

*Saint John the Evangelist
Roman Catholic Church*



Established: March 13, 1887

History of St. John's Parish

Background

St. John's Parish was established officially on March 13, 1887. Prior to that time Catholics in Montville attended St. Mary's Star of the Sea Church in New London, Connecticut. St. John's was originally part of the Diocese of Hartford. It became part of the Diocese of Norwich, when the Diocese was formed in the 1950's and headed by Bishop Bernard J. Flanagan.

In 1887 Catholicism in Connecticut was in relative infancy. The first sustained Catholic Mass was offered in Lebanon Connecticut in 1780-1781. The first Catholic Church in Connecticut was Holy Trinity established in 1834. A census in 1835 revealed that there were 720 Catholics in Connecticut in 1835. Nine years later, that number grew to 4600, due largely to the Irish immigrants who fled Ireland after the deadly Potato Famine. In 1870, three years after St. John's Parish was established, the Catholic population reached 153,000. From there it grew rapidly due to the Great Migration from Europe. By 1908 there were approximately 395,000 Catholics in Connecticut out of a total population of 725,000. At the time of its foundation in 1887, St. John's was at the cusp of the rapid growth in Catholicism in Connecticut. Originally, the laity was predominately of Irish ancestry as were the Pastors and other religious serving the Parish. After the Great Migration, the ethnicity of the Parishioners began to reflect

that of the many sons and daughters of Europe who elected to leave their native lands for a new and more promising life in America.

Development of the Physical Plant

The original St. John's Church had very humble beginnings. It was built as a horse barn in 1866. In that same year the most Reverend Frances McFarland, Bishop of Providence (then part of the Diocese of Hartford) anticipating the growth of the Catholic population in Southeastern, Connecticut purchased the property from a Mr. Patrick Gaynor for the sum of six hundred dollars.

The first pastor of St. Johns was the reverend James Connolly. In need of a Rectory, Fr. Connolly leased a two story home for a monthly fee of \$16.67 until such time as he was able to build a two story home adjacent to the Church. The third Pastor of St Johns, the Reverend James P. Ryle remodeled the rectory, and refurnished the Church while simultaneously building a barn, a horse shed and eliminating the Parish debt.

This modest physical plant served the needs of the Parish until construction of the present church in 1957. A census conducted around 1930 indicated that there were 1,350 Catholics over six years of age in the Parish. Since families were much larger in the 1930's then they are today, the actual number of Catholics belonging to St. Johns most likely was many times that number.

A large segment of parishioners was concentrated in the Palmertown area of Montville. It was deemed expedient to build a chapel to better serve these people. All Saints Chapel was dedicated in October of 1934. St Edward the Confessor Chapel; a converted Methodist Church in Norwichtown, Connecticut was dedicated on June 4, 1947. It was originally assigned to St. Andrews Church in Colchester but reassigned to St. Johns on February 4, 1958. (This chapel was replaced by Our Lady of the Lakes Chapel which was dedicated by Bishop Vincent J. Hines in November 1961. The chapel was later remodeled to become what is today our Sister Church in Community, Our Lady of the Lakes Church).

On May 12, 1948, the Reverend Vincent D. Murphy became Pastor of St Johns. Father Murphy recognized that the facility that he inherited was inadequate to solve the recreational, social and catechetical needs of the Community. As a result, he undertook the construction of what today is our Community Center. The center which has a capacity of four hundred people was dedicated on December 2, 1951. It is the oldest of the buildings which make up the complex on Maple Avenue.

In the 1950's, Southeastern Connecticut experienced rapid growth in population due in part to an increase in activity at Electric Boat, the Underwater Sound Lab and the Submarine Base occasioned by the Cold War. The old Church on Maple Avenue, the converted horse barn, was deemed inadequate. On June 16,

1956 ground was broken for the construction of our present Church. It was dedicated by Bishop Flanagan on June 30, 1957. The Church was designed to accommodate five hundred and sixty people. Architecturally, it is a cross between the more traditional designs of Churches built in the 1800's and the early 1900's and the more modern designs built in the wake of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. (This is particularly true of its stained glass windows).

On July 13, 1957, the Reverend Joseph V. King became Pastor of St. Johns. Under his dynamic leadership, the old rectory was razed and the present rectory built. It was dedicated in March of 1961. Father King foresaw the need for a Parochial Junior High School. On October 22, 1961 ground was broken for a nine room school. The contractor for the school was Edward Hayden, a St. John's parishioner. He also developed plans for a convent.

Unfortunately, the good pastor was reassigned as Rector and Pastor of St. Patrick's Cathedral before his dreams of a new school and convent came to fruition. It was left to his successor, the Reverend James J O'Brien who became Pastor on January 15, 1962 to complete the school and convent and to pay off a debt of \$400,000. The school which was designed to accommodate 360 students in grades seven through nine is very unique architecturally. It is ten sided. St John's school opened its doors in September of 1962. Father O'Brien was able to acquire

the service of three Sisters of the Most Precious Blood from O'Fallon, Missouri to staff the school.

Except for a renovation of the Community Center, and alterations of the Church required by the change in the liturgy after the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, the physical complex remains very much the same as it was after its completion in 1962.

The only other affiliated property is St. Patrick's Cemetery. Realizing that the Parish of St. Johns needed a place to bury its dead, then Pastor Reverend Patrick J. Kennedy purchased in May of 1901 for the sum of seven hundred dollars the land which constitutes what today is St. Patrick's Cemetery; a place where St. John's Church could bury its dead in hallowed ground.

