THE CATHOLIC Spirit

Pastoral Letter's 50th Anniversary Events Shed Light on Plight of Appalachia

By Colleen Rowan

Two recent events marking the 50th anniversary of the Appalachian bishops' 1975 pastoral letter "This Land Is Home to Me" have shed light on the plight of the region and its people.

On Oct. 25, Bishop Mark E. Brennan joined Bishop Mark A. Eckman of Pittsburgh and retired Bishop David A. Zubik at "A Healthy Future for This Land" conference that focused on the anniversary of the pastoral letter and the 10th anniversary of Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical "Laudato Si'". In Charleston two days later, the West Virginia Council of Churches hosted a day of speakers on "This Land Is Home to Me" at its 144th annual assembly.

Joining Bishop Brennan at these two events were clergy, religious, diocesan administration, and laity.

In his address at the Pittsburgh event, Bishop Brennan said that stubborn inequities persist in the Appalachian economy, according to an Oct. 30 article from Our Sunday Visitor. Bishop Brennan stated: "This region of our country — the backbone of the Appalachian Mountains — is rich in

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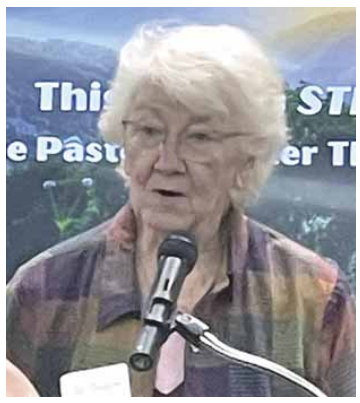

Sister Gretchen Shaffer, CSJ, speaks at the West Virginia Council of Churches event on the pastoral letter "This Land Is Home to Me" Oct. 27.
Courtesy photo

Pope Calls Treatment of Migrants in U.S. 'Extremely Disrespectful'

By Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Insisting that the dignity of all people, including immigrants, must be respected, Pope Leo XIV asked U.S. Catholics and "people of goodwill" to read and listen to the U.S. bishops' recent pastoral message on the topic.

"When people are living good lives — and many of them (in the United States) for 10, 15, 20 years — to treat them in a way that is extremely disrespectful, to say the least," is not acceptable, the pope said Nov. 18.

Meeting reporters outside his villa in Castel Gandolfo, Pope Leo was asked what he thought of the "special pastoral message on immigration" approved overwhelmingly by members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Nov. 12.

"We are disturbed when we see among our people a climate of fear and anxiety around questions of profiling and immigration enforcement," the bishops said. "We are saddened by the state of contemporary

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Power of Unity on Display at Mary's Refuge Gala

By Meg H. Partington

MARTINSBURG—The power of a unified front was on full display during the fourth annual gala for Mary's Refuge.

About 250 area church members, clergy and the general public gathered Nov. 6 at the Hilton Garden Inn Martinsburg to celebrate and expand upon the growth of the maternity home, whose mission is to provide a safe and stable environment for young mothers and mothers-to-be. Seated among them in the ballroom were 10 of the 11 refuge residents and two of the youngest children. One mother was home resting after having given birth to twins on Nov. 3; another woman living there is due to deliver her child on Dec 1.

Nearly $81,000 was raised through the fundraiser for the first maternity home in the Eastern Panhandle, which opened Jan. 9, 2023, in a former convent at 111 E. Stephen St. in Martinsburg. Other figures of note displayed on video screens for attendees were these recorded since

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Meg H. Partington photo
Allison Ferrell, executive director of Mary's Refuge in Martinsburg, holds 5-month-old Amina, one of the residents of Mary's Refuge, during the annual fundraising gala on Nov. 6 at the Hilton Garden Inn Martinsburg.

Inside: A Special Section From FatithInWV: Celebrating the History of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, Pages 7-14

Diocesan Official Appointment

Bishop Mark Brennan has made public the following appointment:

Mr. Patrick Henry is reappointed as the Diocesan Chief Administrator/Financial Officer for a period of five years, effective January 4, 2026.

Obituary—Sister Mary Alice McMaster

Sister Mary Alice McMaster (formerly Sister Rita Catherine) died peacefully in her sleep on Nov. 15, 2025 at Mount St. Joseph in Wheeling. She is preceded in death by her parents, George and Sarah (Myers) McMaster, a brother, Joseph McMaster, and a sister, Rose Smith. She is survived by her sister, Patricia Weaver and her brother, Frank McMaster as well as numerous nieces, nephews and grand-nieces and grand-nephews.

Sister Mary Alice graduated from Delone Catholic High School in McSherrystown, Pa., and entered the Congregation of St. Joseph in Wheeling on Aug. 22, 1950. She took college courses at Duquesne University for two years. Sister Mary Alice's first assignment was to care for small children at St. John's Home in Wheeling. She was a cook and housekeeper at the SSJ House of Studies in Washington, D.C. Following this service, Sister Mary Alice gained her certificate in Home Health and served in Thomas as a nursing assistant. She continued her healthcare positions later at Wheeling Hospital. Sister Mary Alice's last professional position was in pastoral care at St Vincent de Paul Parish. She retired from St. Vincent Parish in 2010. After her retirement she continued to volunteer at the parish. Sister Mary Alice resided at Mount St. Joseph in Wheeling where she continued to send cards and stay connected with friends. She volunteered in Center Outreach projects, participated in Group Spiritual Direction and in a variety of other center activities. Sister Mary Alice always remained active in prayer ministry throughout her life.

Family and friends were received on Thursday, Nov. 20, at Mount St. Joseph, 137 Mount St. Joseph Road, Wheeling. A vigil service was also held that day.

Funeral Liturgy will be celebrated at 11 a.m. on Friday, Nov. 21, in the Mount St. Joseph Chapel. Both the vigil service & funeral liturgy were to be livestreamed via a link on Sister Mary Alice's obituary page at www.altmeyerfuneralhomes.com. Condolences to the family can also be offered on this page.

Arrangements by Altmeyer Funeral Home, 1400 Eoff Street, Wheeling.

To Report Suspected Cases of Sexual Abuse of Children: The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been committed. We also encourage utilizing www.reportbishopabuse.org to make a report about any bishop in the U.S. If you have reason to believe that a bishop has engaged in sexual misconduct or has interfered with an investigation into sexual misconduct, please contact civil authorities in the applicable jurisdiction and visit www.reportbishopabuse.org. **To Report to Civil Authorities: Contact your local law enforcement:** numbers will vary based on your location. If you believe someone is in immediate danger, call 911. To confidentially report any incidence of suspected child abuse or neglect, including sexual abuse, contact the West Virginia Bureau for Children and Families' Child Protective Services by calling the Child Abuse Hotline at 800.352.6513. You may report anonymously to this hotline if you prefer. **To Report to Diocesan Authorities:** The diocese encourages reporting to the appropriate civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been committed. The diocese also encourages reporting to the appropriate church authorities. To report suspected cases of sexual abuse of children by personnel of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston to the Diocese, contact one of the following designees at 1.888.434.6237 or 304.233.0880: Mr. Bryan Minor, ext. 263; Mr. Tim Bishop, ext. 353; or Sr. Martha Gomez, ext. 264. You may also call the Diocese's Office of Safe Environment at 304.230.1504 or the Diocese's sexual abuse hotline at 833.230.5656. Additional methods of reporting are available at www.dwc.org, under "Accountability." Complaint forms are available online at www.dwc.org, click "Diocese" on the menu bar, then "Offices," then "Safe Environment", then "Download Files and Forms." The form is titled "Complaint Form for Allegations of Sexual Abuse of a Minor." The form may be returned via U.S. mail to: Office of Safe Environment, Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, PO Box 230, Wheeling WV 26003. **To Report to the Diocese's Victim Assistance Coordinator:** call Erin McFarland, M.Ed., LPC, at 304.559.6742. The Diocese partners with Navex Global to offer EthicsPoint to report other concerns such as suspected financial, professional, and personal misconduct of a priest, deacon, religious, or lay employee of the Diocese or any Catholic parish or school in WV.EthicsPoint can be accessed via www.dwc.org, under "Accountability", then "Report Misconduct" or by calling 844.723.8381. EthicsPoint is a third-party reporting system that reports to civil authorities where applicable and Diocesan authorities, and the identity of the person reporting is protected. Links and information: WV Department of Health and Human Resources: https://dhhr.wv.gov/bss/services/Pages/Centralized-Intake-for-Abuse-and-Neglect.aspx West Virginia State Police, Crimes Against Children Unit: 304-293-6400.

OSV News photo/Union Energy

Bishop Mark E. Brennan speaks as leaders from across Appalachia gather Oct. 25 at the Diocese of Pittsburgh Pastoral Center for a daylong "faith and labor" dialogue designed to grapple with a range of questions concerning the region's fate.

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natural resources, and in the intelligence and talent of its people. But the profit — of developing those resources, using them — goes to powerful corporations, and their owners. And what is the problem? The fruits of labor — the work that people do, think the ordinary people — are not fairly distributed."

For more on Bishop Brennan's remarks at the event, see the Oct. 31, 2025, issue of The Catholic Spirit (click here).

The conference was held at the Diocese of Pittsburgh Pastoral Center with attendees from all over the Appalachian Region. West Virginia attendees said the gathering had a great impact on them.

"My eyes were opened—opened widely to what God has given us: the beauty and the needs of people and creation," said Deacon Paul C. Lim, vice president for Mission Integration at WVU Medicine Wheeling Hospital, who attended. "This is where the moral and social teaching of the Church come together in wonderful dialogue about our future and how we are to nurture it."

Discussions on "This Land Is Home

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Sexual Abuse Awareness Training

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops requires all Dioceses/Eparchies have a Safe Environment Program for the protection of children and young people. The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston's Safe Environment Program consists of the following components for persons seeking employment or to volunteer, directly or indirectly, with children: background check; receipt of the Diocese's Policy Relating to Sexual Abuse of Children; sexual abuse awareness training for adults. Training may be completed online or via live workshop. For information, go to www.dwc.org, click "Diocese", then "Offices," then "Office of Safe Environment."

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The Catholic Spirit's Print Schedule for 2025

There are 10 print editions in 2025. Below are the names of the issues and the publishing dates. Please note, the publishing dates may or may not be on feast days. Digital issues are published every Friday, delivered by e-mail to subscribers, and posted on thecatholicspiritwv.org.

2025 Print Issues and Dates: Christmas, December 19

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to Me" and the follow-up document "At Home in the Web of Life: A Pastoral Message on Sustainable Communities in Appalachia," is where people of diverse backgrounds and ideologies can come together and be the people of God for Appalachia and beyond, Deacon Lim said.

Lonnie Ellis, OFS, executive director of In Solidarity, helped organize the Pittsburgh event which he said was a giant step forward in reinvigorating the mission described in "This Land Is Home to Me."

"Together we experienced the integration of our faith with the social mission of the Church," Ellis said of the event. "'On earth as it is in heaven' could have been another title for the event as we try to realize God's values for our communities. From here I see more plans developing in the various dioceses for listening and for raising a faith-based, moral voice for actions like cleaning up abandoned gas wells that are polluting our world. To do so, we can team up with labor unions who have been working to ensure we create good, family-sustaining careers for a just transition to clean energy."

West Virginians in attendance were Molly Linehan-Belcher, chair of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia and chair of the event; Sister Helen Skormisley, a member of the leadership team of the Congregation of St. Joseph in Wheeling who responded to the forced fracking of their land; Chad Carter, chancellor of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston; Anna Troiani, executive director of the St. Joseph Retreat Center at the Congregation of St. Joseph in Wheeling; Lou Volpe, a lay person; and Tom Breiding, who performed Americana music and storytelling.

Also present was Dr. Dianna M. Vargo, president of Wheeling University, who said the conference afforded her the opportunity to learn more about the Catholic Committee of Appalachia.

"In 1975, the Appalachian bishops gathered on our campus to promulgate their pastoral letter," she said. "'This Land Is Home to Me' 50-year celebration was held at Wheeling University in January 2025."

The Charleston event, "This Land is STILL Home to Me: The Pastoral Letter Then, Now, and Yet-To-Be" was held at St. John XXIII Pastoral Center gathering people of many denominations to discuss the impact of the letter and the work ahead.

The event was a product of the West Virginia Council of Churches Faith and Order Program Unit and led by Rev. Kenneth M. Hardway of the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Wheeling who is also chair of the Faith and Order Program.

The presentation was in three parts and fostered an in-depth conversation.

"We had a representative from the Roman Catholic faith present on each part for 20 minutes and then we had two respondents who would respond to the presentation that were folks representing other denominations and faith traditions," Rev. Hardway said. What followed was a roughly 30-minute floor discussion among attendees.

"So, it really was a robust ecumenical dialogue, which was our goal," Rev. Hardway said.

Each part was led by moderators representing different denominations as well. For the first part, titled "The land and its people," Deacon Raymond Godwin served as the moderator. He is the ecumenical officer for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

The presenter for Part I was Congregation of St. Joseph Sister Gretchen Shaffer who has spent more than 49 years leading the Big Laurel Learning Center in Mingo County.

She is also a long-time member of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia and has been instrumental in writing the Appalachian pastoral letters and carrying them out, program officials said.

Part II, "The answer of Jesus & his church" was moderated by The Rev. Dr. Kenneth Krimmel, pastor of Oak Hill United Methodist Church, and presented by Linehan-Belcher, who is also director of campus ministry and theology teacher at Charleston Catholic High School.

