



Relationship with GOD

More than Just SUNDAY

From Humble Beginnings to “The Jewel on the Hill”

The weekend of April 6-8 featured the second of seven regional celebrations of the 150th Anniversary of the Diocese of La Crosse. This one was focused on the deaneries of Tomah and Wisconsin Rapids. Once again Bishop Callahan was present for special Masses and events planned by those deaneries.

It seemed to me a good occasion to open once again my copy of *Feed my Lambs*, the official book on 150 years of Catholic life in

the Diocese of La Crosse, available in parishes (\$35). I would like to share a few themes that jumped out at me as I read the brief histories of parishes in the Tomah and Wisconsin Rapids deaneries. Please pardon me for not being able to remark on all the wonderful parishes there – these themes are just a sample!

1. *Our ancestors’ deep desire to worship* – This is a constant thread running throughout our history. As parishes got their start, before churches were built, Masses were celebrated in homes, in a county courthouse (Black River Falls, 1859), or in a simple 20’ x 30’ log structure built by hardy pioneers from trees felled on Irish Ridge (St. Mary’s Ridge, 1858). We see this even as late as 1963, when Mass was celebrated first in “Smith Mortuary,” and then in an American Legion hall, before the church was built (St. Kevin in Melrose).

2. *Humble beginnings* – A parish often began with a tiny nucleus of families. Some examples are St. Mary in Bangor (11 families), St. Kevin in Melrose (16 families), and St. Leo the Great in West Salem (25 families).

3. *Pastor swinging a hammer* – In 1910, Fr. Theo Fraling laid the cornerstone of the Church of St. Mary in Coon Valley and did much of the construction work on the church himself.

4. *Resilience in adversity* – At least three parish churches burned to the ground. The pastors and their congregations pulled together and rebuilt: St. Patrick in Sparta, St. Joseph on St. Joseph Ridge, and St. Lawrence in Wisconsin Rapids.

5. *Abundance of vocations* – God has blessed the Diocese of La Crosse with many priestly and religious vocations through the years, but remarkable in this regard is Ss. Peter and Paul in Wisconsin Rapids (founded in 1857), which has had 16 men from the parish ordained to the priesthood and 24 women professed as sisters!

6. *Beauty in High Places* – The diocese has many stunning churches. Three particularly beautiful ones are on the high ridges that stretch east of La Crosse: Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (St. Mary’s Ridge), St. Joseph (St. Joseph Ridge) and St. Peter (Middle Ridge), with the last literally referred to as “The Jewel on the Hill” because of the sparkling beauty of its stained glass windows high up against the night sky when the church is lit.

7. *Compassion across borders* – Ours is a generous diocese, but St. Vincent de Paul Parish of Wisconsin Rapids is worth noting. It received the mission award from the diocese in 2010 for its twin parish relationship with St. Joseph Parish in Bonneau, Haiti, to which it has, among other things, sent several parish-sponsored medical teams.

8. *Oldest and newest parishes in the Diocese of La Crosse* – Both in the Tomah deanery. The oldest parish is St. Mary in Lyndon Station (1851) and the newest is Guardian Angels in Black River Falls (from 2017 merger of St. Joseph of Black River Falls and St. Kevin of Melrose).

9. *Schools, schools, schools* – From homes, to two-room schoolhouses, to today’s large and often consolidated facilities, the faithful of the diocese have placed a premium on Catholic education from the earliest years to today. This is evidenced repeatedly in the pages of the book devoted to the Tomah and Wisconsin Rapids deaneries.

What an inspiring adventure it is to read *Feed my Lambs* and to discover our rich faith heritage, parish by parish, deanery by deanery. Tomah and Wisconsin Rapids deaneries, you clearly have much for which to be proud and thankful!

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CELEBRATING
150 YEARS
BUILDING UPON A TRADITION
OF CATHOLIC FAITH