

ST. AGNES PARISH HISTORY
THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS – 1890 - 1990

Records show that the first Mass within our parish boundaries was celebrated in the Women's Christian Temperance Union in Atlantic Highlands. Father O'Connor, pastor of St. Mary's Church in New Monmouth, was the first known celebrant. The date of this Mass is unknown.

The land on which the original St. Agnes Church was built was purchased by the Rev. John H. Fox, pastor of the Catholic Church in Sea Bright. This property, 44 South Ave., was purchased in October of 1889 and the cornerstone for the first parish church was laid on November 30, 1890. The original church was dedicated on May 30, 1890, having cost \$5,300 to build with an additional \$2,000 required for windows and furnishings. Formal papers of incorporation were filed on September 4, 1890. Parish boundaries, established at that time, have not been changed as far as we can tell from available records.

In 1892, Rev. Thomas J. Roche was assigned as first pastor of St. Agnes. Father Roche's major contribution to the parish was the construction of a rectory which later became our parish convent. The rectory, at 44 South Ave., served in its original capacity for more than thirty years. During Father Roche's tenure as pastor he also served the needs of the people of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Highlands. Originally a parish in its own right, it had reverted to the status of a mission of St. Agnes and it was not until 1898 that it was again established as a parish.

Father Roche was succeeded as pastor in 1900 by Rev. William J. O'Farrell and Father O'Farrell by Rev. James F. Morrison in 1906. Little information remains for us relating to these pastorates.

Rev. William P. Tighe served the people of St. Agnes from 1916 until his death in 1925. During these years Father Tighe guided his parishioners through World War I and saw the building of our first parish school, opened in 1924, and the construction of our present rectory on Center Avenue. Although Father Tighe attended the opening of the school, he died soon after the completion of the rectory and never lived here.

Begun in 1924, St. Agnes School opened in September of that year with four classrooms and an auditorium. Enrollment that first year reached 195 and in future years it became necessary to divide the auditorium into classrooms. Originally housing grades 1-6, an additional grade was added in each of the next two years. The school was staffed by the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Charity, motherhouse located at Stella Niagara, N.Y.

The present rectory, completed in 1924, became home to Rev. Michael A. Callahan who was to guide our parish family through the Great Depression and World War II. As incomes fell, Father Callahan, with great skill and administrative ability, managed to keep St. Agnes functioning.

During his time at St. Agnes, Father Callahan led his parishioners through a period of growth and development.

In December of 1932, the parish Holy Name Society was formed, followed by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in 1941, the Sodality in 1942 and the Boy Scouts in 1944. The St. Agnes Chapter of the Catholic War Veterans was formed in 1946.

During these years Father Callahan was elevated to the rank of Domestic Prelate with the title of Right Reverend Monsignor by His Holiness Pope Pius XI. Having served the people of St. Agnes for 22 years, Msgr. Callahan died in 1947.

Through the decades of the 1930's and the 1940's our school enrollment continued to climb. In September 1942 a kindergarten class was added.

Father John P. McKeon succeeded Msgr. Callahan. His energies were needed to improve and repair parish properties and to build an addition to the convent. In 1948 under Father McKeon's leadership, the Rosary Altar Society was formed. Father McKeon also set into motion the plans for the construction of the imposing church which serves us today. But in 1951, before he could see his plans become reality, Father McKeon died.

Father Francis L. Nolan, who succeeded Father McKeon, brought to St. Agnes a great deal of experience as a parish administrator. In 1951 he began a fund drive which as to realize over \$100,000 in pledges.

On Sunday, December 7, 1952, Father Nolan broke ground on the site of our present church to begin the building of a house of worship that would blend with our rectory and parish school. The cornerstone was laid on October 4, 1953 and the new St. Agnes Church was dedicated on November 21, 1954 by the most Rev.

George W. Ahr, Bishop of Trenton. With the new church in use, the old building was razed in 1955, having been in use for 65 years.

