

A History of St. Bernadette Catholic Church

The presence of Catholicism in Hickory County began around 1945 when Bishop Edwin O'Hara of the Kansas City Diocese worked with the Catholic Extension Society to ensure every county in Missouri had a Catholic Church.

After construction of Lake Pomme de Terre in 1963, mass was needed for vacationers and those moving into Hickory County after retirement. The availability of mass was occasional as Fr. Clem Imberger from Lebanon, the pastor from Osceola and others would celebrate mass at various sites. A building was constructed at the intersection of Highways 54 and 254 in Hermitage, but shortly thereafter fell into disuse as there were not enough Catholics in the area. There were only six families registered at St. Bridget, as it was then called. The building was sold in 1972 by the Diocese of Jefferson City to the Lions Club.

In the summer of 1973, in response to numerous requests for a permanent Catholic presence in Hickory County, Bishop Michael F. McAuliffe STD, charged Fr. Donald Green CPPS, pastor at Warsaw to open a mass station. Fr. Green's health did not permit him to follow through on the Bishop's request.

St. Bernadette Catholic Mission Church was born with the arrival of Fr. Joseph W. Starmann who lived with the Bishop in Jefferson City and commuted over 200 miles each weekend. Fr. Starmann celebrated the first mass in this area on a picnic table in the Dam Site Park on the Feast of All Saints, November 1, 1973 with about 10 people attending. The weather was cold and windy which encouraged Fr. Starmann to inquire if there was a place indoors that could be rented. Ironically, he rented the Lion's Club building which the diocese had sold the previous year. Thereafter, services during winter were held at the Lions Club building.

The Lion's Club proved to be less than desirable because of the need to rearrange the furnishings each week, its inability to accommodate the number of worshippers present during the summer, as well as the smell of smoke. Masses were held at a number of outdoor sites to accommodate the vacation crowds. This inconvenience led the parishioners to seek a permanent location and status as a mission parish.

St. Bernadette Catholic Church began as a shivering little group, almost all strangers to one another, in the open air. Bob Hathaway organized committees for finding a location and building plan. With Bishop Michael McAuliffe's approval, ten acres were purchased for the parish and 26 ½ acres for the diocese along Highway 254 south of Hermitage from Jess and Rose Kauffman. A contract was negotiated to construct a 40' by 66' building. Mr. Leon Hartley of Wheatland was the contractor for the main structure with members of the parish doing the work on the interior. Harley poured the cement slabs, erected the prefabricated roof beams and put on the roof. Parish members did the rest. The cost of land and construction was \$80,000. The new church was ready Holy Thursday, April 15th, 1976.

In 2 ½ years, this small group built this beautiful and not-so-little church. It was built almost entirely by the people of the parish, a labor of love and devotion. Parishioners cleared an area behind the church to develop into a suitable place for celebrating the Liturgy outdoors during the summer when the congregation swelled with vacationers. This church was built mainly to serve the many visitors to the Pomme de Terre area. The church consisted of 31 families.

Dedication of St. Bernadette Mission Catholic Church was on May 16th, 1976 by His Excellency, the Most Reverend Michael F. McAuliffe, Bishop of Jefferson City, MO. Concelebrants were Rev. Joseph W. Starmann, Pastor of Saint Bernadette Parish, Rev. Father Martin OSB, of Conception Abbey, Clergy of the Diocese of Jefferson City and the surrounding area, and the Knights of Columbus. Deacon at Mass was Deacon Elmer C. Hoppins of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, MO. The choir consisted of 24 Seminarians of Saint Thomas Seminary, Hannibal, MO. Some 300 persons attended the dedication.

The buildings of the parish continued to grow as the parish grew in size and activities. On March 12th, 1977 a patio cover was approved with \$2,700 pledged at the Pastoral Council Meeting. Years later the church exterior was stuccoed under the direction of Joe Strobel. In early 1984, Miller Hall was constructed through the generosity of Fred Miller. In July 1989, construction began on the Parish Center, a separate building with larger space for parish activities. A large part of the interior work of the parish center was done by Jack Wagner and family. In the fall of 1993, a 40' by 30' structure for storage and a workshop for the building committee was constructed.

In the spring of 1995, the St. Bernadette Catholic Church sign was erected in front of the church building. It has since deteriorated and was removed. In 1996, two members from the Pastoral Council traveled to St. Louis to obtain the crucifix. In 1997, under the direction of Fr. Donald Powers, initial steps were taken to enlarge the church to house the increase of parishioners and vacationers. Bishop John Gaydos dedicated the addition, holding 350-450 people on December 12th, 1999. In 2000, the appointment of Rev. W. Paul Jones as resident Pastor, elevated St. Bernadette to an independent parish. Stained glass windows designed and executed by Walt Loeffler, a parishioner, were installed and have added to the religious ambience of the church.

For many years, St. Bernadette's sacramental records were kept at St. Anthony's Church in Camdenton. A fire in 1990 destroyed those records. These records are now maintained locally.

But St. Bernadette Catholic Church is much more than buildings. The Altar & Rosary Society provides necessities for liturgical celebrations, flowers for special feasts, dinners for families of deceased following funerals or memorials, ministers at the nursing home, and schedules activities for its members. The Fr. Donald Powers Council #13786 of the Knights of Columbus, formed in 19??, holds Fish Fries during Lent, supports both Special Olympics of Missouri (SOMO) and local Star County Athletes through October Tootsie Roll Drives, supplemented by funds raised from biennial steak Dinners and an annual Golf Tournament. Additionally, they award scholarships to all local schools, support the local Food Pantry with funding and

volunteers, and support Right to Life activities. The Ladies Auxiliary champions women's issues in Hickory County such as the recently formed Helping Hands Abuse and Crisis Center of Hickory County, local pregnancy support centers, and assists the Knights in their endeavors. Previously, St. Bernadettes had a St. Stephens Men's Club which baked and sold donuts each summer to raise funds for its Toys for Kids charitable activity giving toys to the poor children of Hickory County at Christmas time. This function has now been taken over by a separate Toys for Kids ministry committee.

The Pastoral Council plans for the worship life of the parish, plans social activities, cares for the needs of the poor in the county, and monitors finances and education programs of the church. The Finance Council prepares the parish budget and prepares financial reports as well as monitor the maintenance of all parish facilities.

Presently, St. Bernadette's does not have a Pastor; rather, pastoral and administrative activities are the responsibility of Deacon Kent Boettger, Parish Life Collaborator. Fr. Alexius Ekka, pastor of St. Ann's parish in Warsaw, serves as our Sacramental administrator, presiding at all masses. We are thankful to Bishop W. Shawn McKnight for providing this cooperative arrangement to serve the needs of St. Bernadette and Hickory County.