



T E N N E S S E E

REGISTER

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Following a journey of faith

With a stroke of his pen on July 28, 1837, Pope Gregory XVI created the Diocese of Nashville, carving it out a corner of what was then the American frontier.

The first bishops and priests traveled by horseback to remote cabins to bring the faithful the spiritual food they craved. Successive generations of bishops, priests, religious sisters and lay people have continued the work of building the local church through crises and good times, nurturing the faith and passing it on to the next generation.

The diocese will celebrate this 175 year journey next summer, and Bishop David Choby is hoping to bring the celebration to parishes throughout Middle Tennessee. In preparation of that historic milestone, the *Tennessee Register* throughout the coming months will take a look at the diocese's history, its present state and its future. The *Register's* editors, writers and photographers will look at various aspects of the life of the diocese and her people, such as how life for the priests, deacons and religious sisters who serve the Catholics of Middle Tennessee has changed over nearly two centuries and how it will continue to change.

We will also look at how parish life nurtured and sustained the small but vibrant Catholic community in a state where Catholics were at times literally few and far between.

We'll look at how Catholic schools have shaped the diocese, as well as waves of immigrants finding solace and strength in the church.

The article in this edition by Staff Writer Theresa Laurence is the first of the monthly installments and provides an overview of the Diocese of Nashville's long history. We invite our readers to join us in this look over the next year at where we've been and where we're headed. ✦



Photo by Rick Musacchio

Father Prentice Dean genuflects before the tabernacle at St. Michael Church in rural Robertson County. Father Dean, administrator of Our Lady of Lourdes in Springfield, was visiting his mission parish, St. Michael in Cedar Hill to pray and to set up for Sunday Mass. The small church was established in 1842 and is the oldest continually used church building in the diocese. The church has about 80 households.

Diocese's story: from frontier to future

THERESA LAURENCE

When Bishop Pius Miles, O.P., took possession of the fledgling Diocese of Nashville in the fall of 1838, there was no established Catholic presence in Tennessee. There was one small wooden church, but no priests. There were maybe 500 Catholics in the state, scattered far and wide across 42,000 square miles.

Today, the Diocese of Nashville no longer comprises the entire state, but still spans 38 counties in Middle Tennessee. Catholics remain a small minority of the overall population, representing about 76,000 people out of 2.24 million in the geographical area, according to the 2011 Official Catholic Directory.

The bishop no longer travels by horseback, but his presence is still needed at parishes from Clarksville to Loretto, McEwen to Cookeville, and he logs

hundreds of miles every week traveling to all corners of the diocese. There are still too few priests to comfortably minister to all the Catholic faithful, but many seminarians are working their way toward ordination.

As the Diocese of Nashville heads toward the 175th anniversary of its founding next July, Tennessee Catholics can take this time to reflect on where we've come from and where we're going.

Catholic minority

When Tennessee was still part of the American frontier, the terrain was literally and figuratively unfriendly to Catholics. To reach the members of his new diocese, Bishop Miles, a hardy, resourceful man, would gallop on his horse across dusty roads and over steep mountains to minister to his flock.

Early Catholic settlers in the state were often regarded with outright hostility from those of fundamentalist

Protestant faiths that dominated the territory. To the Protestants of British descent, Catholics from Ireland, Germany and Italy who settled in Tennessee were outsiders, rabble-rousing papists, and quite frankly, not very American.

Ever since the Diocese of Nashville was officially carved out of the Diocese of Bardstow, Ky., on July 28, 1837, "Catholics have been very much in the minority," according to Msgr. Owen Campion, associate publisher of *Our Sunday Visitor* and former editor of the *Tennessee Register*, who is well versed in the history of the diocese.

There were a few prominent early Tennessee settlers who were Catholic though, including Timothy Demonbreun, the French tradesman who settled in Nashville in 1790. Hugh Rogan was another early Tennessee Catholic settler, an Irishman who fought against the British in the Revolutionary

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War and later hosted a smattering of missionary priests to celebrate Masses in his Sumner County home.

Overall, Catholics were few and far between in the early days of the diocese.

Universal church

Just as being in the minority has always been part of the Catholic story in the diocese, so to has being an immigrant church. Today, Masses are celebrated in multiple languages every Sunday around the diocese. As more and more people from around the world immigrate to the area, Catholics continue to get a feel for the universal nature of the church.

While the face of the church has changed dramatically over 175 years, the mission has remained the same: to welcome the stranger. "It's tremendously important to immigrants to have a welcoming church presence when they arrive," said Gregg Ramos, former president of the board of Catholic Charities of Tennessee, as well as Conexio Americas, which helps immigrants assimilate to life in Nashville.

