

Holy Cross celebrates history, looks to future

John E. “Jack” Vana, 70, attended Holy Cross School in Federal Hill for all eight years, was married at Holy Cross Church 48 years ago and still helps out with parish sour beef and dumpling dinners. Elizabeth Linski was baptized and married at the church, attended school at Holy Cross and worked at the parish for 35 years. Two of her sisters, who live just blocks away, also continue to worship there and her brother, Joseph Wehburg – a history buff – said their German immigrant grandfather was one of the workmen who placed the cross on the church in the 1880s.

For longtime Holy Cross parishioners as well as new, younger members, Sept. 14 was an opportunity to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the historic Federal Hill church. Started in 1858 by German immigrants, Holy Cross is now part of the Catholic Community of South Baltimore, which includes Our Lady of Good Counsel in Locust Point and St. Mary Star of the Sea in South Baltimore. Father Patrick Carrion serves as administrator for the three parishes, which support the Catholic Community School.

After a jubilant gathering hymn, parishioners made the sign of the cross, and Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien reminded worshippers that they had just done something that has been a sign of the faith since the earliest days of the church.

“We have just shielded ourselves with the cross of Christ,” said the archbishop, who concelebrated the Mass with Father Carrion, Father Erik Arnold, who served at Holy Cross as a seminarian, and Father Martin Demek, whose home parish was Holy Cross. “A cross we not only carry, but a cross of Christ in which we rejoice.”

The archbishop referenced the richly-colored stained glass windows along the parish walls, the wooden Stations of the Cross with German text underneath and a plaque naming those who served during World War II.

“They serve as a reminder of the debt we owe today to German Redemptorists who were pastors here,” he said, noting it’s important when celebrating anniversaries to

reference beginnings and the sacrifices that were made.

The archbishop said some 50 women from Holy Cross have gone on to enter religious life while 30 men, including Father Demek, pastor of St. William of York in Baltimore, entered the priesthood.

A school was established in 1855, which was run by the Sisters of Christian Charity.

"I think the interesting thing is watching how the three neighborhoods support the church," said 31-year-old parishioner Brian Battani, who is part of a younger generation that has moved to the city and called Holy Cross home. He met his wife, Katy, at the 6 p.m. Sunday evening Mass and serves on the school board. Mrs. Battani is on the parish council.

Father Carrion said the 500-family parish has a rich history, including the only remaining Ganter & Schumacher organ of its kind in the nation, which was installed in the church 122 years ago.

"It's been a mainstay through the years," Father Carrion said of the church. "Just think about how many things have changed in 150 years. Holy Cross is a standing statement about yesteryear and the power of faith."

Mr. Vana said growing up, Federal Hill was a working class neighborhood and Holy Cross had a reputation for being a strict school. Even though he has moved to Linthicum Heights, he continues to attend the 8:15 a.m. Mass at Holy Cross and noted that some of his former classmates are also in attendance.

After Mass, Judy Fyffe, a parishioner of 50 years, bustled about the church handing out paper-thin, buttery German sugar cookies. She and parishioners Mary Jane Simon and Margaret Storey, who are known as the Women of the Cross, volunteer regularly at the church and made 1,300 cookies for the anniversary celebration.

"We have had some bad times; we have had some good times," said Ms. Linski. "It's the people who make the church, and the people have a very strong faith, and the families are still there. It's a good church."

Mayor Sheila Dixon attended the Mass and talked about the contributions Holy

Cross has made to the city and of how her family has benefitted from Catholic education. She proclaimed Sept. 14 as “Holy Cross Catholic Church 150th Anniversary Day in Baltimore.”