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**THE HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
IN
NORTH BRANFORD**

By

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It is recorded that in 1756 eight Arcadians, brought from the Grand Pre region of Nova Scotia, were indentured in Branford. No doubt they tended the cattle and tilled the land of the Branford colonists. The North Farms later became North Branford and these Arcadians were Catholics, hence we can say with a certainty that in 1756 there Catholics in North Branford.

The first Irish name found in the records of the mother town of Branford is Michael Taintor and the date is 1669. During the next century there was a large immigration of Irish to America.

In 1829 the first resident priest came to Connecticut. He visited New Haven every three months, and Catholics living in this area were afforded an opportunity to attend Mass and receive the Sacraments. In 1832, a parish was established in New Haven and this was considered close by for those living in this section. Just the year before, the State Legislature had incorporated North Branford as a separate town, and so records were no longer included with those of Branford.

For many years there are no records of Catholics living in North Branford, but during the potato famine in Ireland a real tide of immigration set in, and by the 1850's many Catholics were living in Connecticut, and in 1859 Branford had its first permanent pastor. The political unrest in Central Europe, which had begun by this time, brought other families to the North Branford-Northford area and members of these families played a great role in the founding of the Catholic Church in the town.

Great efforts were made to attend mass as often as possible. Family records tell us that Mrs. Bridget Cummings and Mary Mitchell Augur of Northford walked barefoot during the summer months to St. Patrick's Church on Grand Avenue in New Haven, So precious were shoes at that time that they carried theirs under their arms until they approached the church.

Because the roads were impassable oft times during the winter, Mass was celebrated once a year by the priest from New Haven at the home of John Fanning on the Old Middletown Turnpike near Village Street. Catholics in the southern part of town went to New Haven, Branford, or Guilford to assist at Mass.

The Catholic population remained small and scattered until Lake Gaillard was formed by the building of a huge dam, Many of the workers on this project were Catholics. Some brought families with them and became permanent residents of the town. They joined the families brought by the opening of the New Haven Trap Rock quarry.

On Christmas Day, 1919 James Walsh an employee of the New Haven Trap Rock Company and his sons James and John, walked to Branford six miles away to attend Mass at St. Mary's Church. Father Murray, the pastor, regretted there was no church nearer their homes.

During the first week in February 1920, a meeting was held at the home of Mrs. Edward Foote in North Branford Center, and despite the bitter cold and blowing snow, a representative group of men and women were in attendance. Among those present were Father Thomas J. Murray, Miss Anne Acheson, Mrs. George Fair, Mrs. John McKenzie, Mrs. Patrick Nelligan., Mrs. Bridget Wrinn, Mrs. Richard Scholz, John B. Hart, John McKenzie, Alexander Hart, Patrick, Nelligan, Edward Daly, Daniel Doody, John McKernan Sr., John McKernan Jr., James Walsh, John Hartigan, and Joseph Wetteman. They voted unanimously to have Mass celebrated in North Branford.

On Sunday morning, February 29, 1920, the first Mass was celebrated by the Rev. Thomas J. Murray in the home of Mr. and Mrs. James Walsh. This house was known as the George Ford house.

An upper room was used. All furniture had been removed. Along table, set up on blocks, served as an altar. A few chairs were used, but planks placed across boxes served as pews. John B. Sliney of Branford, now Selectman Sliney, drove Father Murray each week in a sleigh or carriage as the weather required. Alexander Hart served as the altar boy at the first Mass, and John Hartigan was the first regular altar boy.

Various projects including Lawn parties, fairs, barbeques, dances and card parties netted enough money so that by the spring of 1924 it was possible to plan definitely for the construction of a church. Mr. Charles Todd was approached and on June 4, 1924 he transferred title to the land near his home on Branford Road for a site for the church. On August 14, 1924 additional acreage was secured from him so that a rectory might be built adjacent to the church.

Dedication of the church and laying of the cornerstone took place on Sunday, May 3, 1925. Bishop Nilan officiated and Father Murray sang the Solemn High Mass. The sermon was delivered by Father John Fogarty of Guilford.

The church was dedicated St. Augustine and the bell was christened St. Monica in honor of the mother and son saints of early Christian years. In his explanation of the choice of names Father Murray said, "As the prayers of his mother, St. Monica, led St. Augustine to do many good works and earn his sainthood, so will this bell ring out over the countryside and bring others to God." This proved to be true.

The cost of the building was \$18,000 and it was dedicated without debt five short years after the first Mass was said in the Walsh home. St. Augustine's remained a mission church of St. Mary's, Branford, until the death of Father Murray in 1936. Curates had been Father Patrick McCarthy and Father Edward Demenske.

In 1936, St. Augustine's became a mission of Guilford. Father Francis Finn was the pastor and Father Nathan Conklin curate. Father James Coughlan, Father William Brewer and Father John Hines became pastors later.

New Catholic families moved into town and activities in and for the church increased. In September of 1941, Bishop Maurice F. McAuliff formed a separate parish to include Northford which had formerly belonged to North Haven. The parish now included eighty-five families in the original North Branford area, and sixty five families in Northford.

While the rectory was being built next to the church on Branford Road, the parish priest lived in the home of George Augur Jr. on Middletown Turnpike. Mrs. Augur was the eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James Walsh in whose home the Mass was celebrated.

