

OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP

1902 - 1977

This triangular southwestern tip of Fayette County, Pennsylvania is naturally defended on the east by the Chestnut Ridge, where no passage is possible except by National Highway, Route 40; on the west by the Monongahela River, on which most of the transportation was carried in the Pioneer Days. Here, after the military defense was established by Port Mason on Canon Hill, peace and tranquility prevailed among these God-fearing, religious and friendly settlers who had established at least two Christian settlements before the Catholic congregation was formed.

Rapid development and great progress were initiated when the railroad was laid from Pittsburgh, PA to Morgantown, WV. When coal fields were discovered in this area, inland railroad had to be laid, mines to be opened, coke ovens to be built and trees cut with which houses and towns had to be built for the workmen. People began to come from all parts of Europe hoping to gain a livelihood, establish homes, build churches and become citizens of this new land of ours!

The coal mines in Ronco and Gates marked the beginning here. In 1900, the Monongalia Railroad cut its winding way from Gates eastward through the hills along Brown's Run toward the now Leckrone, reached Moser Run here and built a Junction toward Edenborn Mine. It was at this point that our congregation was established.

The workmen during this period travelled to church by railroad to Ronco and then to Brownsville. Others went by horse to St. John Church, Uniontown, PA. Reverend Aurelius Stehle came to say Mass for workmen in Ronco.

Real estate was so much in demand that tracts of land exchanged hands several times a year.

Rt. Reverend Richard Phelan, Roman Catholic Bishop of Pittsburgh, sent Father William J. Drum here as Pastor of "Masontown District" on July 16, 1902. So many Catholics here were anxious to build a church of their own that no time was lost.

The management of the coal company also recognized this need. The H.C. Frick Coal Company donated the plot of land (4.917 acres, which is now our present cemetery) on December 3, 1903. The title reads: "To Rt. Reverend Richard Phelan, in TRUST for the Roman Catholic Congregation ... at Moser Run Junction, German Township, Fayette County, PA."

Joyfully the workmen cut trees, made suitable lumber and built the parish church. The cornerstone was laid in a few weeks, in 1903. The wooden church building was completed at

the cost of \$4,000 and on October 9, 1904, Bishop Richard Phelan of the Pittsburgh Roman Catholic Diocese dedicated the church, which was called St. Columbkille for the German settlement in this German Township and soon known as Our Lady of Perpetual Help for the Slovak population coming in from Europe. Great jubilation filled all in the area.

Soon, however, tragedy followed. Father Drum was injured by his horse as he tried to calm the animal, frightened by a moving locomotive. On August 3, 1906, Fr. Drum was moved to Noblestown and died three days later.

Father Damascene Francis Polivka (age 42) succeeded Father Drum on August 5, 1906. He was a brilliant scholar and excelled in speaking several languages. This was very important because many parishioners had come from areas of Europe, especially from Slovakia, to obtain religious freedom.

During Fr. Polivka's pastorship, the original church was destroyed by fire on December 5, 1907, the day before St. Nicholas day. On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1907, Mass was celebrated in a long building near the ball park in Leckrone, Pennsylvania. Later, this building became the home of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Radvansky, Sr. Several months later, H.C. Frick donated another parcel of land to Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, and a wooden building was constructed near the site of our present church. Mass was celebrated in this building for several years. In 1907, St. Mary's also acquired a Mission Church at Gates, Pennsylvania and Mass was held there every Sunday. Father Polivka was transferred July 11, 1908.

By this time great progress in the area was made. The German Township Grade School was built near the railroad station west of the ball park in Leckrone, PA. The West Penn Railway (streetcar) line was constructed and the houses, known as Leckrone 1, 2 and 5 Blocks were constructed and the Leckrone mine was opened. Therefore, the old church location continued to be used as a cemetery and the new land was purchased. The new land was next to the German Township Grade School building.

On February 13, 1908, H.C. Frick Coke Company donated and deeded this land (3.092 acres) to "Reverend J.F. Regin Canevin ... in TRUST for the use of the Roman Catholic Congregation of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and St. Columbkille at Leckrone, German Township ...". This deed, however, was not officially recorded in Fayette County Courthouse until it was reviewed, revived, and a new deed written upon the request of Fr. Joseph J. Hmelyar. This new deed, from U.S. Steel Corporation to "Most Reverend William G. Connare in TRUST for the Roman Catholic Congregation known as Our Lady of Perpetual Help and St. Columbkille ..." (was recorded in August 1968).

