

Maryland church a landmark of faith

By Mark Zimmermann

Catholic News Service

NEWTOWNE, Md. – Celebrating the 350th anniversary of St. Francis Xavier Parish in Newtowne, one of the oldest Catholic parishes in the original 13 colonies, Washington Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl said the faith of those pioneer Maryland colonists should inspire today's Catholics to continue that legacy.

"It's our turn now," the cardinal said at a June 9 Mass in the parish hall at the rural church in southern Maryland, which is part of the Washington Archdiocese.

Nearly 400 people were gathered in the parish hall; an overflow crowd of another 70 people watched the Mass on a closed-circuit hookup in the historic church.

Cardinal Wuerl encouraged today's parishioners to emulate the example of their ancestors, and live and share the faith, and pass it on to the next generation.

"They were faithful people who kept the faith, who celebrated it, who lived it," he said.

The Mass of the Solemnity of Corpus Christi commemorated when the first church was built at Newtowne – in 1662. The St. Mary's County church is within view of where the first Maryland colonists landed at St. Clement's Island in 1634, and celebrated the first Catholic Mass in the English-speaking colonies.

After the Mass, Cardinal Wuerl and Father Brian Sanderfoot, pastor of St. Francis Xavier, posed with a framed apostolic blessing from Pope Benedict XVI to commemorate the anniversary. They stood before the historic parish church that was built in 1731, the year before George Washington was born.

St. Francis Xavier Church is believed to be the oldest Catholic church building in the United States east of the Mississippi River.

The church's red brick entranceway, added in 1767 for a vestibule and choir loft, has a unique semi-octagonal shape, connecting the church's wooden central section with another semi-octagonal section added in 1816 for the sacristy and confessional. The building's restoration was completed in 1984, and the church and a nearby 1789 manor house are on the National Register of Historic Places.

In recent years, St. Francis Xavier Parish with the support of the Maryland State Council of the Knights of Columbus has sponsored archaeological digs in an effort to locate the site of the 1662 church.

The continuity of faith at the parish, from colonial times to the digital age, was celebrated at the anniversary Mass and at a dinner immediately afterward under a tent set up on the parish grounds.

Men dressed as early Maryland militia members signaled dinner was ready by firing muskets. A few guests dressed as gentleman farmers and colonial ladies. A photo display showed the church's bell, cast in 1691, that summoned generations of the faithful to Mass from the surrounding countryside and waterways.

At the dinner, Father Sanderfoot paid tribute to those pioneer parishioners, noting: "Three hundred and fifty years ago, they came together for the same purpose we come together now, to praise God, for the worship of our Creator, and participating in the life of Christ."

In his homily, Cardinal Wuerl said the family of faith at Newtowne actually traces its beginnings to the first followers of Christ. That day's reading from the Acts of the Apostles described how the first Christians came together to pray, to listen to the teaching of the Apostles, to build a community and to join in the celebration of the Eucharist.

"That's what we do when we gather, that's what the founders did," the cardinal said.

The cardinal encouraged the congregation to share Christ's love with others, as their ancestors did. "We gather as a family of faith, to support one another, to be

there for the needs, not only of our community, but of the community around us," he said.

Parishioners Francis and Pat Greenwell dressed in Restoration-era costumes to portray William and Temperance Bretton, who deeded the original grant of land for St. Francis Xavier's first church and cemetery.

"It is a tremendous honor (to portray them)," said Francis Greenwell, whose wife of 50 years sewed the costumes. "They gave this land for the people to celebrate Mass and practice their faith," he told the Catholic Standard, newspaper of the Washington Archdiocese.

Christine Travis, 85, noted that she had been born in the area, and baptized in the little church in 1927 and received her first Communion there. She remembered walking the three miles from her family home to the church for Mass and devotions.

"It's just a thrill to come back here today to celebrate (this). ... Rain, snow, sleet or (when winds would) blow, we came to church every Sunday," she said.

Her nephew, John Bond, a retired corrections officer who was raised in the parish and now goes to daily Mass at the church, described how his father passed on the faith.

"He was a waterman" catching oysters, "going out on the water in the morning, he said the rosary," recalled his son, who is a Knight of Columbus. He volunteers as lector and as an extraordinary minister of holy Communion at the parish.

More recent parishioners, such as Tom Koviak, another Knight of Columbus, also regard the parish as holy ground. Koviak, who joined the parish 14 years ago and attends Mass there with his wife and two children, works for the Maryland Department of Agriculture.

He volunteers with 10 crews of parishioners who care for the grounds surrounding the historic church and cemetery. He said it's an honor to be a steward of a sacred place where early parishioners helped establish the Catholic Church in the United States.

“It’s a blessing to come to Mass here,” he said.

Zimmermann is editor of the Catholic Standard in Washington.

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