The moderator for "Part III, "Facing the future" was Bishop Matthew Riegel of the West Virginia–Western Maryland Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and was presented by Eric Fitts, director of Bethlehem Farm in Summers County who is also a long-time member of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia.

OSV News photo/Union Energy

Leaders from across Appalachia gather Oct. 25 at the Diocese of Pittsburgh Pastoral Center for a daylong "faith and labor" dialogue designed to grapple with a range of questions concerning the region's fate. In the center at Table 3 is Deacon Paul C. Lim, vice president for Mission Integration at WVU Medicine Wheeling Hospital.

Reflecting on the impact of the pastoral letter 50 years after its promulgation by the Catholic bishops of Appalachia, Rev. Hardway commended the Roman Catholic Church's leadership in the region.

"This document arose from the needs and wisdom of the people," he said, adding that the West Virginia Council of Churches event offered a platform for voices to be heard. He noted that presenters and respondents were not ordained clergy.

"For the most part, they were lay folks who brought wisdom, their faith, and their professional background," he said. "People who work in support of the powerless presenting to a room full of clergy and bishops and middle judicatory leaders."

Rev. Hardway continued by saying that the pastoral letter amplifies the importance of the laity in Appalachian spirituality and "always keep before us this long rich tradition of the church listening to and advocating for the poor and the powerless in our midst. And the timing of that couldn't be any more poignant, particularly with all the things we're facing—SNAP benefits being cut, health insurance costs rising, immigration issues, deportations."

Echoing these sentiments was Rev. Jeffrey S. Allen, executive director, emeritus of the West Virginia Council of Churches, who was honored at the assembly.

"'This Land Is Home to Me' shaped a generation of folks who worked in Appalachia," Rev. Allen said. "It provided a way to talk about Appalachia from a common theological standpoint that was grounded in the real-life experiences of the people we were ministering to and it spoke to both those working from the church and the community."

(Contributing to this story was Kimberley Hetherington, an OSV News correspondent from Virginia.)

Courtesy photo

Sister Kathy O'Hagan of the Sisters of Notre Dame De Namur (left) who has served at the Big Laurel Learning Center in Mingo County for 49 years is among attendees at "This Land is STILL Home to Me: The Pastoral Letter Then, Now, and Yet-To-Be." The event was presented by the West Virginia Council of Churches at St. John XXIII Pastoral Center in Charleston Oct. 27.

Pope Prays for Christians Experiencing Discrimination, Persecution

By Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — The Gospel readings at Mass in November call Catholics "to reflect on the travails of history and the end times," not to frighten them but to remind them of Jesus' promise that "evil cannot destroy the hope of those who trust in him," Pope Leo XIV said.

"Today, in various parts of the world, Christians are subjected to discrimination and persecution," he told an estimated 40,000 people who gathered in St. Peter's Square Nov. 16 for the recitation of the Angelus prayer.

"I am thinking in particular of Bangladesh, Nigeria, Mozambique, Sudan and other countries from which news often arrives of attacks on communities and places of worship," the pope said.

Although other factors also are at play, most of the attacks have been carried out by Muslim extremists.

But, Pope Leo said, "God is a merciful father and desires peace among all his children!"

The pope also offered special prayers for the Christian community in Congo's North Kivu province. In the town of Byambwe late Nov. 14, members of the Allied Democratic Forces, a group loyal to Islamic State, attacked a clinic run by the Presentation Sisters, killing 15 people before stealing medications and burning the clinic down. They went to nearby homes as well, killing another five people, Vatican News reported.

"Let us pray that all violence may cease and that believers may work together for the common good," the pope said.

Pope Leo also prayed for

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U.S. Bishops Issue 'Special Message' on Immigration

BALTIMORE — As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) gathered for their Fall Plenary Assembly in Baltimore, the bishops issued a Special Message addressing their concern for the evolving situation impacting immigrants in the United States.

The full text of the bishops' Special Pastoral Message follows: As pastors, we the bishops of the United States are bound to our people by ties of communion and compassion in Our Lord Jesus Christ. We are disturbed when we see among our people a climate of fear and anxiety around questions of profiling and immigration enforcement. We are saddened by the state of contemporary debate and the vilification of immigrants. We are concerned about the conditions in detention centers and the lack of access to pastoral care. We lament that some immigrants in the United States have arbitrarily lost their legal status. We are troubled by threats against the sanctity of houses of worship and the special nature of hospitals and schools. We are grieved when we meet parents who fear being detained when taking their children to school and when we try to console family members who have already been separated from their loved ones.

Despite obstacles and prejudices, generations of immigrants have made enormous contributions to the well-being of our nation. We as Catholic bishops love our country and pray for its peace and prosperity. For this very reason, we feel compelled now in this environment to raise our voices in defense of God-given human dignity.

Catholic teaching exhorts nations to recognize the fundamental dignity of all persons, including immigrants. We bishops advocate for a meaningful reform of our nation's immigration laws and procedures. Human dignity and national security are not in conflict. Both are possible if people of good will work together.

We recognize that nations have a responsibility to regulate their borders and establish a just and orderly immigration system for the sake of the common good. Without such processes, immigrants face the risk of trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Safe and legal pathways serve as an antidote to such risks.

The Church's teaching rests on the foundational concern for the human person, as created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). As pastors, we look to Sacred Scripture and the example of the Lord Himself, where we find the wisdom of God's compassion. The priority of the Lord, as the Prophets remind us, is for those who are most vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the stranger (Zechariah 7:10). In the Lord Jesus, we see the One who became poor for our sake (2 Corinthians 8:9), we see the Good Samaritan who lifts us from the dust (Luke 10:30–37), and we see the One who is found in the least of these (Matthew 25). The Church's concern for neighbor and our concern here for immigrants is a response to the Lord's command to love as He has loved us (John 13:34).

To our immigrant brothers and sisters, we stand with you in your suffering, since, when one member suffers, all suffer (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:26). You are not alone!

We note with gratitude that so many of our clergy, consecrated religious, and lay faithful already accompany and assist immigrants in meeting their basic human needs. We urge all people of good will to continue and expand such efforts.

We oppose the indiscriminate mass deportation of people. We pray for an end to dehumanizing rhetoric and violence, whether directed at immigrants or at law enforcement. We pray that the Lord may guide the leaders of our nation, and we are grateful for past and present opportunities to dialogue with public and elected officials. In this dialogue, we will continue to advocate for meaningful immigration reform.

As disciples of the Lord, we remain men and women of hope, and hope does not disappoint! (cf. Romans 5:5)

May the mantle of Our Lady of Guadalupe enfold us all in her maternal and loving care and draw us ever closer to the heart of Christ.

Pope ...

Cont'd from Page 1

debate and the vilification of immigrants. We are concerned about the conditions in detention centers and the lack of access to pastoral care. We lament that some immigrants in the United States have arbitrarily lost their legal status."

The bishops also said, "We oppose the indiscriminate mass deportation of people," and they prayed "for an end to dehumanizing rhetoric and violence, whether directed at immigrants or at law enforcement."

Pope Leo told reporters in Castel Gandolfo that the pastoral message is "a very important statement. I would invite especially all Catholics, but people of goodwill, to listen carefully to what they said."

"No one has said that the United States should have open borders," the pope said. "I think every country has a right to determine who and how and when people enter."

However, he said, in enforcing immigration policy "we have to look for ways of treating people humanely, treating people with the dignity that they have."

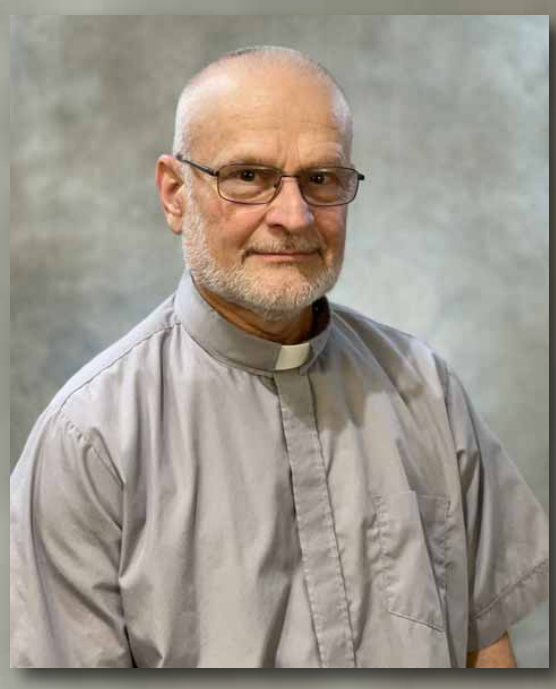
"If people are in the United States illegally, there are ways to treat that," he said. "There are courts. There's a system of justice," but the system has "a lot of problems" that should be addressed.

See the bishops' message on the left of this page.

CONGRATULATIONS

DEACON DAVID LESTER

on Your 20th Anniversary of Ordination to the Diaconate



From the Permanent Deacons of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston

Catholic Daughters of the Americas

The Best Kept Secret

Courtesy photo

From left are Catholic Daughters of the Americas in West Virginia—Beth Fitzgerald, state treasurer; Theresa White, second vice regent; Marilyn Bean, state regent; Sue Smith, first vice regent; and Christine Robison, state secretary; and Karin Dudash, national director.

Formed in 1903 by the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic Daughters of the Americas (CDA) is one of the oldest and largest organizations of Catholic women in the Americas. The national organization, headquartered in New York City, has nearly 53,000 dues-paying members in 1,041 courts (local chapters) in 45 states across the country and in Puerto Rico, Mexico, Guam and the Virgin Islands.

With the Blessed Mother as their Patroness, the organization's motto is "Unity and Charity". Founded in spirituality and service, Catholic Daughter women share faith and a love of God as they worship and pray together. They give their time, energy, stewardship, hearts and finances to help others in the service of Christ. They give generously to local and national charities and work hard for their parishes and communities.

Does the prospect of a deep merging of spirituality and service resonate within your heart?

Are you looking for a way to help the less fortunate in your community or wondering how you can help people in your area who have experienced tragedy? Perhaps you would like to take a more active role in your parish, community, city or town but aren't sure exactly how to do it. Catholic Daughters of the Americas can provide these opportunities.

By giving of your time, talent, ideas, knowledge, dedication, and enthusiasm, you'll receive spiritual enrichment, leadership skills, affirmation, community, broadened horizons, and a marked sense of accomplishment.

There are currently eight courts (chapters) in the state of West Virginia. New members and new ideas are always being sought. If you are a Catholic woman over the age of eighteen and have an interest in the organization or would like more information you can visit our national website at www.catholicdaughters.org, or you may contact West Virginia State Regent, Marilyn Bean, by e-mail at msbean1421@aol.com or phone (304) 266-7546. Come see what we are about!

Special Collection to be Held for the Cathedral of St. Joseph Nov. 22-23

WEST VIRGINIA—At Masses this weekend, Nov. 22-23, parishes and missions of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston will participate in the special collection for the Cathedral of St. Joseph.

As the mother church of our diocese, the cathedral stands as a spiritual home for all Catholics in West Virginia. Your generous support helps preserve and strengthen this sacred space for generations to come.

You can send your donations to Cathedral Campaign, PO Box, 230, Wheeling, WV 26003 or donate online at saintjosephcathedral.com/100th. Thank you for your continued kindness and stewardship.

Parishes and missions have in-pew envelopes, prayer cards, and brochures about the cathedral's 100th anniversary campaign. See more in the ad below.

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National Religious Retirement Office Announces 2025 Retirement Fund for Religious Collection

WEST VIRGINIA— The National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO) is announcing that the annual Retirement Fund for Religious collection will be held in parishes throughout the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston on the weekend of Dec. 13-14.

Rising health-care costs and the absence of traditional retirement plans have placed significant financial strain on many religious communities. The Retirement Fund for Religious helps address this need, supporting more than 21,000 religious over the age of 70. In 2024, the average annual cost of care was about $56,600 per person, with skilled nursing care averaging $96,000.

In 2024, the appeal raised over $28.1 million, providing financial assistance for the retirement needs of 266 U.S. religious communities. Beyond financial aid, the collection supports educational programs, empowering religious communities to plan for their long-term needs.

The NRRO coordinates the annual national appeal for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes financial assistance to eligible religious communities. It is sponsored by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Gala ...

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November 2024: 21 mothers and 17 children helped; eight babies born; 1,006 hours of educational classes provided; 190 rides given to appointments; 15,680 diapers donated; and 4,427 hours of free child care provided. None of those strides could have been made without teamwork, according to those who spoke at the event.

Deacon Patrick Michel from St. Joseph Parish in Martinsburg explained that the refuge came into being thanks to a coalition of all the Eastern Panhandle Catholic churches: St. Joseph in Martinsburg; St. James the Greater in Charles Town; St. Agnes in Shepherdstown; St. Bernadette in Hedgesville; St. Leo in Inwood; and St. Vincent de Paul in Berkeley Springs.

"Something happens when we come together in unity. It's an anointed thing," said keynote speaker Lisa Kratz Thomas, who rose above a life of drug addiction, prostitution and incarceration to become an author, radio talk show host and orator, whose message is one of redemption and rising above adversity. She spent time before the gala with the 11 mothers and 13 children living at the refuge, as well as the four staff members.

"It's a living testament of truth," Kratz Thomas said of the maternity home.