During Fr. Polivka's time at the parish (1906-1908), there was change and great progress made. Many new members arrived from Europe. The parish was Roman Catholic of the Latin Rite. To please everybody, no emphasis was placed on the name or the Rite.

After Fr. Polivka arrived it became known that he was ordained in Premysl, Galicia on September 12, 1866 by Rt. Reverend Constantine Czechowich, Catholic Bishop of the Greek Rite and had served as Pastor of a Greek Catholic Church in Duquesne, PA from July 1901 to September 1902. He officially changed Rites in Rome before coming to Leckrone.

The largest part of the parish came from Slovakia and many, especially women, were of the Greek Rite.

Fr. Polivka was transferred to Divine Redeemer Church in Ambridge, PA on July 11, 1908, where he served until November 4, 1908 and then was transferred to Ss. Cyril & Methodius in Charleroi, where he served until June 26, 1910.

Father John W. Kovalsky (age 25) arrived here July 11, 1908. This young and energetic priest organized the enthusiastic congregation, borrowed a cement-block making machine from Dr. Brady of Grays Landing, Pennsylvania, and began making cement blocks for a new church. These blocks were actually made on the church grounds by parishioners. Everyone helped! Mr. Link was the architect. Much credit was given to organist, Joseph Masteria, for the work accomplished here. The cornerstone was laid August 7, 1910 and the new church cost \$12,000. Father Kovalsky was transferred on November 19, 1910.

Father John Blazic arrived on November 19, 1910 (age 29). Father Blazic, a hard working man, did very much for the children. From town to town and from house to house he went to teach Catechism to children. He taught in Grays Landing, Martin, Gallatin, Greensboro and Bobtown, besides Ronco, Gates, Edenborn and Leckrone. The children loved him and he them.

During his pastorate, construction on the new church was completed. On Christmas Day, 1912, Father Blazic celebrated the first Mass in the present church. Windows in the church were not completed and only a pot-belly stove provided heat. Bishop Canevin dedicated the church on June 1, 1913. The parish numbered about 300 families, mostly of Slovak heritage, and the number of families has remained constant throughout the years, even to the present time.

In 1921, a strip of land was acquired opposite the main entrance of the church. A home for the organist was built on this land and the rest of the property was used for parking space.

John Zurvalec converted the old frame church into a school around 1925 at a cost of \$12,000. The same Mr. Zurvalec designed and built the convent for \$20,000. In September,

1926, the Vincentian Sisters of Charity, Perrysville, Pennsylvania, began to teach at St. Mary's. They continued educating our children for about 42 years. The Rectory, which was formerly a farm house on this property, was renovated around 1926 by Father Blazic. Father Blazic was a hard-working and zealous priest. He was transferred on October 11, 1926 and Father Bernard J. McBride replaced him. Father McBride remained at St. Mary's only six months and then Father Fabian S. Kondrka was named pastor on May 11, 1927 by Bishop Hugh C. Boyle. Father Kondrka made extensive improvements to all buildings: the church interior was painted at a cost of \$14,000, a new organ was installed for \$3,500, blocks of coal resting under the church property were purchased from H.C. Frick for \$3,500 and a school bus was purchased costing \$3,800. The school enrollment at this time was 217.

In 1926 the U.S. was entering the Great Depression and there were coal miners on strike. Hard times came. Even the coal under the church and our school was about to be mined. Children were bused from Martin, Grays Landing, Masontown, Gates and Edenborn. Enrollment reached 217 students. Great progress continued.

In 1950, two classrooms were plastered and painted and new lighting fixtures were installed. In 1952 for the Golden Jubilee, the exterior of the church, school, convent and rectory were painted, the interior of the church washed, all classrooms were painted and the desks varnished.

The Holy Name Society, organized May 29, 1930 by Father Eugene Kozar, C.S.P., was very active. On special Sundays the church had chains reaching from the church wall to the pews to reserve space in church for men making their Communion Sunday. The chains were removed by Father Hmelyar in 1968.

The Holy Rosary Society in this parish was well organized, continuously active and helpful. Other Slovak organizations in the parish are: First Catholic Slovak Ladies Union; the First Catholic Slovak Men's Union (Jednota); and the Slovak Catholic Sokol (Falcon), a religious, gymnastic union working especially with the youth from infancy.

