

A HISTORY OF SAINT VICTORIA'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

Based on the notes of Ruth Blanchard

Fifty Years ago Catholic families in the Altavista – Hurt area attended Mass at Holy Cross Catholic Church in Lynchburg. In 1955, a traveling mission called “Saint Mary of the Highway” staffed and sent out by the Diocese came to Altavista. At this time the Diocese realized that a local priest was needed to minister to the needs of the community.

The first Masses were held at the newly built Campbell County Bank (Later Central Fidelity and now home of the Journal) in their community room. The Priests from Holy Cross celebrated Mass here and at St. Elizabeth's in Brookneal alternating early and late Masses.

The Mass was attended by fifteen to twenty people at the bank in 1955. The kneelers were built by George Lewis and stored at the bank. Mr. Ben Rolfes ensured that a big box containing the linens and vestments were brought to the bank every week. Ruth Blanchard opened the building and set up the Altar with the assistance of her teen-age children. The hosts and wine were brought by the priests. A back up supply was kept at the Rolfes' house.

The original families at what would be later named St. Victoria were; Mrs. John L. Hurt, Mr. and Mrs. Worth Key, Mr. and Mrs. Ben Rolfes, Mrs. Harry Hall and children, Mrs. Joseph Hubbard and Children, Mr. and Mrs. George Lewis, Mrs. Victoria Arthur and a family named Dickerson. (There may be others)

An organizational meeting for the Catholic Altar Society was held on May 6th, 1959 at the home of Mrs. Worth Key. Officers elected were Mrs. Mont Hubbard, President; Mrs. Worth Key, Vice-President; and Mrs. Sam Arthur, Secretary – Treasurer. Meetings were scheduled for the first Wednesday of each month.

The first Catechism classes were taught by Mrs. Hubbard and Mrs. Blanchard on Weekdays with Father Cosby from Holy Cross at the Hubbard home.

The community grew to more than 50 people in early 1961 and began meeting at the Moose Lodge. During this time construction on the Leesville and Smith Mountain Dams brought new Catholic families to the area who attended Masses for approximately three years. Msgr. F. Harold Nott of Holy Cross recognized the need for a church building in the Altavista area and through his efforts and the Extension society, Mr. and Mrs. John L. Hurt donated the land.

Ground was broken for the new church and on April 1, 1962. He Most Rev. John J. Russell, Bishop of Richmond turned the first spade assisted by the Rt. Rev. Msgr. F. Harold Nott, Pastor of Holy Cross Catholic Church. Fr. Robert J. McEleney accompanied the Bishop and would later become a Pastor at St. Victoria.

There was no road up the hill to the church site and no bridge, only mud and a creek to cross. The construction people brought a large 4-wheel drive vehicle to ferry the Bishop and other priests up the hill. The parishioners wore boots, forded the creek and walked in the mud to view the long awaited event. The construction workers were a blessing and here when most needed.

Msgr. Nott deposited contributions in the bank and maintained a checking account. He also bought some land at the corner of US 29 and Riverview Rd. in Altavista with the expectation of building a church there. However, owners of the adjoining vacant lots were unwilling to sell. Fortunately, Mrs. Hurt offered the land to build on. He had wanted to build a hospital on the site of present Town Hall of Hurt. He envisioned an Order of Sisters operating it. Msgr. sold the corner lot land and deposited \$3,662 in the building account. With a total of 20,893 and a borrowed \$25,000, construction was underway. The total cost of the project was approximately \$47,420 which included grading a road, a culvert under it and chairs.

The name, St. Victoria, was used at the request of the Hurt family who donated \$10,000 toward the building and gave the land. Their stipulation was that the church be named for their deceased daughter, Victoria.

There were special gifts from people which were not counted in the monetary cost. The Extension society provided vestments, statues and clothing for the Altar Boys. Handmade finger towels, purificators and other items also came from the Extension Society which was donated to them by women's organizations all over the United States. The women of the parish made the Altar Cloths, Tabernacle veils and other needed items.

During the next few years the congregation was less than one hundred people. The construction workers left but more industry moved in bringing many Catholic families. Piedmont Manufacturing, Universal Electric, Ross and Abbott Laboratories were some of the companies that settled in the area.

St. Victoria was dedicated as a Mission Church on Saturday, September 29, 1962. The Most Rev. John J. Russell, Bishop of Richmond blessed, dedicated and gave the first homily at St. Victoria. The Celebrant for the first Mass was the Rt. Rev. F. Harold Nott, Pastor of Holy Cross in Lynchburg. A reception was held immediately afterwards. An open house was held the next day following early morning mass and so many visitors showed up, priests from Holy Cross came in the afternoon to say Mass again.

A Requiem Mass for the late President John F. Kennedy was held at St. Victoria on Sunday, November 24, 1963. A news report in the Altavista Journal stated that "....this is the first time in history that the Catholic Church has permitted the observance of a Requiem Mass on Sunday – not even at the death of Pope John." According to Ruth Blanchard, "For the Requiem Mass at the 9 o'clock service, the congregation attended 100 percent. Also, there were visitors to quite fill the church. Some had never seen a priest dressed in the black vestments of the Requiem Service.

St. Victoria remained a mission Church of Holy Cross, along with St. Elizabeth's in Brookneal until 1964. In August of that year, St. Victoria was made a parish and Fr. DePaul Landrigan of the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity was named resident Priest (1964-1977).

The first Mass was celebrated at St. Victoria as a Parish Church was on September 13, 1964.

St. Victoria's new Parish Church offered sacraments for the first time in 1964-1965. Father DePaul Landrigan was the celebrant for the Baptism of Elizabeth Flora and the Wedding of John and Donna Lynch. First Communion was held for Jeanne Blanchard and Andrea Dickerson and the first funeral was held for Ann Dickerson. The first confirmation celebration was held in 1971 for Michael Lewis, Robert Gober, Larry Hoover and Melinda Shields. Mr. and Mrs. Worth Key were sponsors for all of the Confirmands.

The rectory was completed in 1967 at a cost of \$18,405 which included to hard top the gravel road which was washing away. Until that time, Fr. Landrigan lived in the sacristy. A modest living space containing only the bare essentials; dishes, two burner stove cabinet, refrigerator and a hideaway bed. Mr. and Mrs. Key made a folding screen to provide minimal privacy. Fortunately Fr. Landrigan was able to stay at Holy Cross or at the Father Judge Mission Seminary in Monroe with his Order when he needed some release from the sacristy.

Fr. Andrew Roy (1977-1981) was instrumental in adding the Parrish Hall, which was not dedicated until 1983 when Fr. Albert Pereira (1981-1983) was Pastor.

In the Spring of 1993, stained glass windows were installed at either end of the church. One window measuring over sixteen feet high, depicting the risen Christ, was placed above the altar. Over the entrance doors, a triangular window containing the symbols of the Trinity was installed, which beautifully softened the light in the entire church.

During the residence of Fr. McEleney, (1995-1998) an education building was added. Father McEleney worked diligently to secure funding for the needed build. Not only was it paid off in full but there was a surplus of over \$2,000. The Most Rev. Walter F. Sullivan, Bishop of Richmond dedicated the building in September 1997.

There is no possibility in this brief overview of Saint Victoria's past fifty years to properly credit all those who gave of their time, talents and finances. For those of you who have been at St. Victoria for many years, we trust you will remember. For those who are new, you will surely hear how hard everyone worked and their names will never be forgotten.

Pray for Saint Victoria's continued growth in the next fifty years.