Parish Life

During the first two decades following the dedication of the new St. John's Church in 1957, parish life was exceedingly vibrant. Masses were frequent and often full to overflowing. If one arrived late one stood in the aisle or in the vestibule. For example according to Parish Bulletin dated September 13, 1962 Daily Mass was held at 7:00 and 7:30 am; Saturday Mass was held at 7:30, 9:10 and 11 am; and Sunday Mass was held at 7, 8:15, 9:30 and 11 am. A five pm Mass on Sunday was added in later years. Confessions were held at 4 pm on Saturday

and before every Mass except Sunday Masses. Baptisms were held weekly on Sunday at 12:30 pm.

There were many active organizations including: The Rosary Altar Society, The Holy Name Society, The Nocturnal Adoration Society, The Knights of the Altar (altar boys), The Catholic Youth Organization, Pequot Council, 125 Knights of Columbus (one of the oldest councils in the world, chartered in 1895), The Women's Auxiliary to the Knights, the Columbiettes and an affiliate for high school-age boys, the Columbian Squires.

These organizations were not particularly unique to St. Johns. The St. John's Mother's Circles and the St. John's Couple's Club were unique to St. Johns. Mother's Circles consisted of groups of stay-at-home Moms who met regularly at each other's homes to discuss ways of becoming better Mothers, to share common experiences in child rearing, etc. They were organized according to the grade level of their children at school. There was a Month's Circle devoted to 7th and 8th grades, for example.

The St. John's Couples Club was an organization created in the late sixties by Parishioners the late Fred and Maria desChenes. It was an attempt to encourage social interaction among Parishioners outside the four walls of St. John's Church. Its mantra was "togetherness". There were at its peak several hundred members

ranging in age from early twenties to late fifties. It sponsored a major social event every month that was open to club members, their friends and to the Parish at large. The club organized dances on New Year's Eve and Valentine's Day, family picnics, attendance at sporting events ex; baseball and hockey, evenings at the theater, swimming parties, etc. It was a dynamic organization which in the process of having fun raised money for our Church. It also fostered many friendships among parishioners which have lasted to this day.

Thanks to the well attended services at St. Johns, the weekly offerings allowed the Parish to meet its fiscal responsibilities and pay off the \$400,000 debt incurred by the construction of the school and the convent. The weekly collection on September 28, 1962 totaled \$ 1,933 which adjusted for inflation equates to approximately \$10,300 today.

Pastors, Curates and Religious

Since St. John's Parish was created in 1887 there have been nineteen pastors including our present pastor, the Reverend Robert F. Buongiorno (See List). The pastors, as the list indicates were predominately Irish until the appointment of Father Bronislaw Gadarowski. A partial list of curates who have served at St. Johns since the construction of the new church in 1957 is included as well.

Religious who have served the Parish as teachers at St. John's school are Sisters of the Precious Blood; Sr. Mercedes, Sr. Bertille and Sr. Noella and Sr. Ellen Rose who took Sr. Mercedes place. Their successors, the Sisters of Notre Dame, were Sr. Kathleen, Sr. Helen and Sr. Elaine (Sisters Kathleen and Helen were biological sisters as well).

Parishioners of St. Johns should be especially grateful to Pastor Vincent Murphy (1948-1957) under whose leadership our present church and community center were build. Former Pastor Joseph V. King (1959-1962) was responsible for initiating the creation of St. John's Jr. High School and for building the rectory. Pastor James J. O'Brien (1962-1971) deserves credit for completing the school building, the convent and paying off the debt. Fr. Bronislaw Gadarowski, as Pastor (1972-1989) led the church during the difficult times during which changes in the liturgy mandated by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council were implemented. These changes included translation of the Latin Mass to the Novus Ordo (New Mass), replacement of the altar by a banquet table and removal of the altar rail. They created considerable anxiety among older members of the Parish who were comfortable with the traditional Tridentine Mass. (The Knights of Columbus were particularly upset with the dismantling of the altar rail which was their gift to the new church. A compromise was reached by transferring the wood which topped the altar rail to the first pew). Father Gad, as he was affectionately called,

beautified the Church and renovated the Community Center. He also had the onerous chore of closing St. John's Jr. High School when it became apparent that it was no longer economically viable. He was exceedingly well versed in all aspects of keeping a large physical plant complex such as St. Johns well maintained. He possessed considerable expertise in dealing with carpenters, boiler makers, electricians, roofers, etc. whose services he used only if he could not find a skilled parishioner who would do the requisite work gratis. During his seventeen years of service as Pastor he succeeded admirably in keeping St. John's parish together both spiritually and physically during very difficult times.

In singling out the contributions of these fine Pastors to the creation of what we enjoy today as St. John's Parish we should not forget the contributions of the many priests and religious who have preceded them and those who have succeeded them. On the occasion of the celebration of the 75th Anniversary of our Parish in September 1962, Father O'Brien, a very spiritual priest, wrote the following in a letter to his Parish Family:

“Much more important than brick and mortar development is the spiritual growth of our parish which no statistics can measure. Only God Himself knows how many persons have been received into the Mystical Body of Christ through the waters of Baptism; how many souls have been restored to the grace of God through Penance and

receiving the Bread of Life in the Eucharist; how many citizens of God's kingdom have become soldiers of Christ through the strengthening of Confirmation; how many couples have been united in the holy bond of Matrimony and how many others have been laid to rest with consoling Last Rites of the Church. Only God himself knows how many times a priest has "gone up to the altar of God" to change bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrifice of the Mass. All these facts are written in the book of life and there is no need for us to know them..."

As we think of all the wonderful priests and religious who over the years have nourished our souls through the Sacraments, who have brought God to us and us to God, our hearts should be filled with a deep source of gratitude and humility.