

St. Anthony of Padua kicks off anniversary

“This is where we used to have band practice.”

The woman in her 30s had just walked into the auxiliary building behind St. Anthony of Padua in Baltimore, space that had been built during boom times, been used for storage and was serving as a “Hall of Memories” on Sept. 14, when the parish began its 125th anniversary year with a homecoming and Mass.

The occasion combined a look back with a rigorous call to embrace the present and future.

Father C. Lou Martin, pastor of the Catholic Faith Community of St. Anthony and nearby Most Precious Blood, recognized nuns and lay teachers who had worked at the St. Anthony School. It closed in 2005, but its building is now occupied by Mother Mary Lange Catholic School, which serves northeast Baltimore.

Mother Lange students in uniform attended the 10:30 a.m. Mass. The Prayer of the Faithful was said in Filipino, Gaelic, Vietnamese and several African languages, including Igbo, a Nigerian dialect.

To mark the 10th anniversary of his ordination, Father Anthony Abiamiri, associate pastor on assignment from the Diocese of Okigwe in Nigeria, received a chalice from the Nigerian Catholic community of Baltimore. A Nigerian choir filled the front rows, providing song that complemented a parish folk group that numbered 11.

“When the kids are home from college, we’re even bigger,” Stephanie McDermott said.

That tapestry makes for a community that is much more diverse than the one Father Martin experienced as a seminarian at St. Anthony of Padua in 1974-75. When he returned as pastor in 1995, he found a Gardenville parish that was averaging three funerals a week.

“We had 450 funerals my first three years,” Father Martin said. “The population was aging, and the surrounding neighborhoods were transforming. We’ve done a lot of outreach, knocking on doors and a lot of inreach. Now, I think we’re doing really well.”

Kevin Barr, a parishioner with his wife, Marguerite, since 2000 and a member of the Northeast Catholic Brotherhood, concluded the Mass by sharing the renewal of his faith.

The outreach at St. Anthony has included considerable involvement from the Archdiocese of Baltimore’s Office of African American Ministries. That potential growth was the focus of the homily by Father Edward M. Miller, St. Bernardine pastor, who was invited to speak by Father Martin in response to his work in reviving that West Baltimore parish.

“There is an African tradition, that before you preach, you ask permission,” Father Miller explained, turning to Father Martin and following that protocol.

Father Miller challenged the parishioners of St. Anthony on several fronts.

“Our urban schools are a gift of invaluable ministry,” Father Miller said, “especially if we reach out to the parents who are un-churched, more than 50 percent. ... City parishes are building rich. New residents are coming all the time, and our doors must be open.”

“We want people to remember,” Father Miller said of the parish’s history, “but the great St. Anthony Church is yet to be born. What a fantastic foundation to build upon. Today’s good news is that God ain’t done with us yet.”

St. Anthony will officially mark its 125th anniversary in October 2009, when a gala is planned.