"This refuge is one of those places where God slaps the enemy in the face," she said. "We've got a room full of people who want to do more. They have to be loved back to health," she said of the refuge's tenants and countless others who similarly face economic and social challenges that make supporting their children a struggle.

One of the recipients of that love was Caitlin, who lives at Mary's Refuge with her three children.

Dressed in a floor-length red, one-strap dress and overcome with emotion, she told the audience that when she was eight months pregnant and already the mother of two children younger than 3, she was living in a homeless shelter that would not let her stay after she delivered her baby. All the maternity homes she called in her native Virginia were unable to house the young family.

Doors were closing everywhere she turned until a woman living at the shelter told her about the refuge. Executive Director Allison Ferrell responded promptly to Caitlin's pleading email, providing an opening to a better life for the recovering addict and abuse victim.

On July 28, 2024 — just five days after her C-section — Caitlin and her three children moved into Mary's Refuge. Her daughter, Laci, is now 3; Ryan Jr. is 2; and Kane is a year old.

"They have truly lived up to their name," she said of the refuge.

With help from case manager Ayla Gressler, she applied for Medicaid and food stamps. In December 2024, she received a Recovery Coach Academy certificate so she can help others detoxify their lives. In April, she completed the five-month medical billing and coding certification program at Blue Ridge Community and Technical College and she recently completed a 40-hour externship at a Martinsburg medical office.

The refuge staff placed Caitlin in a vehicle donation program, and helped her transfer her driver's license to West Virginia and create a plan to pay off her debts.

"It was God who kept me going," Caitlin said through tears.

Her oldest child's ability to demonstrate patience, love and resilience have inspired her, too.

"Every day is a lesson," Caitlin said.

The ability of the four-person staff and countless volunteers to put single mothers on the path to self-sufficiency is a blessing, but more room is needed so that reach can expand.

"It's plainly evident that we have a space problem," Michael Gormley, president of the Mary's Refuge board, told those assembled at the gala.

He outlined plans for growth, including converting the third floor of the facility into two apartments; renovating the home of a parishioner into two apartments; and purchasing a building in the city of Martinsburg to house six more apartments for transitional living, plus an area for office space with mental health services, fatherhood programming, classes, child care and job training.

"We are so thankful for the generosity you have shown us," Gormley said, adding that financial support from the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston has been vital to the establishment and expansion of the refuge.

Meg H. Partington photo

Lisa Kratz Thomas speaks at the annual fundraising gala for Mary's Refuge in Martinsburg Nov. 6.

Michel joked that Ferrell sneaks women into the house and tells him and Father Thomas Gallagher, pastor of St. Joseph Parish, about it afterward. He said her heart breaks whenever she has to turn away mothers and expectant mothers.

"We're expanding the footprint so Allison can hide more women and we can service more women," Michel said.

Kratz Thomas called the mothers living at Mary's Refuge warriors for carrying out their pregnancies, a choice she didn't make for herself when she was embroiled in a life of illegal activity.

"I used abortion as birth control," she said. "Abortion doesn't just take a life, it steals your soul."

She met Jesus in a 12-step recovery program.

"That's when Jesus said to me, 'You are still mine,'" Kratz Thomas said.

Now married for 34 years and mother of a son and a daughter, she knows there is hope for others facing the same demons she did.

"Every human being has purpose and every human being has value," Kratz Thomas said. "We cannot change the past, but we can mold the future."

For more information about Mary's Refuge or to make a donation, call (304) 350-1632; email life@marysrefuge.com; or go to marysrefuge.com.

Christians ...

Cont'd from Page 4

an end to Russia's strikes on Ukrainian cities. "These attacks cause deaths and injuries, including of children, and extensive damage to civilian infrastructure, leaving families homeless as the cold sets in," he said. "We cannot grow accustomed to war and destruction! Let us pray together for a just and lasting peace in the tormented Ukraine."

Even amid conflicts, disasters and persecutions, Pope Leo said, "and in the face of the indifference that seeks to ignore them, Jesus' words proclaim that the attack of evil cannot destroy the hope of those who trust in him."

"The darker the hour, the more faith shines like the sun," he said.

"The persecution of Christians does not only happen through mistreatment and weapons," the pope said, "but also with words, that is, through lies and ideological manipulation."

"Especially when we are oppressed by these evils, both physical and moral," Pope Leo said, "we are called to bear witness to the truth that saves the world; to the justice that redeems peoples from oppression; to the hope that shows everyone the way to peace."

A Special Section

Celebrating the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston's 175th Anniversary

In honor of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston's 175th anniversary, The Catholic Spirit is featuring this special section on the history of the Church in West Virginia presented by FaithInWV. The articles on Pages 7-14 offer a look at the clergy, religious, and lay faithful who have shaped the diocese.

This is an ongoing series that is part of the print and weekly digital editions of The Catholic Spirit and FaithInWV weekly e-bulletins. The series begins below. We hope you enjoy this memorable section.

Mount Calvary Cemetery in Wheeling

A Final Resting Place for 43,000

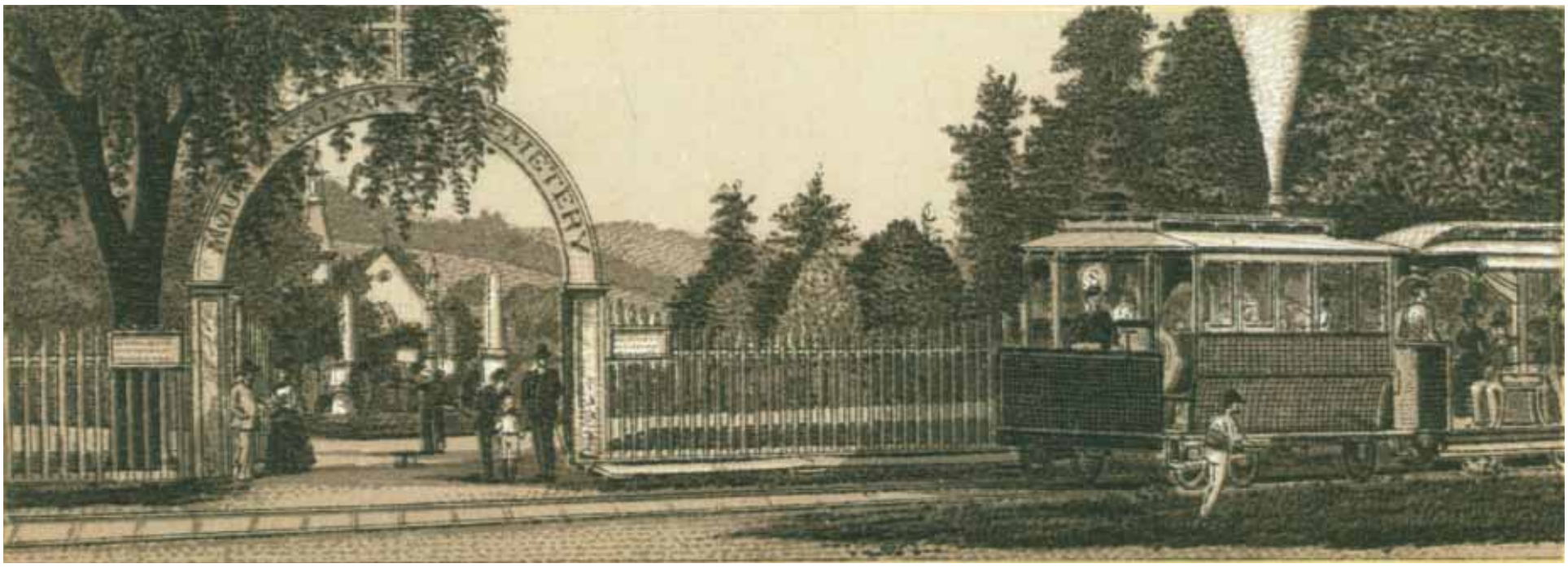


Photo courtesy of Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston Archives

Shown above is an 1888 sketch of the entrance to Mount Calvary Cemetery in Wheeling.

By Joyce Bibey (Courtesy of FaithInWV)

Before the diocese was established Wheeling Catholics buried their loved ones in available plots around the valley and hilltops. In 1850, when the Diocese of Wheeling was founded, Bishop Richard V. Whelan bought land in the Manchester section of Wheeling, Virginia — on the hillside of Rock Point Road which was across Big Wheeling Creek from 17th Street. Irish and German Catholic families moved their dead to the Catholic Cemetery with the blessing of their priests and Bishop Whelan. However, within 20 years, the "Old Manchester Catholic Cemetery" was full.

Bishop Whelan prioritized the purchase of 39-acres four miles east of Wheeling on National Road in 1872, for a new reverent Catholic cemetery. He personally oversaw the Mount Calvary Cemetery's layout and design and made sure the bodies in the Manchester area cemetery were reinterned to Mount Calvary.

Since then, the property underwent many beautification projects.

The Bishop's Chapel was built in 1879, and a house for the sexton (caretaker for the graveyard, chapel, and any other buildings on the grounds) was added in 1883. A dedicated section of the cemetery was set aside for priests who served the diocese, other areas were designated for religious men and women.

Mount Calvary is where the largest mass burial in Wheeling ever took place.

Marking tragic history, 119 men and boys lost their lives as a result of two explosions within the Wheeling Steel Coal Mine in Benwood on April 28, 1924. While the miners were from all over the surrounding communities on both sides of the Ohio River, the majority were immigrants from Poland, Greece, Italy, Hungary, Russia, Serbia, Croatia, Lithuania, and Ukraine. Notably many were also Catholic, belonging to St. John Parish in Benwood and St. Ladislaus in South Wheeling. In all 72 miners are buried at the Catholic cemetery, of those 65 were buried at the mass grave, where priests conducted the service in three languages. The seven other miners were buried in other areas, including three Hungarian immigrant friends, whose families chose to have them buried together.

Twentieth Century Improvements

As the decades passed, the cemetery's sacred landscape grew. The McFadden Memorial Entrance was dedicated in 1954; the Crucifixion Shrine followed in 1964; and new burial areas were opened to meet the needs of the faithful. In 1975, Bishop Joseph H. Hodges dedicated the Resurrection Chapel Mausoleum, home to 1,624 crypts and graced by a radiant stained-glass image of the Risen Christ—an enduring sign of the Christian hope in life everlasting.

Today, Mount Calvary Cemetery stands as a quiet, steadfast witness to Catholic history—a place where faith is remembered, sacrifice honored, and the promise of resurrection proclaimed.

Celebrating 175 Years of Faith, Resilience, and Community

Black Catholic Roots in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston

By Joyce Bibey (Courtesy of FaithInWV)

As the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston continues to celebrate our 175th anniversary we look back on a story as enduring as the rugged terrain of the beautiful mountain state. For nearly two centuries, the Catholic Church has found its way into every corner of West Virginia—through narrow coal valleys, across rivers, and into the hearts of believers who built this diocese and their parishes from hope, hard work, and prayer.

Among those who helped shape this hopeful Church were West Virginia's Black Catholics, whose quiet courage and devotion helped the Gospel take root in places where few expected it to grow.

A Mission Parish of Their Own: St. Peter Claver, Huntington

In the late 1930s, a small group of Black Catholics in Huntington attended Mass at St. Joseph Church, often worshipping with deep reverence but not always with full acceptance. Fellow parishioners thought they should have their own church, one where they would be "more comfortable."

Huntington pastor, Msgr. John Newcomb, understood both their pain and their steadfast faith. With his request and Bishop John J. Swint's blessing, a humble house at 9th Avenue and 15th Street was purchased and became St. Peter Claver Mission—the first Black Catholic parish in West Virginia.

On February 7, 1939, Father Leo Landoll celebrated the first Mass. By year's end, 30 people called St. Peter Claver their home parish.

The upper rooms of the parish house soon transformed into classrooms, where the Pallottine Missionary Sisters taught local children—Catholic and non-Catholic—until the school closed in 1964.

St. Peter Claver Mission became a hub of community life. Father Landoll was replaced by Father Jerome Wolf, and three years later a new pastor came, Father Jerome "Jerry" Hoepf, a beloved carpenter-priest and artist, who left his mark with both his woodwork and his compassion. Later, Father Peter DeMeester guided the parish through the transformative years of Vatican II, forming parish councils, study groups, and societies that empowered lay leadership.

By the 1970s, the parish thrived under Father Patrick McDonough, known for his devotion to the poor and youth. In 1981, Bishop Joseph H. Hodges dedicated the current St. Peter Claver Church. The congregation of 180 parishioners were mostly converts to the faith, and much of the church building was constructed by the dedicated master craftsmen of the parish. It was written, "Each one contributing knew it was a realization of a dream—a new church, and a spacious hall that would remain an 'open house' to people of all faiths, young and old, and future generations.

