



Relationship with GOD

More than Just SUNDAY

Diocesan History Rings a Familiar Bell—and Tolls out Parish Blessings

Who would have thought it possible? (Not I!) But the plain truth of the matter is this: being a liturgist is a great job. And as I approach my 20th year working here in the liturgy office in the Diocese of La Crosse, I've been a part of numerous beautiful ceremonies, met many wonderful people from parishes across the diocese, helped others to pray better at Mass—and learned from them how to pray better myself.

There are numerous stories from which I could choose my favorite on-the-job experiences. One of these took place shortly after I started work here, and it happened at St. Mary Church in Keyesville.

Within weeks of starting the position, I was able to help with the preparations and celebration of the annual Rural Life Day. St. Mary Church was a perfect spot for this 1998 celebration. Nestled among the rolling hills of rural Richland County, this old brick church sits atop its own hill among those hills, enjoying a beautiful view, and surrounded by farms. As it was early fall, anyone present that day could spy farmers maneuvering their farm implements out among their fields, tending to their fare.

As we arrived before Mass, a rather large and impassive pig was biding its time within a temporary pen outside the church's front doors, waiting for Mass to end and receive its blessing with the other animals scattered about the yard among tractors and other farm implements. (This machinery and the outlying fields were also to receive a blessing from the bishop that day.) But when Mass did end—eventually—this particular participant in Rural Life Day rendered with his rooting snout his once-fresh plot of grass that served as a temporary domicile into the sort of dirty and mud-splashed sty he was probably more accustomed to having back at the farm. St. Mary's front lawn was suddenly converted into a pig pen. Truly, here was Rural Life at its best!

Today, as I look through another pastoral treasure of the Diocese of La Crosse, *Feed My Lambs*—the commemorative book celebrating the diocese's Sesquicentennial Anniversary—I read that St. Mary in Keyesville has roots reaching deep in history's rich soil (certainly deeper than that old pig could root!). And like my golden memory from that Rural Life Day pig, St. Mary Church cherishes her own history, recalling for instance that her church bell rose to the belfry's heights after

being extracted from California gold dust.

Margaret Adams, an ancestor of William Misslich, whose home hosted the area's first Mass in 1856 prior to the building of St. Mary Church, ran a San Francisco restaurant during the 19th century gold mining days. "At the end of the day," as St. Mary's entry in *Feed My Lambs* recounts, "she would sweep the dirty floor, saving the dirt. She would then separate the gold dust left by the miners from the dirt. Margaret sold the gold dust and bought a bell, inscribed with her name, for the church."

From gold dust to God's dust, Adams' generosity rings another sort of bell for us: "The LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). There's even more organic life at St. Mary's rural setting than my 1998 Rural Life Day suggested.

This bell—like the church building and the parish itself—rose out of the dirt and dust and soil because of God's life-giving Spirit. Bells in those days were blessed in a most remarkable way. After first being washed with holy water, the bell was anointed on its inside with the Oil of the Sick, then on the outside with Sacred Chrism. The prayer of blessing was then said, during which the bell was named after a patron saint. Incense was burned beneath the bell, and only then could its tolling mouth and tongue be raised to a lofty position and announce the good news to the neighborhood—in this case, Keyesville and environs.

In many ways, The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Keyesville is not unique, since every parish in our Diocese has its own treasured history. Yet their comparable accounts are filled with their own unique legends. All parishes have hard-working personalities who have built (with God's help) parishes from scratch. But in my mind, as the Keyesville belfry can speak to every day its rocking bell tolls, the story of St. Mary parish represents a worthy gold standard in parish and diocesan history.

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150 YEARS
BUILDING UPON A TRADITION
OF CATHOLIC FAITH