

St. Mary celebrates 250 years of faith in Hagerstown

When Catholics first gathered for Mass in Hagerstown 250 years ago, they did it in secret. Since English penal laws prohibited them from worshipping publically, Hagerstown Catholics met in family homes and relied on Jesuit circuit riders from Conewago, Pa.

It was a far cry from the very public celebration of Catholicism that took place Sept. 21 when more than 400 parishioners crammed into St. Mary in Hagerstown to mark the 250th anniversary of the first Catholic congregation worship in the city.

In his homily, Father George Limmer credited the faith community's great love for Catholic tradition as a key reason for its solid foundation and longevity. Thousands of Catholics have received the sacraments over many generations, he said.

"Those 250 years of faith traditions are now ours to hand on to others who will come after us," said Father Limmer, a retired priest and former St. Mary pastor.

"They are a priceless legacy - a treasure that we have received," he said, "but they are not our own."

St. Mary traces its origins to the Jesuit priests who celebrated Masses in secret, the priest said. By the late 18th century, Father Limmer noted that a log chapel was built on the site of St. Mary's present rectory, serving as St. Mary's first church. The cornerstone for the present church, the third church building, was laid on July 4, 1826.

Father Limmer proudly pointed out that St. Mary is the mother parish of St. Augustine in Williamsport, St. Peter in Hancock, St. Michael in Clear Spring, St. James in Boonsboro, St. Joseph in Halfway and St. Ann in Hagerstown.

During a catered picnic that followed the liturgy, many parishioners highlighted their great love for the Eucharist and traditional Catholic devotions like the rosary.

“Our parish has been around longer than some religions,” said Greg Rohr, a parishioner and father of nine. “We’ve persevered in faith and we’ve seen it all – the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, two world wars and everything else.”

Standing near a display case filled with parish artifacts including a 1909 manual on Forty Hours devotion and a 1941 St. Gregory Hymnal, Father J. Collin Poston said he is inspired by the long commitment to the faith in Hagerstown.

“It’s just really impressive to see how our faith has been treasured for so long,” said Father Poston, administrator.

Irene Wunderlich, coordinator of youth ministry, said the parish has come a long way from the days when Catholics were officially shunned. She is proud of the respected place the church takes within the wider community.

“As Catholics, that should be special to all of us,” she said. “The church is a visible part of American life and not something to be hidden.”