

St. Augustine Church History

In the late 1960's, addressing racism, it seemed appropriate to promote integration by closing Black Catholic parishes and inviting parishioners to move to white parishes. There had long been a little Black Catholic parish in Richmond's Fulton bottom, and it was administered by Redemptorist Fathers; its school was run by the Dominican Sisters. Its name: *Saint Augustine Parish!* Amidst the pain of closing their parish in the interests of integration, the tenth Bishop of Richmond, John Joyce Russell, promised to honor their patron saint, Saint Augustine, by naming the next parish in Richmond after him. In the winter of 1973, Bishop Russell fulfilled his promise and asked the Reverend Monsignor John J. McMahon, then pastor of south Richmond's Sacred Heart Parish on Perry Street, to form a new parish to be called Saint Augustine. Glad for the challenge of forming a new parish, Monsignor McMahon, who had been in the forefront of many important issues, and who had held many important posts in the Richmond Diocese, happily agreed, for the need was great. Moving from urban areas into Chesterfield County, many Sacred Heart parishioners were eager for a parish closer to them. Saint Edward Parish in Bon Air had long been overcrowded; Saint Ann Parish in Colonial Heights was full to the brim! Miss Mary Shaugnessey had willed a generous sum of \$245,000.00 to the first Catholic parish to be established in the Richmond area after her death. These funds, made available to the new Saint Augustine Parish, gave our parish an auspicious beginning.

Bishop Russell donated the ten acres of land at the intersection of Hopkins and Beulah Roads. Our parish marks June 10, 1973 as the official date of founding. Our beloved Monsignor McMahon arranged to have Mass celebrated earlier than that because the need was so great. On Saturday, April 14, 1973 our very first Mass was celebrated at Bensley Elementary School.

Meanwhile, a house at the corner of Hopkins and Falstone Roads was purchased to serve as offices, meeting space, and living accommodations for Monsignor McMahon. Many remember Monsignor's garage serving as a chapel and cherished the intimacy of daily Mass there. Monsignor McMahon then arranged with the Chesterfield County School Board to rent Bensley School for weekend Masses for three years beginning April, 1973. Those who attended "St. Bensley" will long remember the un-air conditioned sultry days, the big fans making more noise than cool air, and the steep incline of the auditorium. Those who thought that Mass "just happened" were surprised at all the "Mass things" Monsignor had to lug in each weekend, and many willingly pitched in to help. Among the many who lovingly stepped forward was Mr. Al Legar, who served as volunteer Music Director. Lynn Morrison played the piano. It practically became part of the liturgy to see Lynn's newborn son sitting in his infant seat on the piano bench while his mother played on!

John Boyd from Sacred Hart and Brain Evans from St. Ann formed a folk group which provided music at the 8:00 a.m. Mass. Walter Huber became chairman of the Building Committee, and accepted with Monsignor McMahan the challenge of building a church in the uncertain times after the Second Vatican Council. Liturgy, and therefore church architecture, was in a state of flux as the Church sought to embrace what is good in the world and allow the liturgy to become, once again, the action of the people, as well as the priest. Parish meetings held in the parish house had a sense of excitement.

We are still deeply grateful to Faith Memorial Baptist Church and our good neighbors at Beulah Methodist Church for making meeting rooms available. Bensley Fire House was also used for meetings as our parish grew. And so, while Masses were celebrated and building plans discussed, others began building the essential network of committees which hold the family together and which provides the smaller communities where spiritual growth and ministry happen. Today's Worship Committee, Christian Formation Committee, Justice and Peace Committee, and such diverse groups as Saint Augustine Women's Guild, the parish bingo teams, hospital ministry and many others owe their start to the good and careful committee work of our founding pastor and families. Among fond memories, a open

house held at the rectory gave our gracious ladies an opportunity to serve as hostesses. Monsignor McMahon was all over the parish in every flurry of activity and we thought he had learned the saintly talent of bi-location.

By the winter of 1997, parish structures evolved and other leaders emerged: Jim Waldron chaired the Parish Advisory Board; Hank Gizzi chaired its subcommittee on finances, while Lois Kramb led Christian Formation. Jim Klaer and Mrs. Wright established a Helping Hands Committee which touched the lives of parishioners, their families and friends. Paul Gauvin directed a Membership Committee and Saint Augustine Women's Guild flourished under the leadership of Betty McWaters.