"We look to the past in gratitude for all that God has done for us. We have a vision of the future of

See "Resilience" on Page 9

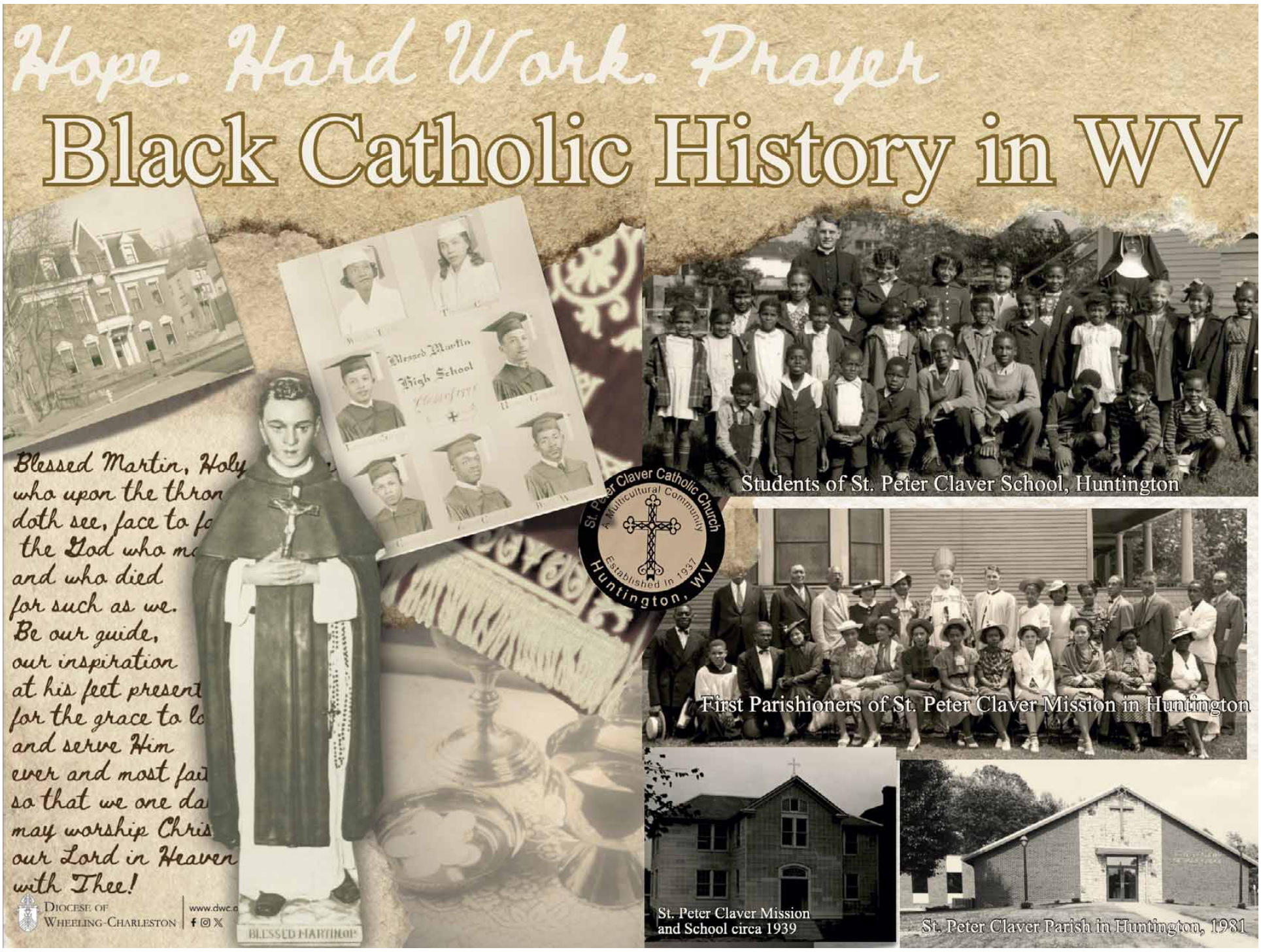


Photo illustration by Joyce Bibey/courtesy of FaithInWV

Grave of Unknown Priest Honors Vocation of Faithful Pioneer

By Joyce Bibey (Courtesy of FaithInWV)

Near the crest of a Marshall County hill is a modest grave that stands as a sacred reminder of the earliest Catholic missionaries who brought Christ to the rugged frontier of western Virginia more than 200 years ago.

On Glen Dale Heights, beneath the shade of trees on an old family farm rests an "unknown priest," whose life and ministry, though unrecorded in name or detail, left a lasting spiritual legacy honored by the property owners and generations of parishioners of St. Jude and St. James parishes.

The grave is encircled by a low cement wall and marked by a weathered cross. It was officially honored in 1954 by the Holy Name Society of St. James Parish in McMechen. A bronze plaque contains the following inscription:

"Erected by the Holy Name Society of St. James Parish, McMechen, in the year of our Lord 1954 to the sacred memory of a pioneer priest who more than one hundred and fifty years ago ministered to the spiritual needs of the Catholic people living here on what was then a distant outpost of the faith. May he rest in the peace and the joy of the omnipotent God who alone knows his name and whence he came."

Historical accounts suggest that the late priest traveled along the Ohio River ministering to Catholic families who had immigrated to the US and settled here. His work would have required great courage and perseverance—navigating wilderness, isolation, and sickness to serve people who had no way to receive the sacraments of the Church.

Local oral history, passed down by Catholic families, tells of the priest falling ill during his missionary travels. After two days of sickness, he died in the home of a family named Clarke, the first known owners of the farm where he was buried.

In the 1950s, before St. Jude Parish in Glen Dale was established, the Holy Name Society of St. James Parish wanted to honor the site. Members—including Martin Conner, James Welsh, James McCulley, and others—reopened the grave in hopes of finding evidence of the burial. Though no bones or artifacts were found, a section of deep purple soil, consistent with long-term human decomposition, confirmed the presence of a body. According to cemetery expert John Shuetz (of Mount Calvary Catholic Cemetery) the grave's "soapstone" ground likely caused a faster decay, preventing skeletal remains from surviving. His professional judgment validated what families had long believed: a priest truly rested there.

Courtesy photo

The grave of the unknown priest in Marshall County.

Guided by faith and respect, the Holy Name Society built the concrete wall around the grave and commissioned a striking Celtic cross carved from white granite. The artisan was an Italian-born prisoner at the Moundsville State Penitentiary who crafted it as an act of devotion. The monument, completed in 1954, is a lasting memorial—a visible symbol of gratitude to one of the first missionaries.

McCulley, a St. James parishioner, documented the grave restoration in a 1954 article. McCulley saw the priest's life as a reflection of the missionary spirit that built the Church on the American frontier—a reminder that the Church's growth came through personal sacrifice, brave service, and steadfast faith.

Today, more than two centuries after the priest's death, the site remains hallowed ground. The owners of the site have frequently hosted the faithful including parishioners from nearby St. Jude's for prayer services.

While the farm has passed from one family to another—the Clarkes, Reilleys, Markeys, Ottes, Keys, and Whartons—the reverence for the unnamed missionary endures, uniting generations through a shared devotion.

Though his name, nationality, and place of ordination will likely never be known, his influence remains deeply felt. This silent witness speaks of the courage, determination, and enduring faith that shaped the early Catholic Church in Appalachia. The stone cross calls believers to pray for those who answered God's call to bring the light of Christ to West Virginia's hills—and to live with the same quiet devotion to God and His people. God bless their souls.

Resilience ...

Cont'd from Page 8

many generations finding a sense of peace and joy and salvation with the walls of this church…" – a quote from the St. Peter Claver Dedication Mass booklet from 1981.

Today, St. Peter Claver remains a symbol of steadfast love and inclusion.

Two Additional Parishes to Serve the Faithful

Bishop Swint's vision extended beyond Huntington. In 1938, St. Augustine's Parish opened in Bristol, Virginia (then part of the diocese), led by Father Urban Landoll, brother of St. Peter Claver's first pastor. It began with just 32 parishioners. In 1952 it joined with St. Anne's in Bristol.

A few years later, in 1941, Bishop Swint purchased a former Presbyterian church in Bluefield to serve Black Catholics there. Dedicated as Our Lady of Lourdes, it became a place of shared worship for both Black and White Catholics—decades before integration would become law. Though both parishes closed after desegregation in 1955, they remain important chapters in the diocese's story of evangelization and unity.

Blessed Martin School: A Legacy of Learning and Love

In Wheeling, another remarkable chapter unfolded when several Black families petitioned Bishop Swint and the Sisters of St. Joseph to open a school for their children. Their pleas—and tears—were not ignored. In September 1942, Blessed Martin School opened in a converted house on 13th and Jacob Streets. At first, attendance was sparse, but by the third day, classrooms filled with eager students and the hopeful plan became a success.

Led by Sister Anne Patricia Whalen and Sister Teresa Fleckenstein, the school quickly expanded into a respected high school. Its curriculum—offering Latin, French, business, and home economics—earned top accreditation from the State Board of Education. Graduates went on to college and respected careers, carrying the school's values of self-discipline, dignity, and Catholic faith into the world.

Blessed Martin was more than a school—it was a cultural and spiritual hub. The basketball team traveled across the state to play other Black schools; its cheerleaders spread spirit and pride; and the school hosted Wheeling's first Girl Scout Troop for Black girls.

When desegregation came in 1955, Blessed Martin's 150 students integrated into public and Catholic schools across the area. Though its doors closed, its spirit remained alive in its students, staff, and families—a testament to faith overcoming barriers.

A Living Legacy

The story of Black Catholics in West Virginia is not one of numbers, but of heart. It is the story of men and women who built parishes when they were told they did not belong, who educated their children when resources were scarce, and who kept faith burning in coal towns and city streets.

Their legacy—rooted in perseverance and hope—helped shape the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

As we celebrate our 175 years of faith, we honor not just our founding bishops and parishes, but also those unsung heroes—teachers, parents, and parishioners—who carved out spaces of worship, education, and belonging for future generations.

The Church in West Virginia stands today "tested by an unstable economy, lack of employment opportunities, and challenged by vast distances, we are a determined and family-oriented people of God nurtured by a land of remarkable beauty and abundant resources." Our foundation was and remains one of faith that conquers hardship, love that transcends race, and unity that reflects the very heart of Christ.

Remembering Father John J. Mueller

Faithful Servant of God and Country

By Joyce Bibey (Courtesy of FaithInWV)

Guided by unwavering faith and devotion, Father John J. Mueller dedicated his life to serving both God and his country—a legacy of courage, compassion, and priestly service.

Father Mueller's life as a priest for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and a chaplain for the military is a storied one, the highlights of which have been preserved for generations to come by the Department of Archives for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and its director Jon-Erik Gilot.

Newspaper clippings, medals of honor, photographs, his old pistol holster, and, of course, his rosary are respectfully saved, acknowledging his example as a true Christian soldier.

John J. Mueller was born on January 15, 1911, in Fulton (Wheeling). He was the third child of John and Isabelle Yontz Mueller.

He graduated from St. Michael's School in 1925 and then attended St. Charles College in Catonsville, Md. for high school and two years of college.

He entered St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore and was ordained on May 22, 1937.

Father Mueller began his priestly service to the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston in Weston at St. Patrick's as assistant pastor the year of his ordination 1937 to 1943. He would often raise his eyebrows recalling the times he had to travel by horseback to get to the outlying mission churches there.

After being a diocesan priest for five years, World War II broke out. Immediately Father Mueller felt a strong call to serve his country. He asked for Bishop Swint's permission to serve his country and volunteer as a military chaplain.

In April 1943, Reverend Mueller was accepted by the United States Army as a first lieutenant.

He left his parishioners in the Weston missions to attend Chaplain school at Harvard University from May to June.

In November 1943, Chaplain Mueller was sent off to the Pacific Theater with assignments in Australia; New Guinea; Luzon, Philippines; and Yokohama, Japan, where he filled the crucial role of spiritual ministry to soldiers and civilians of all denominations.

Photos courtesy of Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston Archives

Father John J. Mueller is pictured in these undated photos: above during his service as a U.S. Army chaplain and other moments of his priesthood at the top of this page.

He remained in the prayers of the bishop and diocese, who were aware of the dangers he would face. Records note that the casualty rate for chaplains in WWII was the third highest of all branches, behind the infantry and air forces. Military chaplains faced life-threatening situations constantly. Their duties extended far beyond conducting religious services, they also were vital in assisting medics with the wounded, offering comfort to the dying, and helping with burial duties, all while navigating extreme danger on the front lines. Like all chaplains, they operated under immense emotional strain and a commitment to minister to soldiers of all faiths, not just Catholics.

As chaplain Father Mueller was a member of an antiaircraft gun unit and several combat divisions.

He received numerous commendations for his work, but most prized may have been being decorated with the Bronze Star for Valor. Chaplain Mueller earned this significant honor for rescuing four soldiers wounded in battle and administering physical and spiritual first aid to them.

His Bronze Star recognition stated:

"Captain John J. Mueller, Chaplain Corps, US Army. For heroic achievement in connection with military operations against the enemy in Luzon, Philippine Islands, on 12 April 1945. Chaplain Mueller was visiting a detachment of men from the headquarters of the antiaircraft artillery battalion who were employing their guns for direct support of the infantry, when the enemy began shelling the position, killing one man and wounding seven others. With complete disregard for his personal safety, he, while under enemy artillery fire, helped move several wounded men to safety and assisted in giving the wounded men such first aid as was possible. The calmness and the heroic example set by him did much to reassure the wounded as well as other personnel present. The outstanding courage and devotion to duty exhibited by Captain Mueller is in keeping with the highest traditions of the service and reflects great credit upon himself and the military service."

In addition to this commendation, he received the Asiatic Pacific medal with two battle stars and arrowhead, a Victory medal, and a Philippines Liberation medal with one star. He was promoted to a Captain on September 9, 1944.

According to diocesan archives, Chaplain Mueller, "oversaw the building of a chapel… the first in a considerable area" made from "native materials 'procured, begged, or stolen,' and had a tent roof."

