

# History of St. Therese's Church

1923 - 2006

Prior to 1923, Back Mountain Catholics attended Mass in Luzerne, Kingston and Wilkes-Barre. Their ethnic origins more or less determined the family choice. During the summer, priests from St. Mary's in Wilkes-Barre and St. Ignatius in Kingston celebrated Mass at Harvey's Lake in various buildings. The Oneonta Hotel, until it burned to the ground, and finally, the Amusement Hall at the Sunset section of the lake, was used most of the time. On Labor Day of 1923, Our Lady of Victory Chapel at Harvey's Lake was dedicated as the first parish of the Back Mountain. On August 1, 1926, Fr. John J. O'Leary became the pastor.

Due to the rapid growth of the Catholic population in the Back Mountain area, on November 3, 1926, Fr. O'Leary was transferred from Harvey's Lake to Shavertown and was named pastor of the newly founded St. Therese's Parish with Our Lady of Victory as a mission. While the present structure was being built, masses were held at a dance hall/skating rink located in Trucksville.

To build the new church, many fund raisers, such as dinner dances, card parties, clam-bakes, bazaars and bingos were held. Among the first fund raising committee members were: Nick Staub, Jacob Laux, Joseph Wallo, Frank McGarry and John Baur, Sr. Several of the Baur and Staub families are still members of the parish today.

The stone on the outside of the church was donated from the properties of Nick Staub of Trucksville, the Belines and Gabel's of Chase, and was transported by horse and wagon.

Lawrence Eckenrode of Wilkes-Barre was the main contractor, accompanied by his son Charles, who was the father of Charlotte Kindler, one of our present parishioners.

The structure was modeled after a church in France where Fr. O'Leary had said mass during World War I at the Battle of the Marne in 1918.

A home at 74 Pioneer Ave. was rented for Fr. O'Leary's living quarters and was used until the present rectory on Davis St. was completed by J.W. Thomas in January of 1929.

The cornerstone of the new church was laid on the first Sunday of November, 1928, and the first Mass in the new structure was held in the basement of the church on Christmas Eve, 1928 as the main floor was not yet completed. During the years 1930 to 1935, the pews, altars, statues and the last of the main stained glass windows were completed. The present pipe organ was dedicated on October 11, 1938. By 1943, the outstanding balance on the new buildings was reduced to \$3000.00 due to the hard work of many parishioners and the generosity of businesses in the Back Mountain.

In 1961, the Shrine of St. Therese, a gift of the Holy Name Society in memory of Fr. O'Leary and Fr. Harold Durkin, was erected at the corner of Pioneer Ave. and Davis Street.

1963 saw the completion of the church to the original plans with the installation of the stained glass windows in the sacristy and vestibule. The house next door to the church was purchased some time in 1950 and was used initially as a dormitory for nuns and students of College Misericordia.

St. Therese's donated \$80,000.00 to the Church/school fund of Gate of Heaven Church which was opened in November, 1951.

The Sanctuary of St. Therese's Church was renovated in 1973 through the donations of many parishioners. The plaque noting the renovation gifts is located in the vestibule of the church. Also in 1973, property on Pioneer Ave. was purchased for the parking lot to accommodate the growing parish.

The stained glass doors at the main entrance to the church were donated in 1983 by the Aston family in memory of their son, William.

Fr. Harold Durkin became the second pastor of St. Therese's in 1936 following the early retirement of Fr. O'Leary due to ill health. In 1943, Fr. O'Leary came out of retirement to serve as pastor until his death in October of 1957. His assistant during this time was Fr. Francis Brennan, who remained as administrator until the appointment of Fr. John P. Walsh, our third pastor, in 1958. Fr. Walsh retired in 1970 and Fr. Joseph Sammons was appointed the fourth pastor of St. Therese's until his transfer in 1985.

During the next five years, St. Therese's had several pastors and administrators, including Msgr. Joseph Gilgallon, Msgr. John Esseff and Fr. Joseph Meighan.

Msgr. Kevin P. O'Neill was appointed pastor in April of 1990 and oversaw several changes in the parish, including the renovation of the first floor of the rectory into parish offices in 1992 to accommodate the staff personnel. The piano in the front of the church was donated through the generosity of a number of parishioners in 1990. In October of 1990, Jack Barbose and his son erected the grotto in the front of the church, housing the statue of St. Therese. In 1991, folding walls were installed in the basement of the church to accommodate classrooms for Religious Education. The kitchen in the basement of the church underwent total renovation in 1992 through the efforts of several volunteers. The church bells were donated in May of 1993 in memory of Phillip Straub. The Finance Council was formed in 1991 and the Parish Pastoral Council was begun in 1993.

In 1994, Fr. J. Peter Crynes was named Pastor upon the transfer of Msgr. O'Neill. He continued the process of growth in the parish begun by his predecessors by forming a Building and Grounds Committee and a Long Range Planning Committee to assess future plans for this parish. The house adjacent to the church on Pioneer Avenue became the Office of Religious Education. In 1997, the four parishes located in the Back Mountain: St. Therese, Gate of Heaven, Our Lady of Victory and St. Frances Cabrini, formed a jointure with the purpose of administering Gate of Heaven School. Fr. Crynes was appointed Monsignor in 1998. Both the upper and lower parking lots were refurbished in 1997 and new carpeting was installed in the sanctuary of the church in 1998. In 1997, Fr. Thomas Flynn began to serve St. Therese's as a

Senior Priest, sharing the celebration of the liturgies with Fr. Crynes. In 1999, Fr. Flynn and Fr. Sammons were feted at a celebration of their 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary to the priesthood in St. Therese's Church.

A Capital Campaign, begun in 2003, raised the funds necessary to refurbish the front entrance of the Church, landscape the Church grounds, install an elevator and air conditioning system, add a new and handicapped accessible parking lot, renovate the Church vestibule, and update the Church Hall and Kitchen.

Fr. James J. Paisley was appointed Pastor of St. Therese's on July 6, 2006 and continues to serve the parish in this capacity.

Among the former assistants to serve at St. Therese's were the Reverends: J. P. McDonough, J. J. Hlopko, D. Langan, H. L. Lewis, A. J. McGowan, B. L. Grogan, D. D. Olszewski, J. McAuliffe, F. T. Brennan, V. Langan, P. J. Flynn, V. Zemaitis, J. Samson, F. A. McGinley, J. F. Carroll, J. M. Lawler, M. A. Roche, G. E. Frank, J. J. Kennedy, E. J. Haggery, J. P. McAndrew, S. J. Cituk, S. Feretti, J. C. O'Bell and K. Siegar.

Two former parishioners celebrated their first Mass in St. Therese's: Fr. Edward Gallagher in 1946 and Fr. Ralph Martin in 1965.

Sr. Mary Irene Sorber, also a former parishioner, professed her vows to the Sisters of Christian Charity in 1975.

The congregation of St. Therese's Parish has grown from the 25 original families in 1926 to over 1500 families in 2006.