Voices From a Landmark

Reflections to commemorate the parish’s 150th anniversary

As the last millennium was drawing to a close, The Basilica of Saint Mary commissioned a book to celebrate our long history as a large and diverse parish, a public space of beauty and serenity, and a leader in civic affairs. This year our parish community celebrates its 150th anniversary (1868-2018), selections from Voices From a Landmark are featured with permission from the author, Peg Guilfoyle.

IN THE FALL of 1999, I took delivery of the first fat binder bulging with photographs and photocopies gathered by volunteer researchers at The Basilica and quickly submerged myself in the past of a small city block dominated by an enormous parish church.

Imagine how The Basilica of Saint Mary must have towered over the younger, smaller city in 1914 — commanding, graceful, adorned at the pediment with imagery of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin into heaven, flanked by massive stone angels. One angel looks down toward the street, the other toward the sky, much like the parish itself. The Basilica block is urban and busy, filled with industry and purpose, populated day and night by people intending good in the world, and accomplishing it.

The life of the community, in days and years, is made up of a long string of small events. Individual prayers, daily Masses, the communion of children, drop in visitors who sit quietly for a moment, a helping hand to someone in need; these are the small events that, over time, make up the strong web of faith and history that form the actual Basilica, as opposed to the physical one.

In his history The Basilica of Saint Mary of Minneapolis: Historical and Descriptive Sketch, Monsignor James M. Reardon writes that early activities of the Immaculate Conception church included programs to help the needy, a parish library, public processions on Saint Patrick’s Day, and a leader, Father McGolrick, who became “one of the most prominent men of the town.” McGolrick “joined many civic organizations,” and “made his own the interests of the citizens.”

Today, The Basilica of Saint Mary is a church with tremendous social outreach programs; it has taken an active place in the public life of Minneapolis and made itself a stakeholder in its future. The Basilica has named a vision: “Seek the well-being for the city to which I have sent you. Pray for it to the Lord. For in seeking its well-being you shall find your own” (Jeremiah 29:7). This vision, and the programs that spring from it, are a natural evolution of the parish’s longtime place in the city’s affairs, and a response to the diverse character of its people.
Looking at its history makes it clear that The Basilica has always been an important church. Its leaders have come and gone from other key positions in the church hierarchy. As one indication, The Basilica has continued to be a place where financial resources have been found, and spent. The old Church of the Immaculate Conception cost $40,000 to build in 1872. The cost of The Basilica’s exterior, with groundbreaking in 1907, was close to $1 million. Then in the 1990s structural restoration and financing cost nearly $9.5 million.

From the very first, the church was the home for large and elaborate celebrations. Again and again in his book, Monsignor Reardon reports “thousands attending,” “a packed church,” for everything from formal ceremonies to May Day processions. The scale of the buildings and its grounds, which can be surprisingly intimate in the sacristy or the apse, welcome the masses; today’s Block Party, which can attract 20,000 people, is the descendant of those earlier events.

The real story of continuity, however, is always with the families who have been involved with the parish ever since, and over generations. For those, The Basilica is not only a civic monument, to be filled periodically with crowds and decorations and celebrations. For many families, it is their parish church, with all the intimacy and ownership and responsibility that implies.

Milestone events take place here: baptisms and first communions, confirmations and weddings and funerals. But the parish church is also the location of everyday worship. Sunday Masses, Holy Days, choir practices, church suppers, and the recognition and celebration of the liturgical year. Advent and Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter. These make up the regular, and well-loved, rhythm of church life.

Longtime parishioners have told me that they see something new every time they come into the church. Historically-minded visitors, by squinting slightly, can blur the edges of the contemporary crowd and glimpse earlier Sunday mornings, bathed in light from the windows and filled with the sound of music. Clothing changes, manners change, rules and habits change, but people still come up the steps from...
the street and into the church seeking and finding a living community of faith.

