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Blessed Sacrament Parish to celebrate 75th anniversary

The first Mass at Blessed Sacrament Parish in West Fargo was celebrated in the North School gymnasium on Sunday, Nov. 22, 1936. Father Vincent Ryan, later Bishop Ryan of the Bismarck Diocese, became the first pastor of the Blessed Sacrament mission.

As a mission church of St. Anthony of Padua in Fargo, many priests of that parish served Blessed Sacrament. Father Frank Nester became the second pastor of the growing church and invested in the property on which the present church stands.

While Mass was celebrated in the North School gymnasium for 13 years, parishioners used a folding table for an altar, with various members taking the altar stone home each week. The ladies of the parish cared for the altar linens and brought them each Sunday. The men built long, heavy benches that folded for storing. Confessions were heard before Mass in a makeshift confessional beside the altar. Gust Arzt was the first Mass server because he had learned Latin as a boy in Czechoslovakia.

In 1948, with a rapid growth in membership, it was decided to build a church in West Fargo. With building supplies short after World War II, a temporary building was chosen. This building was 50 by 120 feet in size, with half used as a church and half for a parish hall. The first altar was handcrafted by Joe Blasl and was used for many years. The first Mass in the building was celebrated July 10, 1949, with about 85 families at that time.

In June 1950, a resident pastor, Father Oliver Lux, came to Blessed Sacrament. Father Lux was born and reared in Chicago. Before coming to West Fargo, he had served as assistant pastor in Jamestown and Langdon. In addition to ministering to the needs of the parish, he taught at the new Shanley High School in Fargo. On Sept. 18, 1951, he moved into the new rectory built under his direction. Each year he whittled away at the debt, and with the generosity of the parishioners, was able to build up considerable reserve for the construction of a new church.

After Father Lux died in 1966, Father Francis Smalley was appointed pastor. He came from Hankinson, where he had been chaplain to the Sisters of St. Francis for 17 years. In addition to his duties as pastor, he taught at Cardinal Muench Seminary in Fargo. Father Edward Arth of the seminary assisted Father Smalley with Sunday and some daily Masses.

Early in 1967, a finance committee was established to plan for a new church. The following year a building committee was elected. This committee began a study of the parish needs. It was found that more than 300 families were using the facilities of the church and hall, and that the present building was inadequate.

In April 1970, there was a groundbreaking ceremony for the new church, and by Oct. 23 it was completed. The first Mass was celebrated on Oct. 31. On Jan. 10, 1971, Bishop Justin Driscoll blessed the church and consecrated its altar. As Father Smalley had said in 1966, "If you want a new church, you will build it."

Father John Moore came as pastor in August 1973. He was born in Powers Lake, studied at St. John's University and Gonzaga University and was ordained a priest on Feb. 2, 1945, at St. Joseph's Church in Devils Lake. He served several churches in North Dakota and came to Blessed Sacrament from St. Michael's parish in Grand Forks. Under Father Moore's direction,

an office-rectory complex was added to the new church in 1975. The debt on the church was retired in 1979.

In the years that followed, many of the ideas and principles of Vatican II were being implemented by the Catholic Church. Father Moore built a staff to help carry out the ministries of the church, including religious education, liturgy, youth ministry, ministry to the needs of the poor, and ministry in peace and justice.

The parish began to plan to build a new church in West Fargo, as there were more than 900 families attending Blessed Sacrament. Money was put aside toward this goal. In 1979, Father David Wild came to Blessed Sacrament to facilitate the planning and building of the new Holy Cross Church. The plan was to establish the new parish as a satellite of the old, receiving personnel and financial support from the existing parish.

Blessed Sacrament contributed toward the church and covered many expenses, such as architect's fees, land surveys and more. Holy Cross Church was completed in 1983.

In 1990, Father Val Gross became pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church. He grew up in Napoleon and was ordained a priest on June 8, 1963. He served as rector of Cardinal Muench Seminary for many years before coming to Blessed Sacrament. Under the direction of Father Gross, preliminary plans were started for the addition of five new classrooms, a music room, restrooms and a new kitchen.

On Sept. 4, 1995, Father John Cavanaugh became pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church. Father Cavanaugh was born and reared at and near Fort Totten. He served for many years as a United States Naval Line Officer before entering the seminary. He was ordained a priest on June 2, 1990. He served St. Michael's in Grand Forks and St. Cecilia's in Harvey before coming to Blessed Sacrament.

A new addition was completed and dedicated Nov. 8, 1997. During the next seven years, Father Cavanaugh installed the new parish kitchen, raised the sanctuary area of the church, relocated the tabernacle to the middle behind the altar, directed the purchase of stained glass windows in the church and gathering area, and purchased a large Nativity scene.

Father Bert Miller became pastor in July 2004. He was born and raised in Harvey. He attended the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, and worked as a journalist before being ordained a priest on June 1, 1991. He served at Nativity Church in Fargo, Holy Family in Grand Forks, St. Lawrence in Michigan (and its mission parishes), and St. John the Evangelist, Grafton, and the State Developmental Center prior to coming to West Fargo. During the past six years, Father Miller has helped retire the debt, replace windows and sewer pipes in the rectory, pave the parking lot, replace carpet in the church, tuck-point the facility, and generally maintain the 40-year-old parish facility.

This history is included in the parish directory and was edited for New Earth.