The diocesan archival office has Father Mueller's scrapbook. On a two-page spread are photos taken in New Guinea from 1944, with people of all ages from that island. The message he wrote on the page says, "Near Aitape, N. G. there was a large village of natives. All Catholic, converts of the S.V.D. SVD (Society of the Divine Word) German missionaries. After the missionaries were forced to leave (by the Japanese) the chaplains took turns giving them weekly Mass."

The page opposite the handwritten message, is an endearing photo of Chaplain hearing the confession in "pidgin English" from a Catholic child in New Guinea.

On the same is a photo of him presenting Holy Communion with a young man from the island assisting as an altar server.

Chaplain Mueller earned the rank of Major on April 10, 1946.

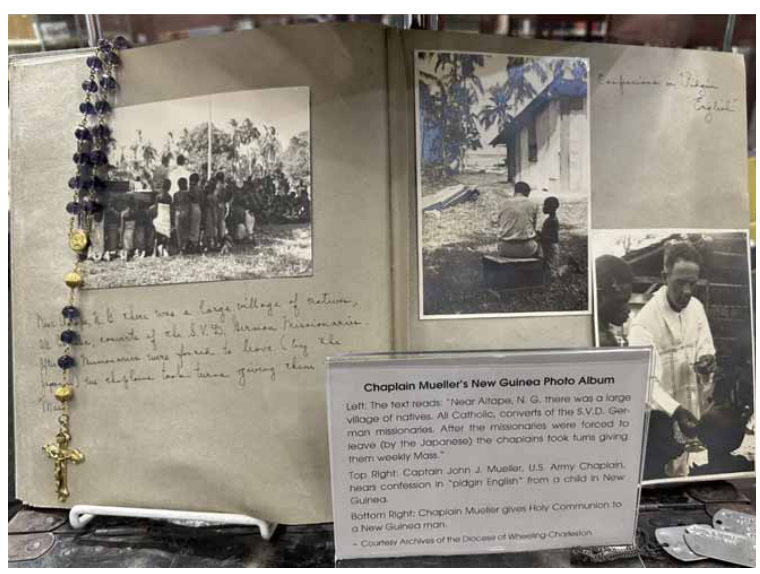
In an interview Father Mueller said giving last rites to a soldier never got easy. Each was humbling, hard to do, but an honor to do.

"We used to have to meet the bombers as they came back from their missions and unfortunately, not everyone came back," he said. "And some of the ones who did come back were so badly injured they never made it through the evening. That was the hardest part of my job."

Days after he returned to the states after the war, in 1946, he was assigned to serve as pastor of the former Sacred Heart Parish in Wheeling, where he worked until 1962. Additionally, during those years, he served the United States Army Reserve until April 1, 1953.

In 1962, Father Mueller was transferred to serve the old St. Teresa Parish in Morgantown through 1969, before returning to Wheeling to serve as rector of the Cathedral of St. Joseph from 1969 – 1981. His last parish he served before his retirement was in Sistersville at Holy Rosary Parish from 1981-1984.

Father passed away on May 4, 1992, in Wheeling.



Joyce Bibey Photo

Pictured is Father John J. Mueller's New Guinea photo album.

St. Peter's Ray of Hope

Strengthening Historic Church

Courtesy photo

St. Peter's circa 1890. The school house is above - from the Lieb - collection.

By Joyce Bibey (Courtesy of FaithInWV)

Master carpenter Ray Smith, a member of St. James the Greater in Charles Town, is painstakingly securing the foundation, tediously inspecting trusses, and stabilizing the St. Joseph side of the sanctuary of the historic St. Peter's Church in Harpers Ferry.

As with any old structure, let alone a church built on a steep hillside, old St. Peter's has some substantial aging issues which to a layman's eye may not have been evident, but a master engineer or carpenter could visually suspect some unusual shifting of the structure. Smith was able to identify some of the structural issues by conducting an exhausting inspection that literally had him shimming through rafters and belly crawling beneath the church.

"They were (trusses) that risked splitting in half, and some were rotting away from the outside wall" he said.

The result was the infamous arches on the interior of the church were beginning to sag. This was causing the walls to start to move from the foundation.

Inspections also uncovered that the marble floor beneath the St. Joseph side of the sanctuary was beginning to sink. Smith noted that in the 1970s extensive termite damage had to be repaired, but not all the damage was discovered. Water was also getting in beneath the side altar causing a small tunnel beneath the marble floor, and once removed it was obvious where daylight was making its way between the priest's sacristy and the main church.

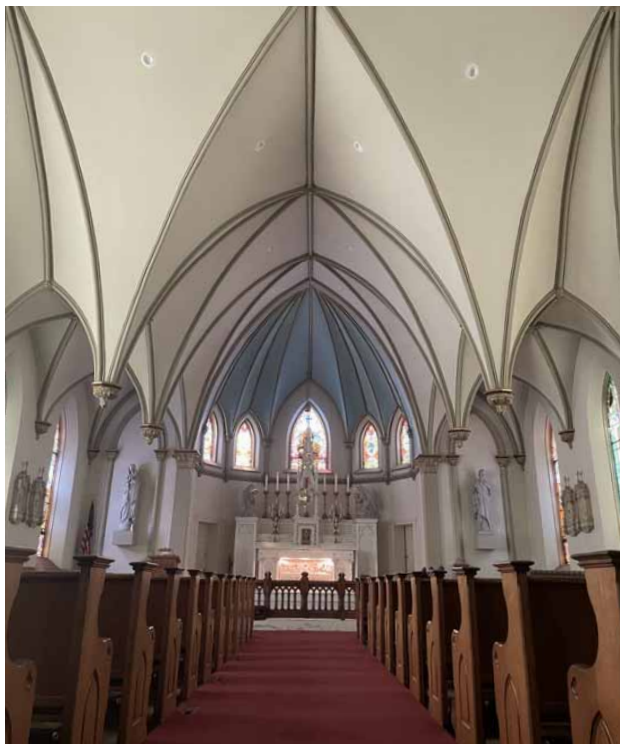
With the help of volunteers and a local Trail Life group, tons of dirt had to be dug out from beneath the building. This was done by an assembly line with five-gallon buckets of dirt at a time – a necessary evil to completely expose the damage and begin the intriquet repairs.

Smith has been working with a small crew to literally brush away and even vacuum the dirt from the foundation in order to reveal any necessary stabilizing.

Smith and his wife Jamie, moved to the Eastern Panhandle after he served in the US Army. The couple have five children – Carter, 17; Elizabeth, 12; Ignatius, 8; Gabrielle, 4; and Gemma, 3.

Ignatius accompanies his father to the historic site now and then – time that is definitely treasured by Smith, who learned his carpentry skills from his father.

"The grandeur of the church is because of the (Irish and German) craftsmanship and care that went into designing, building, rebuilding, and caring for it," Smith said. "I consider it a great honor to work inside this chapel to keep alive that history."



Courtesy photo

Inside St. Peter's Church in Harpers Ferry where work is being done to prevent the sacred walls of the church from slipping away from its foundation.

His job, as he says, is to just strengthen and secure what was lovingly built by faithful devout Catholics and proud local craftsman throughout the Catholic community's 200-plus year history.

Stories handed down from generation to generation place the first Catholics in Harpers Ferry around the year 1765.

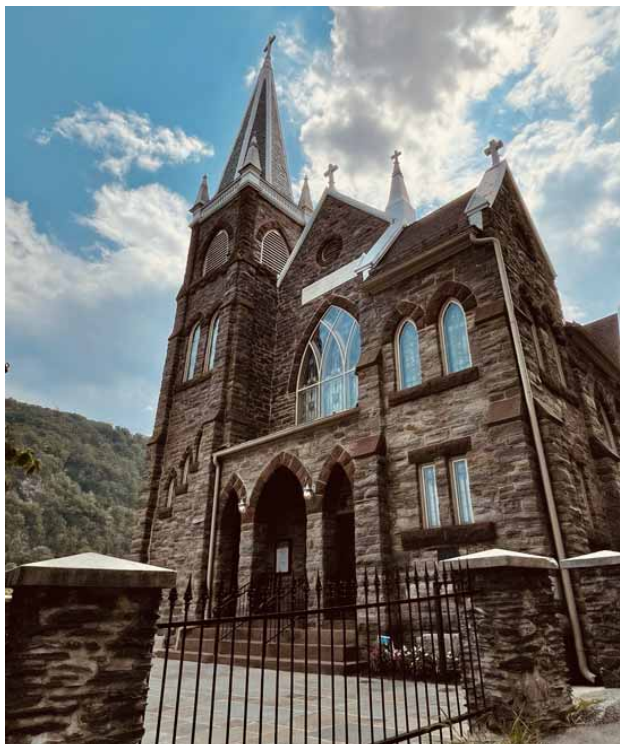
In 1828, Catholic communities were formed in Harpers Ferry (St. Peter), Martinsburg (St. John later St. Joseph), and Shepherdstown (St. Agnes Church). Catholics had long been in this area of Virginia since 1795, but many had to practice their faith in secret because of the early American disdain of the Catholic Church.

How was it that St. Peter's came to be built on the rocky hilltop?

The first log church built for the Harpers Ferry Catholic community was located near the banks of the Shenandoah River, but was washed away in an 1820's flood before its first official Mass.

It was Robert Harper, who ran the Ferry the town was named after, who left in his last will and testament in 1782, four acres for the establishment of a Church. The cornerstone for the original hillside church was placed on Oct. 15, 1830.

Interestingly the construction wasn't just funded by the Catholic community. A May 5, 1830, edition of the Virginia Free Press, noted donations for the construction of the Catholic church, were also from non-Catholics – "liberal contributions have been made by persons of other denominations..."



Courtesy photo

St. Peter's Church in Harpers Ferry

The first priest to serve the Harpers Ferry Catholic community on record is Father Demetrius Augustine Gallitzin (1781). From 1828-1834, Father John Gildea led Catholics and saw the construction of the parish, while he was also pastor of St. John (St. Joseph) in Martinsburg. He was succeeded by Father Richard Vincent Whelan (who became the second bishop of the Diocese of Richmond, and then the first bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling in 1850).

The parish was the only church that didn't suffer significant damage or attacks during the Civil War. It is said that the pastor at the time, Father Michael Costello (who served from 1857-1867) flew the British Union Jack flag over the predominately Irish parish, which designated neutrality.

It was decided to tear down, expand, and rebuild the church on the original foundation in 1896 to what it looks like today.

St. Peter's is presently a designated chapel of St. James the Greater in Charles Town. When the diocesan boundaries changed in 1974, the parish along with all others in the Eastern Panhandle became part of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

Mass is celebrated for tourists and area Catholics each Sunday at 9:30 a.m.

Courtesy photos

Left: Water made its way underneath the brick and marble of St. Peter's Church beneath the statue of St. Joseph. Right: Flooring, dirt and debris had to be removed along the original stone foundation of St. Peter's in order to inspect and make necessary repairs to the historic parish.

Courtesy photo

Master Carpenter Ray Smith takes a break from his work on the historic St. Peter's Church in Harpers Ferry to pose for a photo with his eight-year-old son Ignatius. Behind them is the statue of St. Joseph, where the marble flooring below had to be removed in order to repair damage and natural aging of the structure.

Guard Your Faith

Anti-Catholic Mob Didn't Rattle First Bishop

By Joyce Bibey (Courtesy of FaithInWV)

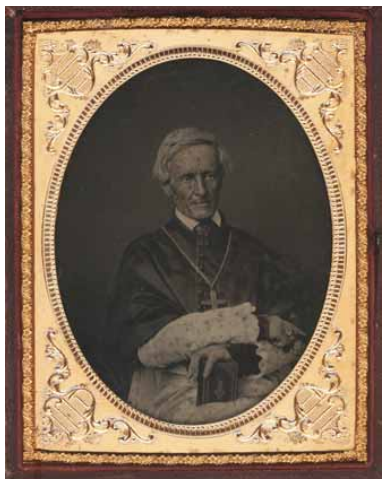


Photo courtesy of Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston Archives

Bishop Richard Vincent Whelan

The first bishop of the Dio-cese of Wheeling, Bishop Richard Vincent Whelan, was a shining example of how we should guard our faith, just as St. Paul wrote to his friend Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14.

It is a bishop's duty as a successor of the Apostles to shepherd his flock, encouraging us by word and actions.

We are all called to "rekindle the gift of God that is within you" and "guard the good treasure entrusted to you with the help of the Holy Spirit, living in us," as St. Paul wrote and Bishop Whelan proved time and time again, especially in the 1850s when an anti-Catholic mob threatened the Wheeling cathedral, a visiting Apostolic Nuncio from Rome, and the predominately Irish parishioners.

According to an article published in The Catholic Spirit on May 22, 1992, an anti-Catholic crusade in the 1850s known as the Know-Nothing Party, believed that the Catholic Church was a threat to America.

"They tried to make people believe that the pope was out to convert the world and take over America," the article noted, and added, "Pope Pius IV was very aware of the situation and wanted to find a solution. So, he commissioned (the papal nuncio) to visit America and obtain firsthand information."

In 1854, Bishop Whelan, invited the cardinal to Wheeling, Va.

Upon learning of this local visit, the Know-Nothings passed out "handbills degrading his character, (declaring the nuncio) 'is not worthy to breathe the free air from this country.... Destroy the secret plans of the Roman missionary.... Drive this monster back to his bloody master that sends him....'"

