

Little Orleans church celebrates 150 years

What St. Patrick in Little Orleans lacks in numbers, it makes up for in the enthusiasm and close bonds of its people. It's a tradition that stretches back 150 years when Irish immigrants first erected the little church as their spiritual home in eastern Allegany County.

"It's always been an intimate community," said Father John Lombardi, priest administrator of the 70-family rural faith community. "The people have always been very fervent, dedicated and thankful for their faith life and the sacraments."

Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski celebrated St. Patrick's 150th anniversary with a special Oct. 17 Mass that highlighted the church's deep faith roots. St. Patrick is a mission community of St. Peter in Hancock, located about 30 minutes away.

"We do celebrate the endurance of so many who have gone before us," Bishop Rozanski said, "whose faith was sustained within these walls and whose family life cycles have witnessed baptisms, marriages and funeral Masses for over seven generations."

Father Lombardi noted that many current parishioners have been in the parish for many generations. Some can trace their origins to the early St. Patrick parishioners that included Irish laborers who worked on the C&O Canal and railroads in Western Maryland.

Even before St. Patrick was built in 1860, Catholics had practiced their faith in Little Orleans at a time when they faced persecution. Father George Glick, a longtime former pastor who died in 2000, told The Catholic Review in a 1998 interview that in the 18th century, Catholics built "Mass houses" rather than church buildings. One of those Mass houses was established in Little Orleans in the early 1800s, he said.

"Because of the stringent penal laws that kept Catholics from public worship, these houses were built to look like private dwellings, but in truth were chapels," Father Glick said.

The Little Orleans Mass house was cared for by the people of the area, with visiting priests using it as a base of operations for the vast geography they covered on horseback.

“Here, they waited for the Spring thaw so that they could travel to Pittsburgh, Cumberland and Wheeling,” Father Glick said.

Standing on top of a hill overlooking the mountains of West Virginia and the Potomac Valley, St. Patrick Church was constructed through the generosity of Catholics including Elizabeth Lady Stafford, the granddaughter of Charles Carroll of Carrollton. In tribute to its Irish heritage and namesake, the church’s façade was adorned with a shamrock.

Catherine Ashkettle, a lifelong parishioner of 73 years, remembers when the church was heated with a wooden stove before the switch was made to kerosene and, later, electricity. Ashkettle is the sacristan and volunteers to keep the church clean.

“It’s a pretty little church,” she said, “and the people are really nice. I hope it stays open for a long many years – long after I’m gone.”