City.

The first graduate of the first Senior Class in 1945 was Bernard H. Fehring, then Gus Lutonsky was the graduate in 1946. Graduation was held in the church, by the pastor who also served as Superintendent of the School.

In 1947, Father Mac announced that he would be leaving due to ill health. He was very highly regarded and would be dearly missed. He worked very hard, pulling all the people of the church together to build a school, a convent and a rectory. Father Mac was replaced by Father Ferdinand F. Meis. Father Meis was to be commended for his leadership and guidance. He remained here until 1952.

When Father Meis was reassigned, we had the privilege of having Father Leo Hardesty from 1953-1954. In 1955, we were assigned Father John T Murray. Father Murray was amazed that the small town parish "starting from nothing and ending with church, school, rectory and convent, is worthy of being classified as a worthy accomplishment of the past 50 years". Father Murray, who raised cattle himself, was here for three years. We had Father Bernard Collins for a short time in 1956. Father Milton P Gans was here from 1956-1961.

Our high school was closed in 1958 by Bishop Reed. Final graduates were Margaret Mae Conway and Evelyn Fehring. In 1960, the grade school was closed due to a small enrollment. The nuns from Wichita, Kansas left Sterling for the last time on June 10, 1961. The old school building still stands and serves as a fellowship hall and Religious Education Classrooms.

Father Cletus M. Bash served as our priest from 1961-1964, Father Grove R. Hayden from 1964-1968. Father John T. Murray returned from 1969-1971. Father Robert O. Kropp served from 1971-1973, Father Blase C. Schumacher, OSB, from 1973-1975 and Father Alan J. Loth from 1975-1982.

Father Lawrence Kowalski was our pastor from 1982-1990. He not only served our church, but also ministered to many people in our community. He counseled many and ministered through his work in AA.

He was followed by Father David A. Cowden from 1990-1994, Father Thomas O'Toole from 1994-1997, Father Peter Ashurst from 1997-1998, Father Marvin Levin, Father James H. Ross and Father Louis Lamb in 1998-1999. Father Joseph Kolb ministered to us until his much-deserved retirement in 2003.

While Father O'Toole served as our pastor, a sign, statue and flower garden were added to our church property. These were designed by Julie Jung Walker, who grew up in our parish.

Also under Father O'Toole, a school reunion was held on August 5th in 1995. Anita Seibold Huitt was chairman, Helen Marie Fehring Huitt served as co-chair. Ginger Seibold catered the banquet. Brother Paschal (Johnny) Duesman, S.S.P, of Staten Island, New York, attended and was presented a print of our church, drawn by Hollis Howard. Three of the nuns who had taught in our school also attended.

From our parish we had nuns from the Scheetz and Doebel families who devoted their lives to God. Deacon Jim Conway serves at the Church in Marlow. Father Charles Schettler will celebrate his 50th year as a priest this year in a celebration in our Church in December. Father Joe Jacobi was born here. Brother Paschal (Johnny) Duesman serves in New York. These people have so blessed the church and we are very proud of them all.

Religious education teachers in 2004 are Christi Pierce Jung, Director of Religious Education, Rhonda Rego Carney, Dorenda Huitt Joiner, Karen Jacobi, Monica Rego Rankin, and Deanna Rego Ridge.

Our current Parish Council members are Judy Jacobi Milam, President, Troy Fehring, Barbara Jung, Clarice Seibold Pierce, Lawrence Jung, Peggy Goodner and Henry Schulte, members.

Father Irundayaraj Yeddanapalli (YC) came to Sterling in July 2003. He was born in India and has been doing missionary work in Oklahoma for the past four years. We are so blessed to have him lead us into the next 100 years of service, as we give thanks for the work, the love and the leadership our priests, our parents, grandparents and great grandparents have given us in the last 100 years.

Helen Marie Fehring Huitt
Church Historian

Note: *This history of the church was written as the introduction for our Centennial Cookbook to honor our "First 100 Years".*