To some extent, exploring The Basilica’s history is a process of examining traces of the past that happened to rise to the surface of the present. It reminds us that we are only part of a long line of people whose attention has been drawn and held by this magnificent place — a line that stretches from the past, through our time, and into the undetermined future.

CHURCH OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Monsignor James M. Reardon gives this brief account of the founding of Immaculate Conception parish, the predecessor to The Basilica of Saint Mary, in his book The Catholic Church of the Diocese of Saint Paul.

“Owing to the rapid growth in the population of Minneapolis, as the nascent town was named in 1855, a new Parish became a necessity and, in October, 1868, the Bishop [Thomas Grace] authorized the Reverend James McGolrick, recently ordained in Ireland and stationed at the Cathedral, to found a parish under the aegis of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the rear of the school, but opening into it by folding doors, Father McGolrick erected a frame building, known as the ‘shed church,’ which served the congregation as a house of worship until 1871.” Monsignor Reardon describes McGolrick as “youthful, energetic, learned and devoted.” Father McGolrick is reported to have organized the St. Vincent de Paul conference to care for the needy members of the flock, a Father Mathew Total Abstinence Society, a parish circulating library of 500 volumes, bazaars, and a Saint Patrick’s Day celebration that included processions and plays. He also gave public lectures on historical and scientific topics “which were listened to by huge and appreciative audiences.”

All this activity was centered in the old “shed church,” which must have been a burgeoning community institution. When the cornerstone was laid for the new Immaculate Conception in 1871, Monsignor Reardon reports that the bishop preached a sermon to a congregation of nearly 3,000 persons. It was planned to be “not only the handsomest but the largest church in Minneapolis.” The church stood at 3rd Street and 3rd Avenue North, until it was razed in 1922.

Father McGolrick was succeeded as pastor by the Reverend James C. Byrne. When Father Byrne assumed the presidency of the Seminary of Saint Thomas Aquinas in September 1892, the Immaculate Conception parish was led by Father James J. Keane. “During the latter years of his residence in the parish he became convinced of the need of a new and more modern Church in another locality,” Reardon wrote. “The growth of the city and the changes necessitated by a commercial expansion made it evident that the new edifice would have to be built at some distance from the old site. The locality about the church was more and more given over to wholesale houses and manufacturing plants; and the people who resided therein were forced to move to outlying districts and, perforce, the church must follow them.”

Several sites were considered for the third building to house Immaculate Conception parish. Father Thomas E. Cullen, who had been ordained less than one year when he was chosen to lead Immaculate Conception in 1902, was ordained by former pastor and then Bishop of Duluth James McGolrick. Father Cullen was a man who “spent himself for the young people of the city. He popularized early Communion for children. His beautiful sermons were adapted to the minds of little ones. His children’s Masses became so popular that adults overcrowded the several Masses he served and special arrangements had to be made for the accommodation of the young.” In 1911, Lawrence S. Donaldson, a “prominent merchant and member of the parish,” purchased and then donated seven lots at 16th Street and Hennepin Avenue. The site for a new church building — now known as The Basilica of Saint Mary — had been found.
OUR JOURNEY CONTINUES

In 1999, Voices From a Landmark author Peg Guilfoyle wrote: “The turn of the 21st century is a golden age for The Basilica of Saint Mary. Growth, activity and engagement characterize the last ten years. Purpose and commitment to find its future. The Basilica calls itself, and properly so, a traditional church with a modern message.”

Her sentiment remains true as we look at the two decades since that statement was written. When Guilfoyle’s book was published, The Basilica was breaking ground on our Undercroft — previously unfinished basement space which still had a mud floor in places. Although modern in materials and features, the Undercroft’s architecture seamlessly and beautifully blends with the original Basilica interior.