The rectory was completed in April of 1942 and the Rev. John J. McCarthy became the first resident pastor. Rev. Bernard Scanlon was appointed assistant pastor five years later. As is the custom, curates were transferred, and Father Scanlon was succeeded by Rev. John F. McDonald, then came Father Homer Maguire, to be followed by Father Vincent Flynn.

Father McCarthy, who had been in poor health for some time, succumbed at St. Mary's Hospital, Waterbury, Nov. 27, 1952. His funeral was held at St. Mary's Church in Branford because of the lack of room in St. Augustine's Church. Father William Monaghan, curate at St. Rose's Church in Meriden was appointed pastor of St. Augustine's.

By this time several Masses were being celebrated each Sunday to accommodate the ever increasing numbers who came to worship in this little rural church. At last the number of parishioners became so great that the capacity of the church was exceeded, and the Catholics of Northford were allowed to have Mass said in the Community House. The Congregational Church was later made available to them, and Mass was celebrated there until the completion of a chapel, St. Monica's, on Middletown Turnpike.

Although this cared for all parishioners for a time, the growth of the town continued to spiral and again, parishioners filled the little church and many had to remain outside. In the meantime, Father Monaghan's health failed to such a degree that he was unable to care for all the parish duties. Archbishop O'Brien appointed Father William J. Reilly, curate at Sacred Heart Church in Waterbury, as administrator in September 1958. Father Frank Igo had served as a temporary assistant.

In 1959, the town officials granted the use of the Junior High gymnasium, and later the school cafeteria for Mass each Sunday. Father Robert Lord was assigned to the parish as a resident curate in 1960.

Father Reilly obtained permission from the Archbishop to launch a drive for funds to build a new church, with a goal of a day's pay each month from wage earners. The drive was a success. Summer bazaars were held annually and other fund-raising activities were carried out by parishioners. Father Reilly studied the problems connected with the construction of a new church.

The site of St. Augustine's Church was no longer the center of population in this expanding parish. Mr. and Mrs. Daniel M. Doody gave a tract of land for parish use. Two acres of land were purchased from Frederick D. Dudley so that access to this plot from Caputo Road was possible. Joseph Spezzano, another parishioner, made a gift of an acre on the north to straighten out the boundary line.

Plans were begun immediately to build a new church on this seventeen-acre plot situated on a hill, apart from the traffic of the main highway. It provided a perfect setting for parish buildings.

Ground was broken on April 9, 1961. Father John Quinn of Madison gave the inspiring address of the day. The church was dedicated with colorful ceremonies presided over by the Archbishop, on Saturday, August 11, 1962.

This edifice is unique in many ways. It is modern in appearance as one approaches, but cathedral-like inside. It has a seating capacity of nine hundred. Members of the parish realize that until a rectory can be built next to the church, their goal is not reached.

Father Lord was transferred to St. Vincent dePaul parish in East Haven in September of 1962. Father James J. Cronin was then assigned as curate.

When the little St. Augustine church was built on Branford Road, it had a seating capacity of 198 and seldom were there more than fifty at the one Mass each Sunday. When the new church was built there were five hundred families in the parish; now in 1967 there are over eight hundred.

As the need for more Masses increased, Dominican priests from Providence College, Rhode Island, came each week to celebrate some of the Masses at St. Augustine Church and Monica Chapel, for lack of seats necessitated the celebration of several each Sunday.

Catechism classes grew larger, and it became necessary to hold them on Saturday. Five classes were held at the Junior High School and three at St. Monica Chapel.

By 1964, the number of parishioners in Northford had increased, to the point where several classes were needed there. Parish duties increased, and although the Catholics of Northford had worked faithfully through the years to establish and support the parish of St. Augustine, it now became evident that a new parish was needed for them when conditions were right.

A house on Cedar Lane was for sale, and Father Reilly discussed the matter at the Chancery in Hartford. The place was purchased for a rectory and the Archbishop, Henry J. O'Brien, appointed the Rev. Stephen Vitka pastor of the new parish of St. Monica, and the chapel became a church. He assumed his duties on September 10, 1964.

The men of the Holy Name Society and the women of the Confraternity of the Rosary work tirelessly for the parish of St. Augustine. They look forward eagerly to the day when St. Augustine will be without debt. The Catholic Youth Organization aims to develop the spiritual side of each member as a means of creating an awareness of his responsibilities to his fellow men, community and country.

Sunday school classes, exclusive of first grade, have six hundred eighty boys and girls under instruction. Men and women of the parish who teach these classes have completed courses in catechetics for the elementary and secondary grades. These volunteer teachers qualified themselves by attending the necessary classes in New Haven and Hamden for a period of seven months. Dominican nuns from St. Mary's of New Haven teach the children preparing for First Holy Communion and also the children of the eighth grade.

In 1920, the first Mass in North Branford was celebrated in an upper room of a private house. Today there are over two thousand communicants attending Mass each Sunday necessitating the celebration of five Masses.

Father Vitka remodeled and redecorated the St. Monica Chapel to make it entirely suitable for a church. A craft room was added for parish meetings and the chairs were replaced with church pews.

Several Masses are already required each Sunday. It is a growing parish with eleven hundred children registered. Between four and five hundred receive catechetical instructions each week.

St. Monica's is young as a parish, and is continuing the organizational pattern of St. Augustine Church. The older boys and girls are members of the C.Y.O. and the Women of the parish are active in the Confraternity of the Rosary. The Holy Name Society meets regularly, and Father Vitka finds his time well taken up in watching over the spiritual and physical needs of his flock.

Cassie J. Duddy