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Faith on the prairie: Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Bechyne celebrates 125 years as a parish

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Just off a quiet gravel road in northeastern North Dakota lies a beautiful white church on the prairie. A well-maintained cemetery dotted with large grave markers stands beside it. Across the road is Bechyne Hall, used for decades as a place where the people of the area, mostly of Czech descent, have gathered, danced, celebrated life's milestones and shared their faith.

Rudy and Kathy Suda met outside the hall during a Sts. Peter and Paul celebration 48 years ago. They returned to the annual celebration this year from their home in Borup, Minn. Kathy said she remembers eating the traditional meal of bologna the day she met Rudy. When he cut into his bologna, its juice squirted out at her "and I still went out with him," she said with a laugh. During the two-day celebration this June, the Sudas met three other couples whose relationships also began at a Sts. Peter and Paul celebration.

Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Bechyne was packed June 26, with extra seats set up in Father Al's Fellowship Room for the Mass celebrating the parish's 125th anniversary. Former pastor, Msgr. Daniel Pilon, presided at the Mass with Father Samuel Ezeibekwe, pastor, and Father Bert Miller, former pastor, concelebrating.

The first church building, built in 1886, was destroyed by fire on Dec. 8, 1956. The cornerstone for a new church was laid June 29, 1957, and the first baptism took place in September.

Caroline Karas, 90, said that she was baptized at Sts. Peter and Paul and remembers: "I was a flower girl when they had a bishop here for confirmation. I kissed his ring, that ruby ring." Her parents were both born in the Bechyne area but moved to Minneapolis during the depression. Karas moved back to Bechyne from Minneapolis after marrying a farmer.

"My dad used to work with his dad," she said. "He came to see my dad. We met . . . the hearts began to flutter." She and her husband farmed and raised geese and chickens, living with no electricity or running water. As a child, she remembered having picnic lunches, sitting under a tree and eating salmon sandwiches. The little girls wore white dresses and a man sold toy monkeys on a bamboo cane.

"The little kids and everybody had beer for a beverage," she said, noting a tradition of the past. For awhile, the annual Sts. Peter and Paul celebration fell by the wayside, she said, but the young people of the area revived it, as witnessed at the 2011 festivities.

Among those younger people are Spencer Bida, who farms in the area with his wife, Rachel, and their young children. "Bechyne has always been a very tight community," he said while enjoying dinner in Bechyne Hall. Unlike many rural churches, the average age of the parishioners at Sts. Peter and Paul is in the 30s. "For a small Catholic parish in North Dakota today, I think that's something to be proud of," he said. "Our community is small. We're all looking for each other's friendship and we find it here when we come to Mass," he said. "It's a place for all of us to join and celebrate together every Sunday."

Longtime parishioner Bennie Hodny now lives in Park River, but he used to live right next to Bechyne Hall. People once marched to the church from his farmhouse on June 29, the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. He said he remembers the days with no electricity, when he had to fill up the gas lamps in Bechyne Hall. When the first church burned in 1956, he couldn't see the flames from their farm because of the trees. A neighbor called, but the fire had already taken its toll. He was one of many who helped build the new church. The large bell saved from the old church is in a stand outside the entrance of the new church.

Hodny said his father helped take care of Bechyne Hall and the church. He reminisced about one day when, as a young teenager, he had to go to the church to start a fire so it would be warm for Sunday Mass. A grave had just been dug in the cemetery. "I walked from the house and came up to this gate. That's as far as I went . . . I didn't make it to the church to start the fire," he said. He saw the hole for the grave and couldn't make himself go any closer to it. His father ended up starting the fire for Mass, he said.

Marge and Jim Kovarik were married at Sts. Peter and Paul in 1964. Marge said her grandfather helped build the first church, and her husband helped with the second church and the addition. She has many memories of Sts. Peter and Paul Day through the years. "All the farmers stopped working and they'd come to celebrate it," she said. She was from Petersburg, and met Jim at a dance after the junior class play there. Eight months later they married and have been wed for 47 years.

James T. Shirek, 85, and his wife, Stella, 83, have been married 61 years. She joined the Catholic Church at that time. As the oldest married couple in the parish, the Shireks had the privilege of bringing up the gifts during the anniversary Mass. Jim said he remembers learning the Mass prayers in Czech and loved hearing Czech music played on the anniversary.

Stella was from the neighboring county and they met when she was teaching school there. Jim often offered her a ride from the school to the home where she boarded. "One day, it was raining cats and dogs and he didn't pick me up," Stella said. Later, after they were married, she asked him why he didn't come get her that day, and he said he didn't want to get his Model A wet.

If she had heard that answer before their wedding, "I might have had second thoughts," she said with a laugh. They recalled countless dances in Bechyne Hall. Babies would sleep under the benches on the sides of the hall, and older kids would sleep in the balcony while the parents danced. "I'm not exaggerating," Stella said, "Jim danced before he was potty trained." The Shireks continue to live on the farm where Jim was born, about five miles from Sts. Peter and Paul Church.

In his homily during the anniversary Mass, Father Bert Miller recalled the sacrifices and the joy of the early settlers of the area. "Can you imagine what it was like? The journey, maybe on foot even, not in wagons," he said. "When they arrived, they knew God had blessed them . . . sometimes even carried them through the rough times. "The land, the gathering of the community, the sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ" were all important to the early settlers, he said.

As those at the anniversary Mass processed up for Communion and then joined together for food and fun, it was clear that those gatherings continue to be important to the people of the Bechyne area today.