The angry mob planned an attack on the papal nuncio in the cathedral where he was to preach.

Wheeling's mayor, Sobieski Brady, would not grant police protection.

So, Bishop Whelan decided to protect the cardinal and the cathedral with all his power.

"As the mob approached the cathedral, Bishop Whelan stood alone to face them.

It is recorded that he spoke these words to them: 'The first one who dare enter the grounds of the cathedral would be immediately shot.' At that the Irish Catholics, under the direction of Bishop Whelan, surrounded the cathedral armed with rifles.

"The only violence that occurred that day was when a rioter threw a stone and broke a pane of glass. Slowly, one by one, the rioters walked away," the article concluded.

So, as St. Paul reminds us – be like ole' Bishop Whelan – strong and courageous - don't hide your faith in shame or during opposition, that threatens your integrity. Don't cower to opposition or challenge.

Let your faith be fully alive and nurture it.

Sweet Springs Chapel

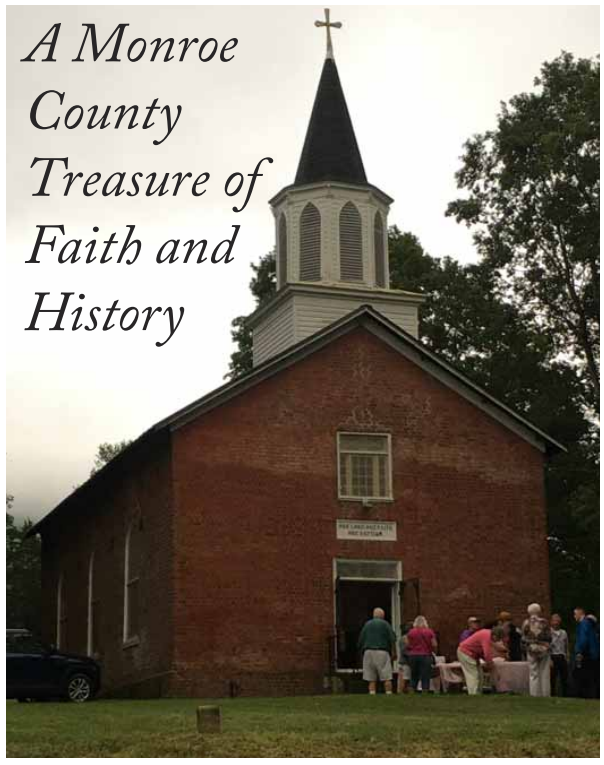


Photo courtesy of Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston Archives

St. John the Evangelist Chapel in Sweet Springs is shown in this undated photo.

By Joyce Bibey (Courtesy of FaithInWV)

Faith and history are still celebrated in Sweet Springs.

Each summer on the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, faithful Catholics and visitors of Monroe County get together to honor Mary, local history, and pay tribute to the pioneering priests, religious figures, and ancestors who laid our spiritual foundation centuries ago for St. John the Evangelist Chapel in Sweet Springs, the oldest standing Catholic church in West Virginia.

After the Mass everyone lingers to enjoy an old-fashioned ice cream social outside of the brick church that sits in a little vale surrounded and shaded by tall trees that line the property.

St. John the Evangelist Chapel was completed in the 1850s under the guidance of Father John Walters thanks to a generous gift from William Lewis and his wife Letitia Preston (Floyd) Lewis, daughter of Virginia's Governor John Floyd (and brother to Virginia's 31st Governor John B. Floyd from 1849-1852). Interesting fact, many Virginians thought of Letitia Lewis as the black sheep of the Floyd family for converting to Catholicism, a faith despised because of British Protestant Reformation and an assumed threat to political order. However, several others in her family and friends followed her lead and also professed the Catholic faith, those included her father the former governor, her mother, her sister, and in-laws.

While the chapel was initially used for the Floyd and Lewis families, it was later used also by Irish immigrants and former slaves working in the area for the railway, wealthy Virginia families, or at the Sweet Springs Resort. Records note St. John's Chapel was established an official church in 1859.

Church sacramental books record the first baptism in 1853, an increase in the Catholic population with 174 baptisms in 1860, and proof that three soldiers were baptized in 1862 during the Civil War.

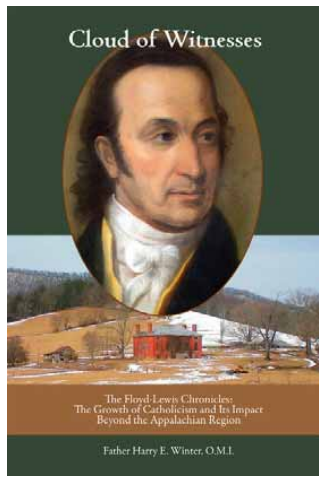
The diocese purchased the property in 1977 from the Lewis descendants and others. The chapel was restored and then rededicated by Bishop Joseph Hodges on April 17, 1983.

Former Pastor of St. John's Chapel published Cloud of Witnesses

Father Harry Winter, OMI, who served in the southern region of West Virginia throughout the 1980s into 1991, published the book, "Cloud of Witnesses" – The Floyd-Lewis Chronicles. It showcases the history of the Floyd and Lewis families.

Cloud of Witnesses also highlights the family's conversion to the Catholic faith and the prominent family's influence on the Appalachian region.

Above the doors of St. John's Chapel are the words, "One Lord, One Faith, and One Baptism." This mantra was echoed in the promise made to Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston Bishop Francis Schulte in 1986 to "faithfully maintain St. John's Chapel, so that our Catholic faith may be witnessed in this Sweet Springs Valley." The promise honors their ancestors and all who made the chapel possible as their "Cloud of Witnesses."



Courtesy photo

The cover of "Cloud of Witnesses"

This reference, just as the title of the book, is a compliment to Saint Paul's writing – Hebrews 12:1, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us…."

The great apostle is telling us that we need to have confidence as we run our race, because we are surrounded everyday by great prophets and saints who are cheering us on.

As we thank God for our cloud of witnesses, include our ancestors who pioneered our Catholic communities in our home state.

Today, the chapel is part of the group of parishes in the Beckley Vicariate that includes St. Catherine of Siena in Ronceverte, St. Charles Borromeo in White Sulphur Springs, Chapel of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Williamsburg, and St. Louis King of France Chapel in Lewisburg; all under the leadership of Msgr. Kevin M. Quirk, J.C.D.

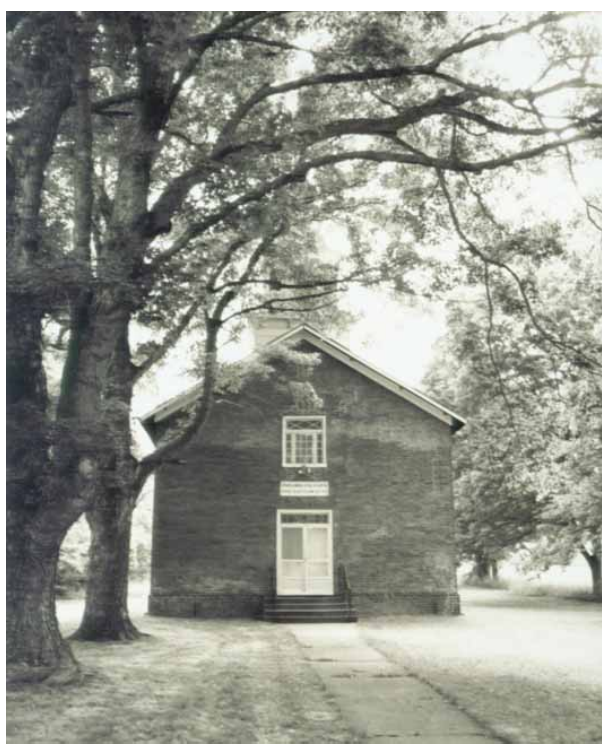


Photo courtesy of Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston Archives

St. John the Evangelist Chapel in Sweet Springs is shown in this undated photo.

Celebrating Our 175th Anniversary

Religious Education Focus in the 1930s – Vacation Bible Schools

The following was written by the late Sister Anne Regina O'Leary, SSJC, for The Catholic Spirit on Nov. 12, 1992. (She served West Virginia Catholic schools for 32 years in Wheeling, Weston, Fairmont, Huntington and Clarksburg. In 1964, she became the first female principal of the co-educational Central Catholic High School in Wheeling - a merger of her alma mater St. Joseph Academy, and CCHS that was boys only.)

Courtesy photo left; Photo by Gruber Photography Studio (Wheeling), right
Sister Anne Regina O'Leary is shown in these undated photos.

"I was four years old when my mother sent me to vacation Bible school in Nutter Fort with my older brothers and sisters. I loved it!

"I thought the sisters came from heaven each morning and returned there each evening. I remember the stories they told about Jesus, his mother, Mary, and St. Joseph... I thought the sisters smelled so clean and good."

Such was Sister of St. Joseph Congregations Sr. Mary Jean Colombo's impression of her first experience in a vacation Bible school.

The early 1930s witnessed the need and the beginning of vacation Bible schools that flourished in rural areas, missions, cities, and parishes and continued throughout the 40s, '50s, '60s.... As soon as the school year ended, superiors of religious congregations received requests from pastors for sisters to conduct vacation Bible schools for two, three, or four weeks. These requests were answered by various religious congregations. The Sisters of St. Joseph list 137 places where the faith of the people was nurtured by religious instruction. The term evangelization can truly be used to describe the vacation Bible schools where religious, pastors and laity carried the Word of God to the people throughout West Virginia.

The sisters really did not "come from heaven each day"! They came from hurriedly closed schools or community retreats, with hurriedly packed suitcases and boxes to journey throughout West Virginia

Photos courtesy of Congregation of St. Joseph Archives and Records (Cleveland)
Sister Mary Jean Colombo is shown in these undated photos above and at right.

where they would live in rectories, family homes, sacristies, nearby hospitals, or available convents. Sisters who taught in Williamson lived in the rectory while (the pastor) moved into the Mountaineer Hotel (still in existence in Williamson). In Shinnston the sisters stayed on the rectory second floor and Father Jirh Egan occupied the first floor. Some religious remember living in the old St. Joseph Academy (Andrew Jackson's house) on the site of Notre Dame High School in Clarksburg.

With the zeal of apostles and yet a bit of fear of the unknown, the sisters reported for the summer vacation Bible schools. They carried little with them. They had no visual aid resources or overhead projectors. Their teaching equipment consisted of a catechism, Bible stories and collections of holy cards and medals.

"Armed" with the catechism and their meager resources, they ventured forth each morning from the various places where they lived to meet the pastor who transported them by car to their missions where children awaited them. Some sisters remember traveling a total of 110 miles each day as they went from mission to mission.

In addition to transporting the sisters, some pastors also used station wagons, vans and buses to pick up the children and bring them to the church basement, the rectory, the public school building, a neighbor's porch, the park...wherever space was available for these vacation Bible schools.

Vacation schools! What a misnomer!

Consider for a few moments what the sisters did in these summer weeks. They taught catechism, relived Bible stories, prepared children for first confession and first holy Communion, worked with confirmation classes of adults and children, played the organ and formed and directed choirs. In their "free" hours, they conducted a census for the pastor, updated church records, mended and washed church linens and vestments, cleaned and cooked. They visited families, shared meals with them, listened to joyful and sad stories, offered assistance, advice and encouragement.

Experiences encountered during the vacation Bible schools range from the hilarious to life threatening. Picture for a moment two sisters riding in the back seat of a car driven by their pastor-to-be for two weeks holding on to mattresses tied to the running boards—mattresses-to-be-their-beds for the next two weeks. One sister is still living (in 1992), can remember vividly this terrifying ride.

One experience never to be forgotten was the destruction and suffering caused by the tornado in Shinnston, June 23, 1944, during the vacation Bible school taught by Sister Francesca and Sister Edith.

They witnessed death and injuries among the children in their classes, destruction of homes, farms, and havoc in the lives of the people with whom they were involved. Sisters Francesca and Edith went to Shinnston primarily to teach catechism.

A devastating tornado made them reconcilers to the families touched by death, injury and loss.

Storytelling today of the vacation Bible schools could captivate audiences, create a best seller, and add a sequel to the popular "Sister Act" movie. Consider the curiosity of bystanders in bus and train stations, restaurants and local streets as fully habited sisters arrived where they had never been seen before. There is a story of the clerk in a candy store who was so startled when she saw two sisters she dropped the tub of candy.