In taking leave of the old Sacred Heart Parish, we gladly agreed to support its school, which became Sacred Heart/St. Augustine School. Many members of our parish served on the school board over the years, and we made substantial financial contributions that continued until the school closed in 1986. We contributed to the school bus fund and supported their many spiritual and educational activities. We also agreed to help Sacred Heart Parish with ministry to the sick and began, at Chippenham Hospital, a supervised visitation program which we share with Sacred Heart, in whose boundaries the hospital lies.

Miss Gloria Flinn became our first Minister of Religious Education and pastoral Associate, beginning a tradition of dedicated and loving lay and religious professional ministry at Saint Augustine Parish. 430 families graced the rolls of our parish and 240 children were enrolled in religious education. The Christian Youth Organization (CYO) participated in diocesan and local youth activities. They maintained the grounds at Falstone Road for us, entered the One Act Play Contest, and were well-represented at diocesan CYO conventions.

While we were grateful to have a roof over our heads at Bensley School, it was difficult to worship there. But we kept remembering: "Well, God is everywhere!" Carroll Powell, Tom Hoof and Norm Mansini, clad in black robes, served as our first Eucharistic Ministers. "Coffee Sundays" proved a hit!

On Ash Wednesday, 1974, a major fund raising effort began under the professional direction of Brandt-Semenza, with Mr. Douglas Silverton as their representative. They exceeded the goal by \$82,000.00! "Pot-luck" suppers became a happy way of life and were held at Dale Ruritan Club and at many parishioners' homes. Meanwhile, we planned with great excitement for groundbreaking and, on May 5, 1974, Bishop Sullivan, who had become Diocesan Administrator, arrived in the midst of a downpour, and, huddling under umbrellas, we witnessed another beginning.

Saint Augustine Women's Guild began a long and generous tradition of serving the parish by taking care of altar linens, cleaning the parish house and doing many other helpful and loving things. During this time, meetings convened in Hank Gizzi's home to get ideas for furnishing our new church. Invitations went out to parishioners who generously donated liturgical furnishings. Monsignor McMahon led the way by contributing \$4,000.00 for an organ. This was the beginning of many contributions to help beautify our church. Many donors' names were later inscribed on little brass plates and placed in the vestibule of our new church.

During our first year, Masses were not only celebrated at Bensley School and in our "garage-chapel" but also at the Bliley Funeral Home Chippenham Chapel, the Defense General Supply Center and in our homes. Saint Augustine Parish experienced the hum and fuss of much activity! Many generous acts of love characterized parish life then and continue today! Hiram Johnson led a Holy Name Committee while Parish Ways and Means was chaired by Tom Hoof. The Ways and Means Committee evolved into our famous bingo, where many parishioners worked long and hard hours, providing tremendous blessings to our parish by raising funds, giving parishioners themselves a chance to serve, and creating an atmosphere of friendliness and integrity.

Even “Cupid” helped bring together two workers who later fell in love, and were married. The parish quickly grew as leadership was provided by our pastor, who was advised by the parish board. Minutes of the May 28, 1974 meeting show those present: Monsignor McMahon, Gloria Flinn, Deacon Bill Dinga, Betty McWaters, Lois Kramb, Hank Gizzi, Hiram Johnson, Norm Mansini, Ray Turner, Walt Huber, Jim Klaer, Tom Lukish and Bob Smith. They wrestled with building and financial plans. Jim Dowling chaired a Liturgy Committee which planned ecumenical Thanksgiving services and many other beautiful liturgical occasions. An organization called; "God Cares – We Care" typified the kinds of things we did. It's charter, gladly approved by the parish board, called for its members to provide "...a dish of food, car rides, visits, or any other kind of help to anyone in need."

This kind of ministry lives on in "Helping Hands", Ministry to the Sick, led by Jack Bartnik, and our food pantry program. Architect Louis Legnaioli was hired to design our new church. The parish had been so busy and there were already so many activities, it seemed desirable to also have a church hall and a meeting room. Much thought was not given to a Christian Education wing and it was thought that funds might not be available for more than one meeting room. A very small rectory next to the church was designed as Monsignor McMahon thought there would not be an associate pastor, nor a large staff. Mr. Legnaioli later lamented that funds were never to be available for the entire project as originally envisioned and that it was necessary to make numerous changes in the original designs.

The church, church hall, and rectory were all cut back in size, the rectory literally halved from the original plans. In the church, such items as lighting, floor covering, sound, choir space and space for the Blessed Sacrament, as well as additional meeting rooms, were all modified to accommodate the budget. In a further attempt to conserve funds, lower quality building materials were frequently used. Monsignor McMahon and Walter Huber instructed Mr. Legnaioli to "...build a church that is modern but looks like a church!" He accomplished that quite successfully with a handsome exterior design and an interior design which focuses on the altar, although inadvertently allowing little room for baptisms, weddings, funerals, and other liturgical activities.

