

THE HISTORY OF ST. STEPHEN PARISH 1853- 1977

In 1853 St. Stephen Parish was founded to serve the religious needs of the earliest Catholic settlers in Niles—Irish immigrants who had come to work in the steel industry that was beginning to develop here. Why was the parish named for St. Stephen, the proto-martyr? (A proto-martyr is the first Christian martyr in a country or among a particular group, such as a religious order. Similarly, the phrase the Proto-martyr (with no other qualification of country or region) can mean Saint Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian church or Saint Thecla, the first female martyr of the Christian church.) Today, there is no one who knows for certain.

However, much of the parish's fascinating history is known. The first priest to minister to the religious needs of these Catholics was the Rev. Francis Stroker, pastor of a small wooden church in Dungannon, Columbian County. He offered Sunday Mass in the homes of the devout, maintaining his pastoral visits to Niles until 1856 when the Rev. Michael Pendergast succeeded him. In 1858, St. Stephen was attached to St. Columba of Youngstown, first as a station and in 1865 as a mission.

It was in the spring of 1864 that Rev. E.M. O'Callaghan, of Youngstown purchased two lots at the corner of Park Ave. and Arlington St. (then known as James and Mechanic Streets). At a cost of \$3,000, the original 38 x 70 ft. frame church was built that same year on the site of the present building. Improvements were added to the church from time to time making it an attractive place to worship. The Rev. A.R. Sidley was appointed the first resident pastor for Niles in July 1865, moving into the pastoral residence, a house next to the church.

In February 1866, Father Sidley bought five acres of land on Warren Ave. Extension to serve as the beginning of St. Stephen Cemetery. In April of 1868 Rev. B.B. Kelley was names pastor,

and it was he who organized a parochial school so that the children of the parish could receive a more thorough religious training. Fr. Kelly left Niles in May 1871 and St. Stephen was attended from the Cathedral in Cleveland by Rev. M. Ivers until August when Rev. T.M. Mahony was appointed resident. In August Fr. Mahony purchased two lots for a new school site adjoining the church on the south end and fronting on W. State St. (then Furnace St.). In Nov. 1873 Rev. A.M. Scanlon succeed him. July 1880 the following priests had pastoral charge of St. Stephen: Rev. J. Monahan, 1884 Rev. D.P. O'Brien, 1888 Rev. J.C. Desmond until May, 1889.

In the 1880 St. Stephen experienced major growth. The first church became too small and Fr. O'Brien began a drive to construct a larger church. Thomas McNamara, Sr., native a County Cork, who helped build the original church, turned the sod when the foundation began in the fall of 1888. Bishop Gilmour blessed the cornerstone May 11, 1890, with the church enclosed during the same year. The first Mass was celebrated on Christmas Day, 1891. The church was completed under the direction of Fr. Felix Scullin who served the parish for 27 ½ yrs until his passing. Total cost of the new church, including pews, altars, and other furnishings were \$30,000. Ten times the cost of the earlier wooden structure, and it was fully paid when dedicated. This was an impressive accomplishment for Niles Catholics. The dimensions were: Length, 100feet; width, 49 feet; and height of spire, 175 feet. (On a tragic note, two workers fell from a scaffold on the spire as it neared completion and were instantly killed). Built of red brick, trimmed with sandstone, the church has elegant stained glass windows, all donated by parishioners and societies. The 62 parishioners who made substantial contributions to the new church had their names inscribed in the bell in the church tower. Rev. Daniel Crotty served until March 1923. Rev. James McDonough was appointed pastor in April 1923 and served until September 1929. Rev. McDonough rebuilds a portion of the church in the wake of a \$9,000 fire in May 1923. The design was

done by a parishioner Col. F.W. Bohne', a prominent architect. The window, which pictured St. Stephen, was replaced with a stained glass portrayal of the Crucifixion, imported from Italy. The church gained national prominence during an imposed confrontation of the Ku Klux Klan. Through the wise and courageous guidance of Fr. McDonough the efforts of the Klan was nullified and its influence was weekend.

In August 1934, Fr. Gallagher bought six additional acres adjacent to the original cemetery. The Rev. Thomas Ring succeeded Fr. Gallagher. In August 1943 the Diocese of Youngstown was created. The Most Rev. James McFadden, Auxiliary Bishop of Cleveland was appointed first Ordinary of the new diocese by Pope Pius XII.