A multicultural church "is what it means to identify ourselves as a Catholic people," said Bishop David Choby. "This reflects the nature of the church as universal."

Another theme that runs deep into the history of the diocese is the missionary spirit of its priests. In the earliest days, adventurous priests trickled into the new diocese, ready to ride on horseback to reach small pockets of Catholics from Memphis to Jonesborough. Today, Nashville-based priests from Mexico regularly travel to Shelbyville, Cookeville and beyond to minister to Hispanic parishioners, keeping that same missionary spirit alive. "Priests continue to travel great distances to bring the Gospel and the sacraments to nourish the faith of God's people in this diocese," Bishop Choby said.



Father Daniel Ellard was assigned to St. Columba Church, the precursor to Holy Name Church, in 1901. Like many priests in the early days of the diocese, Father Ellard relied on horseback for his method of transportation.

Today, priests from India, Africa, Mexico, Vietnam, South Korea and Haiti serve the diocese, as well as American-born priests from other parts of the U.S., such as Franciscans, Salvatorians and Glemnarys.

Today, there are almost as many foreign-born and order priests serving Middle Tennessee parishes as diocesan priests. But Bishop Choby has worked hard to promote vocations, and there are currently about 20 seminarians in various stages of formation discerning their call to serve the Diocese of Nashville. He expects that number to increase by five or six this fall.

"I'm proud of the men who have stepped forward to prepare for the priesthood from many backgrounds," Bishop Choby said.

With priests stretched thin to oversee one or more parishes on their own, deacons play a key role in the life of the diocese. With 71 permanent deacons serving

the diocese, and even more in formation, they outnumber the active priests here. Deacons support their parish priest by taking on a variety of duties, including performing baptisms and weddings and preaching on Sundays.

Need and response

If Bishop Miles could see the diocese today, Bishop Choby said, he would be "surprised and edified by the way the church has grown out of the seed that he and a handful of priests planted."

There are 53 parishes and 21 schools in the diocese today. There are vibrant programs for teens such as Search and Life Teen. There's Cursillo for the adults. There's the Knights of Columbus, the Knights of Peter Claver, the Ladies of Charity and the Legion of Mary. There's the Parish Twinning Program, which assists Haitian communities with medical care, donations, prayer and companion-

ship. There's Catholic Charities, which aids tens of thousands of Tennesseans every year. There are unique ministries at each parish from volunteer handymen to book clubs.

While parishes in other parts of the country are shuttered, the Diocese of Nashville continues to build new churches to serve the faithful here.

Catholics continue to come to the area, mostly in the form of Hispanic immigrants from Mexico and Central America, and transplants from the North and Midwest. The two newest parishes in the diocese, Our Lady of Guadalupe in Nashville and The Church of the Nativity in Spring Hill, show how the church is responding to shifting demographics of the diocese.

The growth of the population around Spring Hill and the Church of the Nativity shows that Catholic life has never been centered around one big city, and when a community reached a critical mass of Catholics, the church responded by building a new parish.

Perhaps the most prolific builder of parishes was Bishop James Niedergeses, a native of Lawrenceburg, who served the diocese from 1975-1992. During that time, he dedicated 14 new parishes everywhere from the Nashville suburb of Brentwood to more far flung towns like Sparta, Lewisburg, and Centerville. He helped launch the Catholic Foundation, which continues to fund renovations and expansions of small, rural parishes.

Cultural shifts

When Father John Kirk was assigned to build up the new Church of the Nativity in Spring Hill in 2008, he hoped that it would help bring inactive Catholics back into the fold. "I think it has done that," he said. "It's an on-going effort, encouraging people to be more regular in the practice of their faith."

With 580 families registered at his parish, Father Kirk oversees a busy year-round schedule of parish ministries including a religious education program with 300 students enrolled. "Parish life never really stops," he said.

And neither does Father Kirk. He says four Masses every weekend and daily Mass every morning. Like most parishes in the Diocese of Nashville, the Church of the Nativity has only one priest, and relies on a small team of dedicated volunteers to help keep parish ministries humming along.

Father Kirk works hard to make sure his parishioners see Mass as something more than just a pit stop on the way to the Titans game or between kids' soccer practices. While the church is not fighting off external prejudices as it was in the past, "the church is affected by changes in the culture. People are occupied by so many other things now," Father Kirk said.