One sister remembers riding horseback to the farm where a kind lady was preparing lunch. (There was also) fear (because it

See "Anniversary" on Page 14

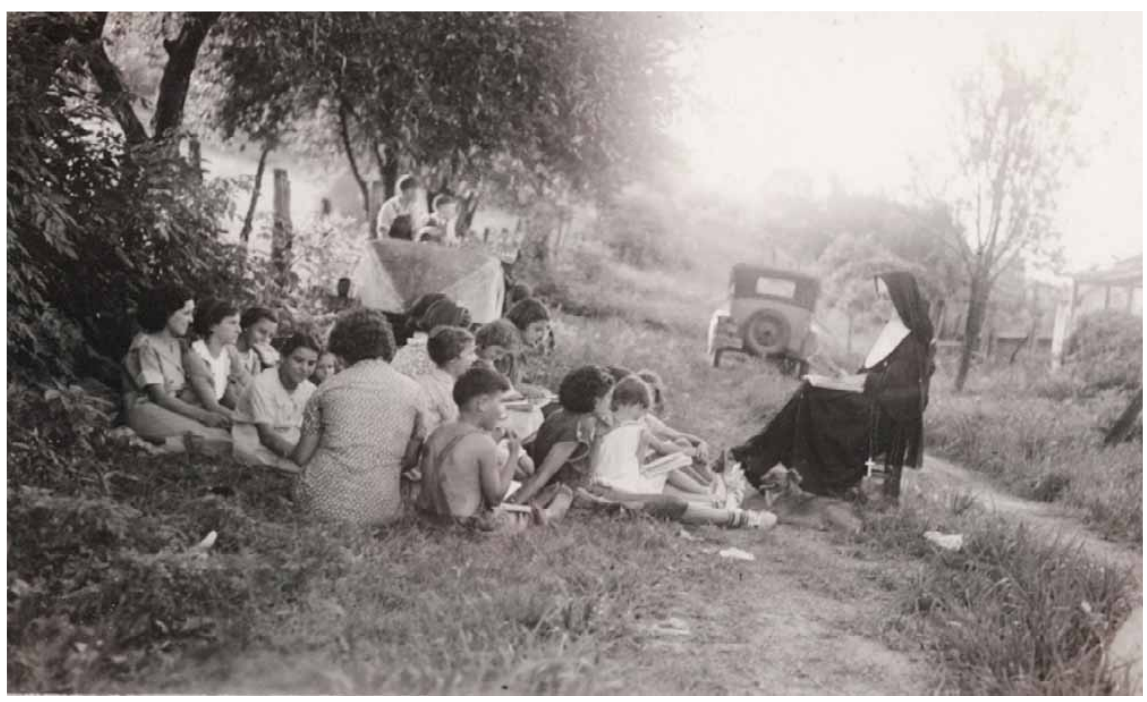


Photo courtesy of Congregation of St. Joseph Archives and Records (Cleveland)
A sister of St. Joseph working in Wheeling teaches vacation Bible school on a road in rural Ohio County around the 1940s. Young and old, Catholic and non-Catholic would all gather to listen to the habited sister share the Gospel and their love of God.

Anniversary ...

Cont'd from Page 13

was necessary to be) escorted for security reasons to where you would meet your classes because your presence was unwelcome (for) some people existed. For some sisters it is the story of enjoying evenings of good music with Father Brumfield. Stories abound of organ playing and singing classes where the movement of the Spirit had to do the playing and directing! Remembrances of the little St. Peter's Chapel in Valley Grove, of back porch teaching, of pastors and housekeepers abound. Sister Rose Ann Hefner first encountered the Sisters of St. Joseph in vacation Bible school in Ronceverte; Sister Rosalie Bucci met them as a child in Williamson. Countless people in West Virginia shared in these summer vacation Bible schools. Josephine Zando from War has detailed accounts of vacation Bible classes in McDowell County taught by the Pallottine Sisters and the Sisters of St. Joseph.

A group of sisters at Mt. St. Joseph gathered in a sharing session on summer Bible schools and reflected on the many aspects of their experiences. Teaching in vacation Bible schools was difficult and demanding physically, emotionally. And yet, the satisfaction and positive aspects were rewarding. It was a joy to see the children and their parents on First Holy Communion Day and when the bishop came for Confirmation. The sacrifices made by everyone became worthwhile.

Pastors made many adjustments in their living arrangements to accommodate the sisters. Sisters gave of themselves to the demands of those weeks to be a welcoming and instructive presence to the children who likewise gave of their summer vacation. Families sacrificed to have the children ready for the Bible classes, shared their homes and food with the sisters. The combined efforts of all involved contributed to make the vacation Bible schools a strong factor in nurturing the faith.

Photo courtesy of Congregation of St. Joseph Archives and Records (Cleveland)

In this undated photo, sisters of St. Joseph are shown with children who made their first Communion in Wheeling. Sister Mary Jean Colombo is the sister on the left.

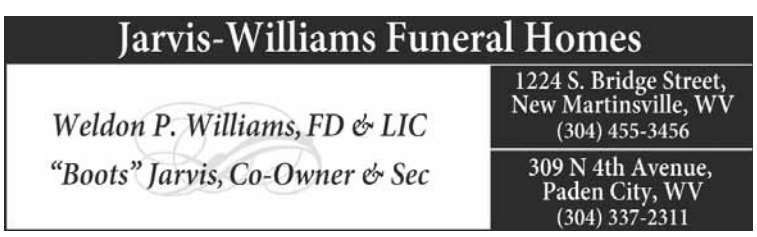
Photo illustration by Joyce Bibey

Today many people throughout West Virginia look back to the vacation Bible schools and remember with fondness and gratitude the many religious who prepared them for first holy Communion and confirmation and deepened their awareness of God's love and compassion.

Josephine Zando from War, expresses it as follows:

"As we recall our early years and instruction in vacation Bible schools, we are so thankful to the priests, sisters and lay teachers who enriched our lives. These priests, sisters and laity, too countless to name, are among the pioneers in bringing the faith to West Virginia."

Some of these early evangelists have gone before us, some are still involved in the mission of the church in West Virginia. Others who are retired pray each day for those priests, religious and laity who are the evangelists of today teaching in all forms of religious education and nurturing the faith of God's people of today in West Virginia.



Clergy and Parishioners Bring Christ's Mercy to Inmates in Moundsville

By Colleen Rowan

MOUNDSVILLE — Clergy and a few members of St. Francis Xavier Parish in Moundsville are on a mission to bring Christ's mercy to inmates at the Northern Regional Jail & Correction Facility located in the city.

"It's very rewarding," Deacon Thomas McFadden said of this ministry. "I think out of all the individuals that are outcasts in society … they're probably the most outcast group. And they're still in need of hearing the word of the Lord and receiving his body and to know that God forgives them and God is merciful. They've been judged by the court system, but they need to know that they can repent, and they can be forgiven by God, and God still loves them."

On the third Friday of each month Father Priyesh Sebastian, MCBS, pastor of St. Francis Xavier, visits the jail and celebrates Mass for the inmates. Then, on the first Friday of the month, Deacon McFadden holds a Communion service for them.

"Even though we're there on Friday, we do the Sunday Mass readings from that Sunday and then holy Communion," Deacon McFadden said. "I preach a homily to them, and I try to involve the inmates in a lot of discussion."

St. Francis Xavier parishioners Celeste Evans and Cathy Frame volunteer at both the Masses and Communion services and engage in Bible study and discussions with the inmates. They have been involved in this ministry since 2012, and Evans said the visits are always uplifting.

"The guys are so appreciative of us coming in and visiting with them and having Mass," she said. "And the ones that can go to Communion

Courtesy photo

Deacon Thomas McFadden and Celeste Evans (center) and Cathy Frame, parishioners of St. Francis Xavier Parish in Moundsville, visit the Northern Regional Jail & Correction Facility in Moundsville for a recent Communion service for inmates.

go to Communion." The visits, she added, are inspiring through "the camaraderie, the talking, the studying of the Bible, and their outlook."

About eight to 10 men attend the service. However, not all of them are Catholic. "I'm really impressed by the questions I get asked, even the non-Catholic prisoners," Deacon McFadden said. "They really know their Bible and a lot of them have questions about certain aspects of the Catholic faith."

By answering these questions and having these conversations, prison ministry volunteers are engaging in evangelization.

"One inmate that has been incarcerated I believe for 30 years expressed interest in how he could make his first holy Communion," said Deacon McFadden, who added that work is progressing on his request.

Deacon McFadden encouraged everyone to pray for those that are incarcerated. He noted Matthew 25: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me."

Deacon McFadden, a secular Franciscan, spoke of St. Francis when he embraced the leper. He saw the face of the Lord Jesus Christ in him. He also spoke of Mother Teresa who said she saw the face of Jesus Christ in those who she ministered to.

"I'm preaching the word of the Lord to the inmates and I'm bringing the Body of Christ to them but actually I believe that Jesus is already present in those jail cells. He's present within the walls of that prison," Deacon McFadden said. "He's there."

Through their conversations, Deacon McFadden always stresses to the inmates that no one is beyond the mercy and forgiveness of God.

"I relate the fact that our Lord forgave St. Dismas, the thief on the cross, and St. Paul, who persecuted and had arrested many Christians who were put to death—including the death of St. Stephen, the deacon," he said.

Inmates are reaching out for hope, "and it's just a powerful experience to go in and offer God's mercy to those who have been imprisoned," Deacon McFadden said.

Evans encourages anyone who is able to get involved with this ministry.

Fairmont Deacon and Volunteers Help Mingo County Flood Victims Repair Their Homes

By Colleen Rowan

For the last 20 years, Deacon David Lester has been leading annual mission trips with volunteers who sign on to help those recovering after disasters or in need of home repairs. It is a labor of love that has taken them as far as Mississippi in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and back home to their own communities of Marion County. This summer, their mission trip took them to Mingo County to help families repair homes damaged by the devastating flood in February.

"We were chosen to go to three different homes," Deacon Lester said. "I had worked with the group called the West Virginia VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster). They have an office in the Charleston area, and I think they're also active right now in the Wheeling area with all that happened there (referring to the June flooding in Ohio County)."

The team consisted of Dave Shaw of St. Anthony Parish in Fairmont; Deacon Lester, Rick Garcia, and Jack Frazier of St. Peter the Fisherman Parish in Fairmont; Rich Gavette of First Presbyterian; and Gary and Lynn Marlin of St. Francis de Sales Parish in Morgantown.

The first house they worked on had a roof that was severely damaged by the storm that brought high winds and torrential rains. The home belonged to a young family with three children. Before the project began, Deacon Lester visited the family and assessed what needed to be done. After inspecting the roof himself, he told the family the house needed a whole new roof. And because Deacon Lester took the time to investigate, the family received a new metal roof.

Although the family could not afford the expense, the father of the family took time off work to help the mission team complete the project.

The next two homes were close to the Tug River, where devastation could still be seen.

Courtesy photo

Volunteers work on a home in Mingo County damaged by flooding in February.

Deacon Lester said that when the team arrived at the home of a retired woman with health issues, she said to them: "I have prayed for help and just knew that the Lord would send someone to me, but I didn't know when. You people are an answer to my prayers."

The team built a new porch and steps and installed new skirting around the base of her home.

The last house, Deacon Lester said, was the hardest hit. There,

See "Repair" on Page 19

Four Ways to Follow St. Joseph this Advent

By Father Michael Ackerman, OSV News

Socrates, in Plato's Apology, famously stated that "the unexamined life is not worth living." This axiom is certainly applicable to the spiritual life, and it is very relevant to one of our greatest patrons — St. Joseph. It is worthwhile to examine the lessons St. Joseph has taught us and consider how we can carry these into the great season of Advent.

A well-known American comic once said that "it's the quiet ones you have to watch out for." Now, I am confident that he was not referring to St. Joseph when he said this. However, when we reflect upon the life of St. Joseph, we really know nothing about him. St. Joseph is as stealth as an international spy. There is no recorded dialogue from him in the Scriptures and no substantial curriculum vitae of record. He would be an excellent case for "Unsolved Mysteries" or the "X-Files."

However, the silence of St. Joseph teaches us volumes. Pope Benedict XVI, in an Angelus address from Dec. 18, 2005, had this to say about St. Joseph's taciturn demeanor: "St. Joseph's silence does not express an inner emptiness, but on the contrary, the fullness of the faith he bears in his heart and which guides his every thought and action."

1. Silence of God

The first lesson of St. Joseph for Advent then is to enter into the silence of God, which is teeming with grace, intimacy and unconditional love. Joseph was not silent because he had nothing to say. He was silent instead because he wanted to listen to and follow God completely.

Pope Francis, in his apostolic letter "Patris Corde" ("With a Father's Heart"), writes about the silence of St. Joseph. "His patient silence was the prelude to concrete expressions of trust."

Perhaps this Advent, we too can spend time in silent prayer, in quiet contemplation before the Blessed Sacrament, or even meditating on the words of Scripture in the recesses of our heart as did St. Joseph. Doing so does not bear futility, but instead, fertility and joyful anticipation of Christ's coming into the world.

2. Service and self-denial

The second lesson that St. Joseph teaches us is one rooted in service and self-denial. Pope St. John Paul II in his 1989 apostolic exhortation "Redemptoris Custos" ("Guardian of the Redeemer") writes this about St. Joseph: "His fatherhood is expressed concretely in 'his having made his life a service, a sacrifice to the mystery of the Incarnation and the redemptive mission connected with it; in having used the legal authority which was his over the Holy Family in order to make a total gift of self, of his life and work.'"

St. Joseph did not allow his own passions or selfish wants and desires to dictate his actions. Instead, Joseph was docile and receptive to the will of God. His preparation for the coming of Christ was not filled with shopping, fighting with relatives and baking cookies. Instead, he invites you and me to be disciples who serve others first, not ourselves.

Now, this can take a variety of forms. We can volunteer our time at church or in our communities assisting at food pantries, homeless shelters or rescue missions. We can assist those around us who are struggling right now financially, emotionally and especially spiritually, either in person or through charitable organizations. Or, we can make visits to those who are homebound, in hospitals, in nursing homes or who are unable to celebrate the birth of Christ with family and friends for a variety of reasons. There is no "correct" way to serve, but the desire to do so must be rooted in Joseph's desire to serve God alone.