In 1946, Fr. Ring purchased another quarter of the present block from the McNamara estate. In 1951 a building fund was sent up for the construction of a junior high school and gymnasium-auditorium. The school was dedicated and ready for the fall term in 1954. Estimated cost was \$400,000. In June 1951 the Ormerod estate, which adjoined the rectory was purchased and converted into clubrooms where the societies held their meetings. These projects evidenced the vibrant growth of the parish community from 210 families in 1912 to 1100 families just forty years later in 1952. Right Reverend Monsignor Francis J. Lavery was named pastor in November 1952. Upon his death in April 1955, the Rev. Robert O'Dea became the head of the parish. Fr. O'Dea purchased a piece of land on Water St. from the city of Niles for the construction of a garage to house the church owned school busses. He also bought the Jenkins property on W. State Street across from the Sisters Convent. Then tearing down the old rectory, the Ormerod and Buck houses were joined together and were converted into offices and living quarters for the parish priests. It was in Fr. O'Dea's time that the Fund Drive for Annunciation High School (J.F.K.) was announced. The parish share of the total cost of this school was \$120,000. Fr. O'Dea was instrumental in the organization of the Home, School and Church Association, the

Catholic Youth Organization for teenagers, and the Christian Family Movement for married couples. His Silver Anniversary as a priest was celebrated by the parish in May 1961. St. Robert's Mission, Cortland, OH had been tended by the priests and sisters from St. Stephen. When the Mission was given parish status, Fr. O'Dea became its first pastor in 1965. At St. Stephen, he was succeeded by the Rev. Francis Hughes.

Fr. Hughes, assisted by Fathers Gubser and Loperfido, took a complete parish census. With the approval of the parish councilmen, he initiated a monthly listing of offerings and increased the weekly collections considerably. Fr. Hughes also purchased property for the expansion of the cemetery from the Reactive Metals Company. It was he who disposed of the school busses when free bussing was extended to parochial school children.

In 1968 the school building on Arlington was condemned. Six classrooms of a temporary nature were constructed on the floor of the gymnasium at a cost of \$92,000. In order to meet the need for a 16 classroom building. Also, the exterior of the church was cleaned and the interior renovated. The Sanctuary underwent major changes to conform to Vatican II guidelines.

Fr. Hughes marked the 25th year of his ordination in 1970 and the entire parish celebrated his Jubilee. In that same year, he accepted an appointment to St. Patrick's, Hubbard and was replaced in June by the Rev. John Turk.

To help solve financial problems of the parish, Fr. Turk began a two year Immediate Action Fund Program in April 1971. The goal was \$238,000. At the end of the program \$165,000 had been collected. Many projects have been direct result of the generous response to that drive which was extended in order to realize the entire amount. These projects included the razing of the old school building in August 1971, the paving of the parking lot and playground; the replacing of the sidewalks around the church; the installing of handrails at the entrances; and landscaping- all completed by the spring of 1972. Also, each wage earner

contributed to a "Fire Fund" to defray the expense of a \$24,000 heating and air conditioning system in the church.

The parish Finance Committee announced plans for a rectory in December 1972. Exclusive of furnishings, the only new priest's residence in the parish history was built at a cost of \$83,275. In was reading in January 1974. Bishop James Malone celebrated the Blessing Ceremony on September 8, 1974, which was followed by an Open House for parishioners and friends from the community. In April 1974, Fr. Turk was honored at a public reception on the occasion of the Silver Anniversary of his ordination.

The first Parish Wedding was hosted by Fr. Turk in January 1976. One hundred sixty five couples, celebrating a total of 3385 years of marriage renewed their vows at the wedding Mass and were congratulated at a reception at the school hall.

In 1976, too, the organ was completely rebuilt at a cost of \$10,000. An amount, which was collected in only two months from voluntary contributions to a special Organ Fund. The church organ has an interesting history. Purchased in 1914 the original contract reads, "...all materials entering into the construction of the instrument, such as glue, felt, leather, etc., to be of the best the market offers, and the organ as a whole to be, when finished, a work of Art in the strictest sense of the word." The organ was electrified around 1929, and a new console was added in the 50's. In addition to the complete overhauling that it received in 1976, to ranks, trumpet and chimes were added.

June 1976 parishioners were introduced to newly ordained Deacon Jeffrey Volzer, who spent six months at St. Stephen in a special program of internship before his ordination to the priesthood.

Two major efforts were realized in 1977. Again through voluntary contributions, parish members paid for the purchase and installation of a new boiler for the school, \$14,000 expenditure. Secondly, after minor repairs to the church and revarnishing of the pews, the walls of the church were painted and decorated by Rozzi Studios of Youngstown. The Blessed Sacrament altar was brought forward, and the Sanctuary screen was replaced with one in the

Gothic mode of the structure. Also in 1977, storm windows were installed at the convent and the parish owned apartment building on Chestnut St. A contract was signed for the installation of storm windows at the church.

The Materials have never taken precedence of the Spiritual at St. Stephen. The material needs have been successfully met only because parishioners have been God-centered in their lives.

The past history of St. Stephen Church is witness of God's fatherly love and affection toward his children who make up the St. Stephen family parish. We must give praise and thanksgiving to the Father for His generosity and care. As we step into the future, we know that God's blessings and guidance will continue with us if we turn to Him in childlike prayer. So let our vision be filled with optimism and our spirits respond to Christ's invitation, "COME, FOLLOW ME".