

Parish History of St. Catherine of Siena



For many years, Catholics in the town of Preston were under the jurisdiction of the Pastor of St. Mary's Church, Norwich. In 1954, The Most Rev. Bernard J. Flanagan, Bishop of Norwich, transferred that jurisdiction to the Pastor of St. Mary's Church, Jewett City. Every Sunday, Msgr. Alfred F. Driscoll could be seen training altar servers as Preston Catholics could be seen unfolding the portable altar used every Sunday and Holyday in the Community Center at Preston City. It was hometown Catholicism at its very best, with the altar actually constructed by Jack Girard of Preston. Even after his death, the commitment of these founding Catholics was evident as a Memorial Fund for Jack was set up to pay for a public address system. The first Mass was celebrated on December 19, 1954. Catechism, as it was called then, also was taught there but later classes also were held in the home of Mr. & Mrs. Albert Lambert in the Poquetanuck section of town.

In June, 1957, Msgr. Driscoll was transferred to St. Mary's, New London, and was succeeded by The Reverend Vincent D. Murphy, Pastor of St. John's Church, Uncasville. A new milestone was reached when arrangements were made to teach catechism in the Preston City and Poquetanuck Public Schools and this program has continued into the new millennium.

The strength of the mission parish grew out of the guild of Our Lady of Good Counsel which was founded by Msgr. Driscoll. Soon, the Guild became the driving force for the establishment of a Church in Preston that would provide for the spiritual needs of Catholics and others seeking a faith community in this rapidly growing town.

Finally in 1959, the William O'Neil family of Norwich, well known for their generosity and commitment to their Catholic faith, donated four acres of land that was designated specifically for a new church and rectory. A successful financial drive was launched and with the help from the Norwich Diocesan Development Fund, ground was broken for St. Catherine of Siena in July. Construction on the building began in spring, 1959, and ended a year later at a cost of \$14,000.

The dream of a parish community became reality on April 24, 1960, when The Most Rev. Vincent J. Hines, Bishop of Norwich, dedicated St. Catherine of Siena Church. It was through the generosity of the Catholic people of Preston and many others that a new Catholic faith community was born. Also deserving special recognition are the Sisters of the Holy Ghost, St. Mary's Convent, Jewett City, who taught in Preston City since 1955. The priests of St. Mary's, Jewett City, also deserve to be singled out: Rev. Joseph Messier and Rev. Leo Sutula, who had taught at the Poquetanuck School since 1957. In 1965, the O'Neil family donated an additional nine acres to St. Catherine's in memory of William and Catherine O'Neil.

Rev. Joseph Finnerty became the church's first pastor on December 7, 1975. He was installed by The Most. Rev. Daniel P. Reilly, Bishop of Norwich. The parish had finally become large enough to stand on its own, breaking away as a mission church of St. Mary's, Jewett City. Under Fr. Finnerty's leadership, St. Catherine's was renovated and its liturgical service, including an outstanding choir under the leadership of Mary Jane Haddad, became well known throughout the region and Diocese.

Fr. Finnerty was re-assigned in 1985 for sabbatical studies and The Rev. John Nash was appointed pastor on August 30, 1985. The Rev. Paul Loverde became temporary administrator of the parish when Fr. Nash was re-assigned in November, 1985. Rev. James Carini became pastor on March 6, 1986. His special gifts made St. Catherine's the choice of parishes for the Ministry of the Deaf. Since 1975, there have been four Pastoral Associates: Sr. Mary Fahey, RSM; Sr. Sharon Tschudi, MSHS; Sr. Cathleen Ryan, OP; and, Sr. Laurie Doucette, CSC.

Rev. Antony J. Alaharasan joined St. Catherine's as pastor on November 3, 1996. His exhortation of "Smile and Shine for Jesus" won't soon be forgotten by the faithful and visitors at St. Catherine's. He left to teach in the Religion Department at St. Bernard High School and The Rev. Michael S. Smith became pastor on November 8, 1998. Fr. Michael's youth and energy rejuvenated both the young and old alike at St. Catherine's. In May, 2000, The Rev. George J. Richards Jr. was appointed Administrator at St. Catherine of Siena parish.