In September 1956, Father Nolan was succeeded as pastor by Father Michael J. Lease. In the 1950's and early 1960's under Father Lease's direction a complete program of repair and updating of the parish facilities was carried out, as well as the purchase of additional properties. Other welcome additions during this period were the institution of the weekly parish bulletin and the organization of the school cafeteria staffed by members of the St. Jude's Guild.

Also in 1956, the Atlantic Highlands Borough Council approved weekly bingo for St. Agnes.

On September 4, 1965 St. Agnes Parish celebrated its Diamond Jubilee -- 75 years of dedication and growth.

During this period, classes were held, not only in the school, but in four other parish-owned buildings including the recently acquired Daemen House, later to become the Thrift Shop. In 1966, work was begun on the "new" St. Agnes School. Ground was broken on April 17, 1966 and the school was dedicated on September 2, 1967 by Bishop George W. Ahr. On November 27, 1967 the teachers and children moved into this beautiful new facility.

On June 4, 1968, Father Lease was honored at a testimonial dinner in appreciation for all his efforts on behalf of St. Agnes School. A bronze plaque was presented to Father and it now hangs in the front entrance of the school.

Also in 1968 the St. Agnes Thrift Shop opened in the Daemen House. The shop has made significant monetary donations to help with the operation of the school and has also given clothing and household goods to the less fortunate members of our community.

As the parish family moved into the 1970's and the 1980's, programs continued to expand. In 1976 the first Blood Drive was held. Donations to this annual drive ensured needed blood for parish members and their families.

On Saturday, March 10, 1984, came an occasion of great joy and celebration. Father Lease was elevated to the rank of Right Reverend Monsignor. This was a wonderful day for all of us.

In the fall of 1985 RENEW came to St. Agnes. Many of our parish members joined small groups to read and discuss Scripture and to pray together. These groups met for 2-1/2 years and during that time many of us made new acquaintances and renewed old friendships as we met on a weekly basis.

April, 1986 saw the completion of the renovations to the rectory. New offices were added and the entire lower floor was redone to make the building better able to serve the needs of our priests and parishioners.

On May 21, 1986, our beloved Msgr. Lease celebrated the 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood. This was a special time for all of us. October 27, 1986 saw the retirement of Father Lease. Father had been with St. Agnes for 33 years. On October 22 a special Mass and testimonial dinner were held in his honor.

With the retirement of Father Lease came Father Joseph J. Farrell to our parish. Father Farrell arrived just in time to join the parishioners as we planned for the celebration of our 100th anniversary.

Our anniversary year began with the celebration of a special Mass on January 28, 1990. This Mass was celebrated by Msgr. Lease and was followed by a reception. During the week of January 31, St. Agnes School celebrated the anniversary with an open house.

On February 24th a Mardi Gras Ball was held at the Shore Casino. The costumes were colorful and original and a wonderful evening was enjoyed by all those in attendance.

During March and April rehearsals were underway for the fourth annual Passion Play. Early in 1988 a small group of teens and adults, under the direction of Dr. John Amberg met to plan what would become the first St. Agnes Passion Play. They built scenery, made costumes, learned lines and performed on three nights to sellout crowds. Through these four years the play group grew in numbers of both participants and audience.

On April 29th the Rosary Altar Society hosted a Church Open House which was of special interest to those who know only the most public portions of the building. The Holy Name Society planned a boat ride around the New York harbor which was held, rain and all, on July 21st. Again, a good time was had by all. August brought a square dance which was held on the school grounds and proved to be very entertaining.

One of the most impressive moments of this year came on September 30 when Bishop John Reiss and Bishop Edward Kmiec concelebrated at our 100th Anniversary Mass. This was followed by a banquet at the Shore Casino.

The final activity of this anniversary year was a lecture series held in the Church Hall and sponsored by the Adult Education Committee. The speaker was Father Phillip Blaine and his very interesting program dealt with contemplative prayer.

As our active thriving parish moves into its second century of progress, we all look forward to continued growth in both the spiritual and physical areas. With the help of God we will continue to prosper to help each other and to grow n faith and knowledge.

Is there a history lover who would consider bringing this up to date? If so, call the church office at 732-291-0272 x113.