3. Simplicity

Third, St. Joseph teaches us a lesson of simplicity. The world in which we live is overly complex. We are so enamored with gadgets, technology, fashion and entertainment that we often miss what is essential. That is not the world of St. Joseph. Pope Benedict, in an Angelus address from March 19, 2006, says this about Joseph's simplicity: "His greatness, like Mary's, stands out even more because his mission was carried out in the humility and hiddenness of the house of Nazareth. Moreover, God himself, in the person of his incarnate Son, chose this way and style of life — humility and hiddenness — in his earthly existence."

Colleen Rowan photo

Pictured is the statue of St. Joseph at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Wheeling.

St. Joseph was not out to "make a name" for himself. He was no social media influencer. Instead, the raison d'être for his life was to remain humble before God.

St. Joseph invites us during Advent to slow down and to appreciate the people, blessings and encounters with God taking place in our lives. Presents, decorating and entering the wild world of retail are probably not the best ways to prepare for Christ. Instead, spending time with our loved ones, sharing faith and experiences, or even making a personal retreat is of benefit in keeping things simple. However, there is another thing that simplicity does: It allows us to increase our trust and dependence upon God.

In "Patris Corde," Pope Francis writes about the "creative courage" of St. Joseph. "God finds a way to save us," he writes, "provided we show the same creative courage as the carpenter of Nazareth, who was able to turn a problem into a possibility by trusting always in divine providence." St. Joseph, because he was not distracted by the trappings of culture, was able to have fortitude in God's plan because of his simple trust in a God who loved him. This same trust is accessible to us if we keep it simple.

4. Sacrifice

Finally, St. Joseph teaches you and me the value of sacrifice. Sacrifice is necessary for all of us in our vocations, and any parent, spouse, priest, religious or dedicated single person knows the value and necessity of this. In his book "The Mystery of Joseph," Father Marie-Dominique Philippe writes of St. Joseph's suffering: "There is no doubt that the sword of sorrow penetrates Mary's heart the most deeply, but it pierces Joseph's heart as well. In their common suffering, in their shared sadness and anguish, Joseph and Mary come to know a new degree of intimacy; together they bear the first fruits of Jesus' apostolic life."

St. Joseph invites you and me in the struggles of life to unite our pain to the cross of Christ. Suffering is always a mystery, but it is not devoid of meaning. The more that we unite our pain and struggles to Christ, the more that we draw into the infinite love, mercy and forgiveness of God. Joseph in denying his own objectives, wants and desires makes his will one with God. We are also called, like him, to unite and sacrifice. This can be done through charitable giving, fasting, increased prayer or giving things away we do not need. Regardless, sacrifice is crucial to ready the way for Christ.

This Advent presents an opportunity to increase our desire to emulate this great saint so loved by Our Lady and Our Savior. Silence, service, simplicity and sacrifice are not easy pills to swallow, but they do lead us closer to Christ and salvation. May the anticipated joy of Advent lead all of us to a deeper love of the Christ Child through the intercession of St. Joseph.

(Father Michael Ackerman is a priest of the Diocese of Pittsburgh.)

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From the Waters of Baptism to the Water of Physical Need

St. Thomas Church in Gassaway

Courtesy photo

Pictured are Father Thien Nguyen, SVD (left); Freddi Friend, godparent and sponsor (back left); Beata Pawlowski, godparent and sponsor (second from left); the McLaughlin Family — Robin (center) and Joshua (back right) holding their son Matthew, and their other children Ciaran, Molly, and William (front from left); and Mac Bails, OCIA coordinator (right).

By Father Thien Duc Nguyen, SVD

This past Easter at St. Thomas Parish, we experienced the profound joy of welcoming 13 new members into full communion with the Catholic Church through Baptism and Confirmation, celebrated by Bishop Mark Brennan.

Among them was the McLaughlin family, a household of six who have journeyed with us through the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) since June 2024. Their deep faith and sincere desire to follow Christ have inspired our entire parish community.

Through the waters of Baptism, their four young children, ages two to 12, began their sacramental life in the Church while their parents, Joshua and Robin, were received into the Catholic faith. Their story beautifully echoes the Gospel of John, in which Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well and offers her "living water," a symbol of eternal life and the grace that quenches every human thirst.

And yet, while the McLaughlins have received the spiritual living water of Christ, they are in urgent need of a basic necessity that most of us take for granted, physical water.

The family lives in a remote, off-grid area of West Virginia without access to gas, electricity or city water. A few solar panels power their home, but they must purchase water every four days, hauling it in large containers for drinking, cooking and hygiene.

I vividly remember one bitterly cold winter evening when they arrived for an OCIA class, towing a trailer with a large tank. When I asked about it, they explained they were out of water again and had to refill. In extreme cold, their water tanks often freeze for days, leaving them completely without water.

Despite these hardships, Joshua works long hours operating heavy equipment at a lumber company, and Robin lovingly homeschools their children in the Catholic tradition. They attend daily Mass whenever possible and regularly volunteer at our parish food pantry. Their two sons, William and Matthew, have even expressed a desire to become priests someday God willing!

Moved by their faith and perseverance, St. Thomas Parish launched the Well Drilling Project to provide the McLaughlin family with consistent, clean and safe water year-round. As their pastor, I felt deeply called not only to care for their souls but also for their well-being—like Christ cared for the woman at the well, offering water that restores both body and spirit. This project is more than a practical solution; it is an act of faith, a response of love to the real needs of our brothers and sisters.

However, the estimated cost of drilling a well was far beyond the family's means and posed a challenge for our small parish, which already supports numerous ministries for the poor. I reached out to Divine Word Residence at Techny (near Chicago) and another parish for assistance. Both responded immediately, and their generous financial support allowed us to fund the project.

After a long delay due to rain, which made it impossible for the drilling truck to cross the creek to the McLaughlin home, the work was finally completed with great joy on June 5, 2025. The family cried out, "It is finished! Praise be to God!"

The well reaches a depth of 91 feet, producing more than 30 gallons of water per minute.

> The McLaughlin family.... Their deep faith and sincere desire to follow Christ have inspired our entire parish community.
>
> **—Father Thien Duc Nguyen, SVD**

The McLaughlins responded with heartfelt gratitude, saying, "We are just completely thankful and overwhelmed by everyone's kindness. We cannot thank you enough!"

In July, 2025 they shared… "For the last two weeks that the new inverter and panels have been running we have not had to run the generator once. When we get the rest of the panels put up we should make enough power from the solar to keep the batteries charged even during the dark overcast days in winter. The two new batteries have doubled the amount of power that we are able to store allowing us to run the house for 2 days with no sun or 4-5 days if we are careful with the power we use.

"Few people will understand how great of a blessing this has been for our family. The amount of stress and constant worry that this has solved is immense. Especially while I'm working and Robin is alone at night with the kids. I don't have to worry all night anymore that they have enough power to make it to morning or if the old cheap inverter finally failed and caught fire. My multiple prayers every night that God may protect them and the house and keep the power running have all been answered in a way I never would have imagined. My family and I will be thankful for the rest of our lives and humbled by the generosity and work that others were willing to do for us. With love and thanks."

As I transition from my role at St. Thomas Parish to serve as a formator at Divine Word Formation House in Chicago, I reflect on this final project in West Virginia, which I had the privilege to lead. Though I now serve elsewhere, the legacy of love, compassion, and commitment to the poor continues. May the Gospel and the love of God remain ever present in the life and heart of West Virginians!

I am especially grateful to the Society of the Divine Word Techny House, Deacon Dave Galvin, and St. James the Greater Parish (Charles Town) in West Virginia for their support in this project for the McLaughlin family.

Courtesy photo

At the Easter Vigil on April 19 at St. Thomas Church in Gassaway, Bishop Mark Brennan anoints Matthew McLaughlin for Confirmation.

Courtesy photo

Drilling of the well at the McLaughlin property begins in May.

El Papa califica el trato a los migrantes en EEUU de 'extremadamente irrespetuoso'

Por Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service

CIUDAD DEL VATICANO (CNS) — Insistiendo en que se debe respetar la dignidad de todas las personas, incluidos los inmigrantes, el Papa León XIV pidió a los católicos estadounidenses y a "las personas de buena voluntad" que lean y escuchen el reciente mensaje pastoral de los obispos de EE.UU. sobre el tema.

"Cuando las personas llevan una buena vida —y muchas de ellas (en Estados Unidos) desde hace 10, 15 o 20 años— tratarlas de una manera que es extremadamente irrespetuosa, por decir lo menos", es inaceptable, dijo el Papa el 18 de noviembre. "Y ha habido algo de violencia, por desgracia—, creo que los obispos han sido muy claros en lo que han dicho".

En una reunión con periodistas fuera de su villa en Castel Gandolfo, se le preguntó al Papa León qué opinaba del "mensaje pastoral especial sobre la inmigración" aprobado por abrumadora mayoría por los miembros de la Conferencia de Obispos Católicos de Estados Unidos el 12 de noviembre.

"Nos inquieta ver en nuestras comunidades un clima de temor y ansiedad ante las prácticas de perfilamiento y la aplicación de las leyes migratorias", dijeron los obispos en su mensaje pastoral. "Nos entristece profundamente el tono que ha adoptado el debate contemporáneo y la creciente denigración de los inmigrantes. Nos preocupan las condiciones en los centros de detención y la falta de acceso a una atención pastoral adecuada. Lamentamos que algunos inmigrantes que viven en los Estados Unidos han perdido su estatus migratorio de manera arbitraria".

Los obispos también dijeron: "Nos oponemos a las deportaciones masivas e indiscriminadas", y rezaron "por el fin de la retórica inhumana y de la violencia, ya sea dirigida contra inmigrantes o contra los organismos de seguridad".

El Papa León dijo a los periodistas en Castel Gandolfo que el mensaje pastoral es "una declaración muy importante. Invito especialmente a todos los católicos, pero también a las personas de buena voluntad, a escuchar atentamente lo que han dicho".

"Nadie ha dicho que Estados Unidos deba tener las fronteras abiertas", afirmó el Papa. "Creo que todos los países tienen derecho a determinar quién, cómo y cuándo entran las personas".

Sin embargo, añadió que, a la hora de aplicar la política migratoria, "tenemos que buscar formas de tratar a las personas de manera humana, tratándolas con la dignidad que les corresponde".

"Si hay personas que se encuentran en Estados Unidos de forma ilegal, hay formas de tratar esa situación", dijo. "Hay tribunales. Hay un sistema de justicia", pero el sistema tiene "muchos problemas" que deben abordarse.

También se le preguntó al Papa León sobre lo que hace en Castel Gandolfo.

Los martes son tradicionalmente el único día de la semana en que los papas no tienen audiencias oficiales ni actos públicos. Cuando su agenda lo permite, el Papa León se traslada a Castel Gandolfo a última hora de la tarde del lunes y regresa al Vaticano el martes por la noche.

El Papa León ha declarado que aprovecha ese día para "hacer un poco de deporte, leer un poco y trabajar un poco" y ha precisado que en Castel Gandolfo juega al tenis y nada en la piscina.

Tomarse un descanso durante la semana "ayuda mucho", dijo el Papa. Y es importante cuidar tanto el cuerpo como el alma.

Mientras se prepara para su primer viaje fuera de Italia como Papa —una visita a Turquía y Líbano del 27 de noviembre al 2 de diciembre—, también se le preguntó cuándo pensaba volver a Perú, donde ejerció como misionero y obispo.

El Papa León dijo que le gusta viajar, pero los eventos del año jubilar le han llenado la agenda de 2025. El reto para 2026 será encontrar la manera de programar los viajes que le gustaría hacer, entre ellos al santuario de Nuestra Señora de Fátima en Portugal, a Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe en México y luego un viaje a Uruguay, Argentina y Perú, "por supuesto".

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Repair ...

Cont'd from Page 15

lives a man and woman with their 22-year-old daughter who has autism.

"They had three feet of water in that house, and it destroyed everything," Deacon Lester said. "The floors all had to come out, the kitchen, the bathroom, everything had to be pulled out."

The team cleared out debris and dried mud and repaired damaged floors and walls.

The volunteers on the mission team are thankful to Sacred Heart Church in Williamson, a half hour from the work sites, for providing them with a place to stay.

Although the volunteers on the team have done some travelling in their ministry, most of the work over the years has focused on home repairs of people in need in Marion County.

"Sometimes we buy all the materials, sometimes they buy the materials and we do the labor," Deacon Lester said. "We never charge anything for our labor."

There are no plans set for next year's mission trip, but Deacon Lester said he stays in touch with Lora Pierce, Disaster Services Specialist with Catholic Charities West Virginia.

Deacon Lester's desire to start the mission trips grew out of his own experience with disaster when his home was flooded in 2003.

"The American Baptists showed up at my house the day of the flood and knew what to do," he said. "So, from that I developed a relationship with them."

They've been volunteering with him ever since along with Catholics and people of all faiths who have joined in his mission trips every year as well.

"And that's been a very wonderful part of the experience," he said, "being able to work with people on the common goal that fulfills our calling in Christ to work for those who are suffering."

Deacon Lester sees God's will in everything that has brought him to building this mission trip ministry—the flooding of his home and the help he received, his previous experience working in disaster relief, his involvement in a business with construction where he honed his skills, and developing a project management ability.

"I only see God's hand in those things that affect us negatively and have a positive long-term result," he said. "I feel like I'm called to go and help as I have been helped."

project rachel
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