Dedicated in the Jubilee Year 2000, the Undercroft includes a large gathering space, the Saint Teresa of Calcutta Hall, providing ample space for St. Vincent de Paul outreach ministries, after-Mass hospitality, plus countless events, receptions, and workshops. The Saint Joseph Chapel, inspired by Joseph’s trade as a carpenter, provides dedicated space for weekday Mass and worship services for smaller groups. Two reconciliation chapels, adorned with gilded domed ceilings and piercing rods of light, flank the chapel. Practical considerations were also addressed, with public restrooms (the first restrooms built in the church building itself), an elevator, catering kitchen, and fully-accessible entrances added.

Our St. Vincent de Paul ministries have seen a 144% increase in donations and a 168% increase in services provided over the last two decades with ample dedicated space for dignified daily outreach to our neighbors in need. Offering shoes, bus and gas cards, fees for identification services (driver’s licenses, state ID cards, and birth certificate reprints), plus referrals to numerous partner agencies for household items, clothing, job search support, and more. Additional caring and support programs were established, including ministries for employment, mental health, prayer shawls, Emmaus listeners, grief support, and disability awareness.

The Basilica is also committed to the celebration of sacred art, which can soothe, illuminate, and enable a spiritual encounter. Sacred art clearly tells stories of faith, either the Roman Catholic tradition or other religious traditions, or deals with fundamental human questions. The Basilica maintains a permanent collection of art covering many mediums, five centuries, and several continents. In our Saint John XXIII Gallery, numerous local, national, and international artists have been featured in solo or group exhibitions. The Basilica also hosts approximately 30 sacred music concerts each year with performances from a wide variety of music ensembles.

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EAST BELL TOWER

In the east tower, one can glimpse the now silent bell that hung at The Basilica’s predecessor parish, Immaculate Conception. Donated in 1877 by the Total Abstinence Societies of Minneapolis, it weighs 3,000 pounds and its exterior is inscribed, in Latin, “May the people called by me to this house of prayer be strengthened in the Lord.” Manufactured by the Meneely & Kimberly Foundry of Troy, NY, the bell was transported from Immaculate Conception to The Basilica, but was silent until 1964.

The parish added electrical mechanisms allowing the bell to ring through the 1970s at least. Those electrical system parts are now worn out and bell is silent again. The bells heard today from The Basilica are located in the west bell tower, which were installed in 1998.

Detail of the bell’s casting date.

Michael O’Connell’s fifteen year tenure as pastor ended and Rev. John M. Bauer became the Basilica’s eleventh pastor in 2007. Under Fr. Bauer’s leadership, the community continues to flourish with solidified parish finances and significant capital projects completed around the campus.

In 2007, The Basilica Landmark (formerly Friends of The Basilica of Saint Mary Foundation) was established as a separate non-religious 501(c)(3) organization to preserve, protect and advance The Basilica buildings and campus. Their tireless efforts have provided funding for much-needed capital improvements and preventative maintenance at The Basilica. An Endowment Fund provides funding for upkeep of our historic buildings into perpetuity.

Some of the larger Landmark projects include replacing the church and school’s 1913 steam heating system with a highly efficient hot water system, energy-efficient LED lighting to the church’s front exterior facade, and interior restoration of the Narthex, Sacristy, and Saint Anthony of Padua chapel. An extensive renovation of the Reardon Rectory from 2013-2015 included construction of a four-story elevator tower, adding fully-accessible restrooms, updating office and meeting spaces, adding central air and sprinklers, plus converting unused attic space into offices and dedicated climate-controlled space for our archives and sacred art storage.

A new roof membrane material was installed on the church in 2016 and the annual tuckpointing work continued in 2018. Many of these projects improved environmental efficiency, accessibility, and provide ongoing savings to the parish’s operating budget.

Throughout the history of this amazing parish — spanning 150 years, two locations, three church buildings, and eleven pastors — there have been dedicated people who have lived and worshipped here, creating a diverse and vibrant community. The parish has always welcomed immigrants, served people in need, and been a beacon of hope and place of peace in Minneapolis and beyond. “This anniversary is about celebrating the Basilica community, the people of the parish,” says current pastor Fr. John M. Bauer. “We plan to not just look back, but look ahead to the future growth and needs of our parish community.”