

ST. ANTHONY WRAPS UP CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

OKMULGEE – In its early days, many Catholics of the future St. Anthony Catholic Church got an early start on Sunday mornings to “drive in buckboards out 10 to 20 miles to attend Mass at a farm house,” recalled parish pioneer J.J. Moroney in an article written in 1926 for the diocesan newspaper.

The earliest historical document to mention Catholics in Okmulgee County is a February 1893 baptism record of three children of the Watson family. The man who baptized them, Father William Henry Ketcham, was still a seminarian when he sought to transfer to the new Vicariate Apostolic of the Indian Territory, as Oklahoma was then called. It is believed Father Ketcham may have walked from Muskogee to minister to the Catholics in Okmulgee, as he was too poor to have a horse, and at that time there was no railroad linking the towns.

In a history prepared to help St. Anthony Church in Okmulgee celebrate its centennial – a celebration that concluded the weekend of July 26-27 – Father James White traces the progress of the Okmulgee Catholics from pre-statehood through the erection of the first St. Anthony Church – the town’s first brick church when it opened in 1908.

Other early highlights are the arrival of the Sisters of Divine Providence from San Antonio, Texas, in 1917. In 1923, a black Catholic woman, Mrs. B.H. Mann, requested a separate church for black Catholics in Okmulgee, since at St. Anthony’s the practice was “the last three pews (were) for colored only,” Father White writes.

In May 1925, Bishop Francis Clement Kelley arranged for the archbishop of New York, Cardinal Patrick Hayes, to travel to Okmulgee to lay the foundation of the building that was to become the current St. Anthony Church, completed in 1926 South Morton Avenue.

Uganda Martyrs Church, built for black Catholics in Okmulgee by white parishioners of St. Anthony, first was erected in April 1918. In October 1925, Bishop Kelley came to dedicate the new parish church to the Uganda Martyrs, the first in the United States to be named for the African martyrs who died in of 1886.

The first native-American born priest to serve St. Anthony was Father John T. Hall, the son of a commissary sergeant at the frontier Army post of Fort Reno who served as a state chaplain in the Oklahoma National Guard. It was he, Father White writes, who first became aware of a looming problem that plagued the parish for many years: It lacked the resources to pay for its new large church.

To some extent, that is because the oil boom of Okmulgee County in the early years of the 20th century turned into a boomlet. Structural problems with the church, in addition to general money woes, have plagued St. Anthony for decades.

A pivotal partnership was formed in August 1928, when the first priest from the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer – the Redemptorists – arrived in Ok-

mulgee following a request from Bishop Kelley. Redemptorist Fathers were to serve St. Anthony until 1986.

In 1930, a homegrown Okmulgee man was ordained to the Society of the Divine Word, a missionary order, and Father Henry Yungbluth celebrated his first solemn Mass at St. Anthony. Several young men from the parish also entered the Redemptorist seminary, including Father Christopher Farrel, C.S.S.R., who offered his first solemn Mass in his home parish on July 5, 1942. His brother, Father Paul Farrell, C.S.S.R., and Father William Coyle, also were ordained as Redemptorist priests, as were four others over the years.

At least 14 Okmulgee women joined the Sisters of Divine Providence, and others became Benedictines, though none of them in Oklahoma.

During World War II, wounded American soldiers and German prisoners of war were treated at a 1,750-bed hospital built in Okmulgee in 1943. St. Anthony Father Thomas Landers, C.S.S.R. was appointed chaplain there.

A long-standing parish debt was finally paid off following a fund drive conducted by volunteer men of the parish, and in January 1948, Bishop Eugene McGuinness came to be part of the mortgage-burning ceremony.

In 1953, the simple colored windows of St. Anthony began to be replaced by artistic stained-glass panels funded by donations.

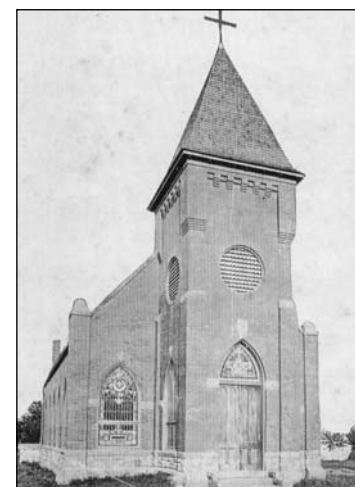
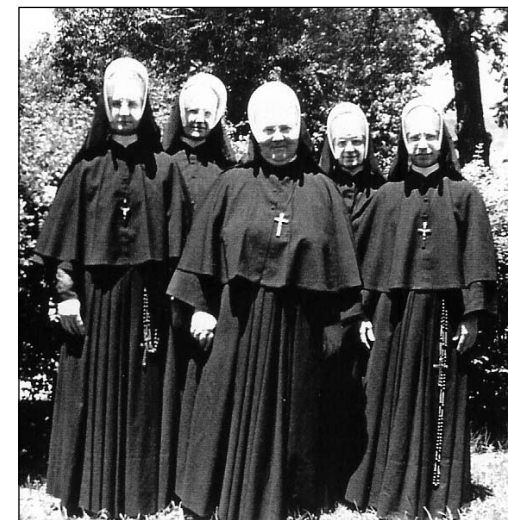
In April 1969, St. Anthony elected its first parish council, with officers Lawrence McCormick as president; Anne Moroney, vice president, and Thomas Neider, secretary. Sometime around 1966, the parish high school was discontinued, and also in those years St. Anthony School enrollment began to fall. In November 1970, the Sisters of Divine Providence were withdrawn, and the school was closed.

Just a month after he was ordained the first Bishop of Tulsa, Bishop Bernard J. Ganter came to visit with Okmulgee Catholics. When Bishop Eusebius J. Beltran became the new bishop in 1978, one of his first acts was to accept an invitation to preside at the golden jubilee of the Redemptorists’ service in Okmulgee. At their final Mass, June 8, 1986, “many sad and loving words were spoken, and many gifts were given as a token of the affection in which the people held the Redemptorists,” Father White writes.

Generous parishioners continued to support the parish; in 1984, Pat Hannigan left \$200,000 to St. Anthony; in 1985, another parishioner left \$25,000.

The history notes yet another renovation of the church in the mid-80s and early 1990s, and the reopening of the parish school as Marian Academy. Run by the Sisinawa Dominican Congregation, it remained open until 2006.

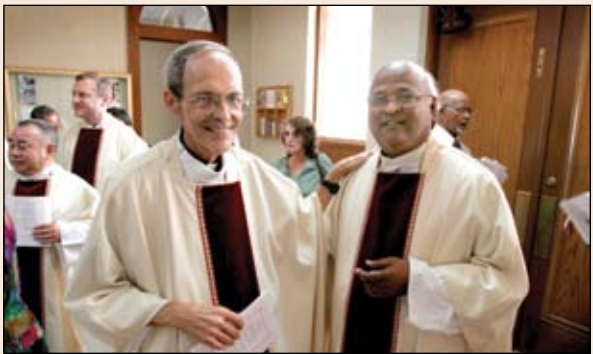
Father Benjamin Vima, the priest who enthusiastically organized the year-long centennial events, has followed in the long line of St. Anthony pastors who have continued renovations to the gorgeous old building.



From top are Mr. and Mrs. J.J. Moroney, center, with Father William Glynn and the pastor of Okmulgee’s Episcopal church; the first group of Sisters of Divine Providence who came to staff the school and old St. Anthony’s on Seminole Street.



Bishop Slattery confirms candidate Ashley Black.



Father Vima chats with Father Daniel Panchot, C.S.C., before Mass. Father Panchot, of Guadalajara, Mexico, is the only priest ordained at St. Anthony.



A full house of faithful stand during the recessional.



Above left, Father Bryan Brooks, pastor of St. Joseph Church in Muskogee, chats with Joyce Williams. Mrs. Williams has been a parishioner at St. Anthony for 56 years. Father Brooks is a former pastor.

Above right, Father Martin Morgan, pastor of St. Patrick Church in Sand Springs and former pastor of St. Anthony, greets Nancy Massaro of McAlester after Mass. Mrs. Massaro is a former St. Anthony parishioner.

Right, Henry Moll is greeted by former parishioner Jackie Olzawski, a member of St. Anthony since 1922. Mr. Moll first met her when she was nine years old. She now attends St. Bernard Church in Tulsa.



THE PRIESTS OF ST. ANTHONY PARISH, 1910-PRESENT

On July 26, 1908, Bishop Theophile Meerschaert dedicated the first Catholic church in Okmulgee under the patronage of St. Anthony of Padua. On June 1, 1910, the church was elevated to the stature of a parish, and Father Hubert A. Van Rechem was appointed as St. Anthony’s first resident pastor.

For 60 years, the parish was served by Redemptorist Fathers. The priests who served the Catholic community of Okmulgee prior to 1910 were:

- 1893-1903 Father William H. Ketcham from Muskogee
- 1903-1906 Father Joseph Van Hulse from Muskogee
- 1906-1908 Father William Glynn from Holdenville
- 1908-1910 Father Paul Gillen from Holdenville

PASTORS AT ST. ANTHONY’S PARISH:

- 1910-1920 Father Hubert A. Van Rechem
- 1920-1925 Father Urban de Hasque
- 1925-1928 Father John T. Hall
- 1928-1930 Father Armand Ferret, C.Ss.R.
- 1930-1938 Father Charles Heing, C.Ss.R.
- 1938-1942 Father Edward Meade, C.Ss.R.
- 1942-1947 Father Thomas Landers, C.Ss.R.
- 1947-1950 Father Gerald Liebst, C.Ss.R.
- 1950-1956 Father Edward J. Comer, C.Ss.R.
- 1956-1963 Father Joseph Campbell, C.Ss.R.
- 1936-1966 Father Ralph Liebst, C.Ss.R.
- 1966-1972 Father Gregory Lahay, C.Ss.R.
- 1972-1975 Father Julian Grehan, C.Ss.R.
- 1975-1978 Father Elmer Toups, C.Ss.R.
- 1978-1981 Father Clement Monroe, C.Ss.R.
- 1981-1984 Father Gerald Seibold, C.Ss.R.
- 1984-1986 Father James J. Nugent, C.Ss.R.
- 1986-1991 Father Arthur T. O’Hara
- 1991-1994 Father Gerald J. Coleman
- 1994 – 1996 Father Martin Morgan
- 1996-2001 Father Bryan Brooks
- 2001 – present Father Benjamin A. Vima