The church was dedicated in a solemn and moving ceremony on June 7, 1975. Bishop Russell had retired as Diocesan Bishop and Bishop Walter F. Sullivan had become Diocesan Administrator. Bishop Sullivan presided over the dedication with Bishop Russell assisting. Diocesan Chancellor Father William L. Pitt, Monsignor Francis J. Byrne, and many other priests and Protestant clergy attended the ceremony. It was truly an exciting day, and in our own inimitable way, we continued the celebration with a party for all in our new church hall. Bingo began in October of 1975 with the established goal of paying off the church debt.

Its first \$25,000.00 donation paved the parking lot. Father Patrick Doody had been Associate Pastor and in March decided to return to Ireland, where he served the poor until his death in 1991. Father Bob Butt became Associate Pastor after Father Doody. Meanwhile, the Holy Name Society built a garage behind the little rectory. Mildred Russert was Monsignor's housekeeper and her husband, Louis, was the custodian; their son, Larry, helped with the grounds. Al Meyers chaired the Finance Committee, and others who helped lead the parish those days included: Rita Banister, Angie Miller, Joe Holicky, Margie Fox, Tom Hoof, Noveen Stiso, Elaine Winter, and Helen Busch. The Roving Retirees originated as an ecumenical group with our parishioner, Louise Leary, as a founding member and first president. This energetic and fun-loving group provides fellowship, recreation, and educational support for its members and they take several out of town trips each year.

Our first Annual Parish Picnic was held on the Sunday after Labor Day in 1976. Buddy Reilly and Tom Hoof brainstormed this idea and annual picnics have become occasions for nearly a thousand people to gather in the fields behind the church for a great time. Games for our children, dancing for the adults, fine food and fellowship became the hallmarks of the much anticipated picnics. Around this time our first annual Variety Show offered parishioners an opportunity to dazzle us with their talent. Father Val's love

for music often tempted him to be part of the show, and he frequently accompanied acts on the piano. Can you still see him smiling his way through a song, his voice rich and melodious? Can you also remember Father Val as part of the infamous hula dancers who included "Rock" Cervený, Walt Huber, Tom Lukish, Tom Hoof, Charlie Craig, Chris Craig and Mike Craig, Ted Figuera and others?

Our beloved Monsignor McMahon was transferred in the spring of 1977 and Father James R. VonMeysenbug (Father Val) became Parish Administrator, and later, our second pastor. Father Butt left in the fall of 1977 and newly ordained Father James Kauffmann became Associate Pastor. Fred LaSpina became our Religious Education Minister in late 1977. Fred not only provided loving leadership in Christian Formation, but also helped us in many other ways from his little office off the vestibule. Father Jim began the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA).

St. Augustine Women's Guild purchased kitchen equipment, including two dishwashers. They also sewed altar linens and twenty altar server cassocks of different sizes. Two softball diamonds were put up behind the church and local groups began using our fields. During the next few years the parish continued growing in love and numbers. Lois Kramb volunteered to direct youth activities and Elaine Winter served as Music Director. Toni Wood became parish secretary, and in 1978 Manny Klammer became custodian following the untimely death of Mr. Russert. He died in the church while preparing it for Easter. Jack Bartnick served a stint as chairman of the Parish Council, along with others including Brenda McCormac, Jim Dowling, Bill Holt, John Bartinikas, Rick Dodson, and Charlie Craig. A Children's Liturgy of the Word started along with bible studies for adults. Genesis II, a program of adult spirituality, began around this time. A Seder Meal held during Holy Week helped us better understand Christian connections with Passover.

The parish also continued participating in clothing drives and blood drives. Some sad things happened as well, chief among which was losing some friends to the new Epiphany Parish in "Smoketree", a parish begun in Chesterfield County due to population growth. Parish Council meetings became quite interesting during these years of liturgical and leadership experimentation and sometimes it was difficult to tell who was in charge! Members wrestled with financial issues and much discussion was had over issues that varied in importance. In what became an annual ritual of parishes in those days, the Parish Council adopted a new Constitution and Bylaws; the Finance Committee, however, closed its meetings to parishioners. On the other hand, a multitude of loving ministry flourished.

Neighborhood clusters formed to facilitate communication and to foster the bonds of love and support. Families were given stickers with clusters of grapes to put on their mailboxes or front doors to identify members of Saint Augustine. Our Christian Formation Program was accredited by the Diocese for the third year; coffee and donuts, poor box breakfasts and pot-luck abounded!