

HISTORY OF ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH OF THE ASSUMPTION

By Jean L. Berres, Ph.D.

St. Mary's Church of the Assumption is the Mother Church of Catholicism in Waco. Originally established as a parish in 1870, it has been the source of six other parishes in the immediate Waco area. The present church building is the fourth home for the parish.

Catholicism, however, had come to Waco far earlier than the date of the erection of the first permanent church. It is probable that priests visited the city as early as 1855 when the first diocese was formed to encompass the entire state. Only thirteen priests served the needs of the Catholics in all of Texas. It has been established that, in 1869, Reverend J.L. Bussant, visited Waco and said the first Mass of record at the Bowers' home near 2nd Street and Franklin Avenue.

That was the beginning of the parish, a parish dedicated to the Mother of God and Her miraculous Assumption into heaven. On July 24, 1870, the cornerstone was laid for the first Catholic church building, which was completed in 1873. Father Bussant was the first resident pastor.

The tiny church at the corner of 6th Street and Washington Avenue, where the McLennan County Courthouse now stands, soon proved too small for the burgeoning parish. A second church building was erected at 9th Street and Washington Avenue. Within a short time the worshippers grew too numerous even for that structure and by 1886 another church, the third building dedicated to St. Mary of the Assumption, was completed.

Following Father Bussant's tenure, eleven pastors have served St. Mary's: Father A. Badelon, 1880-1897; Father P. J. Clancy, 1897-1910; Father E. A. Kelly, 1910-1919; Father P. A. Heckman, 1919-1926; Father J. P. O'Leary, 1926-1932; Father Thomas F. Hogan, 1932-1934; Msgr. John J. Kearns, 1934-1971; Msgr. Edward A. Rabroker, 1970-1988; Msgr. John E. Driscoll, 1988-1990; Father William Barrow (Administrator) 1990 until Father Angelo Bertini became pastor in September 1991.

Among these, Msgrs. Rabroker and Driscoll had at one time been associate pastors of the parish, Msgr. Mark Deering, founding pastor of St. Louis Parish, and still pastor there, also had been an associate pastor of St. Mary's.

It was during the 36-year tenure of Msgr. Kearns that much expansion of facilities for Waco Catholics occurred. It should be noted that he did this in a heavily Protestant community, which at that time harbored deep feelings of prejudice and distrust of Catholics. The Ku Klux Klan was active in those years but that did not deter Msgr. Kearns in his mission to spread Catholicism in Waco.

Despite World War II, he did get the new church building completed and the first Mass was said in that church in April, 1942. When obtaining land for the church, Msgr. Kearns had also purchased adjoining property for the construction of the first parochial elementary school in Waco — the present St. Mary's School at 13th Street and Washington Avenue. In 1954 he oversaw the construction of Reicher Catholic High School in North Waco on the former site of St. Basil's Boys School. The new high school was named for the Most Reverend Louis J. Reicher, the Bishop of Austin.