During Father Kondrka's pastorate in September, 1952, St. Mary's celebrated its Golden Jubilee. Again, all buildings were renovated to some extent in preparation for this joyous occasion. Total cost was \$10,000.

Father Kondrka was an excellent administrator, esteemed and respected by his parishioners. Having spent 29 years as pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, it was appropriate that upon his death in 1956, Father Kondrka chose to lay at rest here in Leckrone where he so faithfully worked.

Father Anthony G. Hardy was assigned to St. Mary's on January 16, 1956 and endeared himself to us during his pastorate. Father Hardy purchased the "old social hall" property for \$7,500. Then he remodeled the church and social hall, organized a baseball team and revived the Sodality of Mary. Also at this time, the Franciscan Fathers from St. Anthony's Friary, Uniontown, Pennsylvania, began serving our Parish and St. Mary's Mission in Gates, Pennsylvania.

Although Father Hardy was with us a short time, he left many friends here. He was transferred on June 20, 1963.

Reverend Joseph J. Hmelyar was transferred from Indiana County to St. Mary's in 1963. "Father Joe" as he was affectionately called, did much to improve our parish. Our Mission at Gates was transferred to Palmer, Pennsylvania and Father paid \$5,500 to St. Mary's, Gates, Pennsylvania, which was their share of the parish holdings.

The school enrollment dropped to 71 students and Bishop Connare closed our parochial school in 1968. Shortly thereafter, Father organized CCD classes for all children of the parish. With the help of lay teachers, classes were held once a week for approximately 75 students.

On July 20, 1965, Father Hmelyar purchased property below our church building from German Township School Board and the land was cleared for parking and used as an exit. All parking lots were resurfaced. Father Joe expanded our cemetery in 1973 and purchased six and one half acres of land adjacent to our cemetery for \$13,000.

During Father's Hmelyar's pastorate, he sought permission from the Bishop to build a new hall. He worked many hours planning the new building. However, Father Joe suffered a serious heart attack on May 26, 1973, and was hospitalized for one month. Due to ill health, he resigned his duties as pastor with great reluctance for he loved St. Mary's and all parishioners. He endowed this parish with a steadfast belief in our faith and a never-ending pride in our Slovak heritage. He retired as Pastor Emeritus on June 2, 1975.

Father Stanislaus J. Walczak was appointed by Bishop Connare as Pastor of St. Mary's on June 3, 1975. Father Stan worked diligently completing plans for the new hall with permission given by Bishop Connare in September, 1976. Pledges of money were made by many parishioners and an auction netted \$2,000 for the building fund. Plans were made in preparation for our Diamond Jubilee on November 20, 1977. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held for the new Social Hall October 3, 1976. Renovation of the church was begun in August 1977 ... to be completed and paid for at a cost of \$189,000 and renovation of the interior of St. Mary's at a cost of \$50,000.

Much credit must be given to all our parishioners for their hard work, the many and generous sacrifices for the good of the parish. It is a hard and almost impossible task to list all the names and accomplishments of everyone. Time and space does not permit it. While we glory in our achievements, let us praise God and render Him special thanks for the many graces He has showered upon us to make all things possible. May God bless you and yours always and in all ways.

Pastors who have served the parish

Rev. William Drum – June 16, 1902 – July 27, 1906
Rev. Francis Polivka – August 5, 1906 – July 11, 1908
Rev. John W. Kovalsky – July 11, 1908 – November 19, 1910
Rev. John Blazic – November 19, 1910 – October 1926
Rev. Bernard J. McBride – October 1926 – May 11, 1927
Rev. Fabian S. Kondrla – May 11, 1927 – January 16, 1956
Rev. Anthony G. Hardy – January 16, 1956 – June 20, 1963
Rev. Joseph J. Hmelyar – June 20, 1963 – June 2, 1975
Rev. Stanislaus J. Walczak – June 3, 1975 – 1982
Rev. Leonard J. McAlpin – 1982 – 1985
Rev. George R. Pierce – 1985 – 1995
Rev. Andrew Kaweckki – 1995 – 2002
Rev. Donald Trexler – 2002 – 2008
Rev. John Butler (Administrator) – 2008 – June 25, 2013

Parochial Vicars

Rev. Andrew J. Charnoki – 1947 – 1953
Rev. Andrew Horvath – 1953
Rev. Anthony Rakauskas – 1953 – 1956
Rev. Edward Boley – 1956 – 1957
Rev. Michael Bienia – 1961 – 1962
Rev. Apolinaruis Murawski