It wasn't always that way. Robert Baltz Jr., a member of one of the oldest and largest Catholic families in the diocese, remembers life growing up in the 1950s

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Jim Petre, a local butcher in the Germantown neighborhood of Nashville, was a parishioner of the Church of the Assumption, dedicated in 1859 to serve the city's growing German Catholic population. The Mass was celebrated in German at Assumption until the start of World War I.

From frontier to future

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as one of six children. "It was a totally different environment than now," he said.

Fathers worked. Mothers stayed home. Children went to Mass every Sunday, sometimes every day, with their families. "The Catholic church as always been very important, very dear to me," Baltz said.

Baltz, who can trace his roots in Tennessee back to his grandfather, John Philip Baltz' arrival in Lawrenceburg with the German Catholic Homestead Association in 1871, grew up surrounded by numerous extended family members.

"The boys grew up working. Every single day we picked okra, squash, tomatoes, you name it," he said. Working on the farm gave Baltz an opportunity to bond with his grandparents and other elders of the family, including his uncle, the late Father John Baltz, his longtime friend and spiritual mentor.

Baltz remembers picking vegetables and going to market every day before attending daily Mass at St. Patrick Church in downtown Nashville, then hitting the fields again. That hard work "was a way of life, it was expected of you," said Baltz, a St. Edward parishioner.

It was also expected that if you were Catholic, you would go to Catholic schools, come hell or high water. Baltz did graduate from the newly built St. Edward School, and went on to attend Father Ryan for one year. But tuition for six children was too expensive to afford on the salary of one working parent, and Baltz completed high school at his local public school, Two Rivers, which caused "quite an uproar in the family."

Catholic schools

Catholic schools have always been an important part of the Diocese of Nashville, dating back to the first parochial school, St. Patrick in McEwen, founded in 1856, to the newest, Pope John Paul II High School in Hendersonville, founded in 2002.

Upon its founding, St. Patrick was staffed by lay teachers, as was the first Immaculate Conception parish school in Clarksville, which was started in 1860. Other schools with such deep roots in Tennessee were run by women religious. The Dominican Sisters started St. Cecilia Academy in Nashville in 1860; the Sisters of Mercy established St. Bernard Academy across town six years later.

From educating Irish railroad workers' children in McEwen to serving the booming number of families in Sumner County, the schools have met Catholics where they are throughout the history of the diocese.

Spirit of generosity

While Catholics have never dominated Tennessee in numbers, they have always left a mark through their good works. "What fills me with a great sense of pride is the generosity of the people of the diocese," said Bishop Choby, citing the outpouring of donations and volunteer efforts in the wake of two recent disasters, the Nashville flood and the Haiti earthquake. Catholics of the diocese are continually generous, "without a lot of fanfare or self-promotion," he said.

Since 1962, Catholic Charities has been the flagship of assistance in the name of the Catholic Church, facilitating adoptions, resettling refugees, providing basic

assistance to the needy of the community, and much more.

Since the early days of the diocese, when anti-Catholic sentiment ran high, such prejudices were best counteracted by Catholic-run hospitals and schools, which dotted the Tennessee landscape since the 1840s. When Yellow Fever struck Memphis in 1873, thousands of Catholics died, including 22 priests and 48 nuns who were tending to victims. Saint Thomas Hospital, founded by the Daughters of Charity in 1898, continues the tradition of Catholic healthcare ministry in the diocese today.

Catholics, patriots

Additionally, "upright, patriotic living by Catholics," also helped them gain acceptance by their Protestant neighbors, according to Msgr. Campion.

Catholic soldiers fought during the Civil War, and several priests served as chaplains; Father Emmeran Bliemel, pastor of Assumption Church, was killed while administering last rites to a Confederate soldier. Catholics also fought for their country in World War I, but it wasn't until World War II that "Tennessee Protestants fought shoulder to shoulder with Catholics and found that Catholics were as loyal to the country as they were," Msgr. Campion said. "World War II was a major melting pot situation to the Catholic Church's benefit," he said.

World War II was a turning point for Catholic civilians as well. They were united with other Americans in the war effort in a way they had not been before. The local Ladies of Charity assisted the Red Cross with rolling and shipping bandages; the Knights of Columbus sold war bonds; diocesan school children collected scrap metal and rubber. Catholics joined with people of other faiths to support the war effort with prayer as well as manpower.

World War II helped put to rest the notion that Catholics were less than fully American, but some suspicions still lingered. When John F. Kennedy ran for president in 1960, some still questioned his loyalty to America over the Vatican. Whether by virtue of an uneasy electorate or timidity on the part of Catholics to run for office, Tennessee has yet to elect a Catholic governor, Msgr. