

# 150th Anniversary of St. Bartholomew Church: Feast of St. Bartholomew

## Introduction: Nova et Vetera

In the years following the II Vatican Council, and in the teaching of successive Popes, the Church's main focus has been on evangelization. This includes bringing the light and love of the Gospel to places where it has never been heard, to far-flung countries. It also includes re-igniting the flame of faith in places where it once burned brightly but lately has grown cold. We've learned that by her very nature the Church is missionary; and guided by the teaching and example of Pope Francis we have been called to be missionary disciples. Pope Francis also has called for our parishes, schools, and charitable works to undergo what he calls "a missionary conversion" - to move away from being self-focused toward a newfound focus on moving outward, bringing the truth and love of Christ to the margins of society. Perhaps to more than a few of us all this feels rather new—a novel way for us to be Catholic Christians.

Today's feast in honor of the Apostle, St. Bartholomew and the history of this parish church that bears his name - tell us differently. As we see in today's Gospel, missionary discipleship goes back to Christ. Christ called Philip to follow him and then Philip came to Nathanael (who is identified in the other Gospels as Bartholomew). Philip said to Nathanael: "We have found him!" We've found the One foretold by Moses and the prophets, the One longed for not only by kings, seers, and sages but by the poor and faithful remnant of Israel, the *anawim*.

Nathanael reacted to this announcement with a skepticism familiar to anyone of us who has the task of announcing the Gospel to our incredulous contemporaries. Nathanael belittled Jesus' humble origins, i.e., until he encountered the Son of Man. In that encounter, Jesus made it clear that he had found Nathanael first, sitting under the shade of a fig tree, a biblical symbol for the peace of God's Kingdom. This opened Nathanael's eyes and so he addressed Jesus with lofty, messianic titles:

Rabbi! Son of God! King of Israel! Later on he would discover the meaning of those titles more profoundly.

In fact, the Lord promises Nathanael as much. Jesus, who embodies the Kingdom of God in all its truth and beauty, promises to show Nathanael that vision of beauty, glory, holiness, and security described in today's first reading from the Book of Revelation – the new Jerusalem, the Bride of the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sins. As Nathanael, the Apostle Bartholomew, begins to follow Jesus, witnessing his Death and Resurrection & receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit— ...this vision takes hold of his soul with such intensity that he becomes one of the Church's original evangelizers. It is said that Bartholomew brought the Gospel of Matthew as far as present-day India & that he suffered not merely martyrdom but indeed a very cruel form of martyrdom. Evangelization, skepticism, encountering Jesus, missionary discipleship, bearing witness: none of this is new: Friends, it is deeply embedded in the DNA of the faith we are proud to profess.

### **Missionaries to Central Maryland**

Thus was the pattern established by Christ and the Apostles for the Church's missionary activity, the work of spreading the Gospel to all nations. We see the same pattern at work, here in Central Maryland, as we reflect on the history of St. Bartholomew's Parish. This parish came to be established 150 years ago thanks to the missionary efforts of the Redemptorists, the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, the spiritual sons of St. Alphonsus Ligouri. What happened to St. Bartholomew in the ancient Near East two millennia ago was reproduced in St. Alphonsus' Ligouri's heart in 18th century Naples: Christ took hold of his heart and transformed him into a missionary disciple who embraced the poor, taught the faith with insight and effectiveness, and imparted his special form of missionary zeal to his companions ... among them, St. John Neumann, Bl. Francis Seelos, and their confreres in the United States, great missionaries who brought the Gospel West and Northwest from Baltimore, from St. Alphonsus and St. Michael parishes, in the 1850's and 60's.

In those years Catholics were few and far between in these parts. It was also a difficult time as the nation was torn apart by the Civil War. And while distance between Baltimore and Manchester is a mere 37 miles, in the 19th century, the

route between those places was long and tortuous. In 1940 Msgr. McAdam, a former Pastor of St. Bartholomew, described that route: Riding in horse-drawn Conestogas, the missionaries traveled at a top speed of 4 MPH “over the rolling hills of Carroll and Baltimore Counties to the music of jingling bells... [T]he route from Baltimore to Manchester traversed Green Street, Pennsylvania Ave., the Hookstown (now Reisterstown Rd.) and the Hanover Turnpikes...” What’s more the driver of the Conestoga paid toll no less than 5 times. Instead of taking an hour, the journey took a whole day and was made in the blistering heat of summer and the biting cold of winter. Despite these hardships, those missionaries came here once a month, preaching the Gospel, celebrating the sacraments, and tending to pastoral needs. Although the distance between Baltimore and Manchester does not compare with the distance and hardship of traveling from Jerusalem to India, let us not underestimate the missionary zeal of those who planted the faith here in Central Maryland.

The planting took determination; the mission did not grow exponentially. It grew by fits and starts; but there were more fits than starts. Over time, the tender mission shoot that now flourishes was entrusted to St. John’s in Westminster and to Sacred Heart in Glyndon. In later decades priests travelled by train but even that was far from comfortable. At the turn of the last century Fr. Gerard Nyssen tended both to Our Lady Star of the Sea in Solomon’s Island and also to St. Bartholomew’s, travelling the distance of over 90 miles, in part by steamboat. As late as 1928 St. Bartholomew’s was temporarily closed, yet less than a decade later, Fr. William E. Kelley became Pastor of St. Bartholomew’s and by 1937 there were two Mass celebrated each Sunday in what is today your lovely daily chapel.

Seeds planted with love and persistence took their time in germinating even after World War II, when the Catholic Church in the U.S. was growing rapidly. Fifty years ago there were only 85 registered families in this parish. When Father Marty Demek completed his service as pastor here, there were 800. It was he who set the wheels in motion for the building of this beautiful church, which was constructed and completed by our current pastor, Fr. Michael Roach. Today the parish has 1,426 registered parishioners, and continues to flourish as a community of faith, worship, and service under the leadership of our truly wonderful pastor, Father Michael Roach. Let’s express our deepest thanks!

## **The Future**

All of which brings us back to where we began: Christ and Nathanael. As we celebrate our 150th and look ahead to the future, it is now our moment to reproduce the exchange between Christ and Nathanael. In this moment when our call to be missionary disciples reaches us, many are skeptical of the One we call Messiah and Lord. When we, like our patron, Nathanael, a.k.a. St. Bartholomew, allow the Holy Spirit to open our eyes of faith to truth and love of Christ and to his kingdom of beauty, glory, holiness, and security, then we will be equipped in our travels through life to bear witness to Christ, to accompany in faith those we meet, and to invite them to share in the life and worship of this vibrant parish, a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. And like St. Bartholomew, we will be willing not only to go out of our way for this mission but even to deny ourselves and to suffer for the sake of the One who loves us so. This, this is how we will reach our 200th anniversary, please God.

May God bless us and keep us always in His love!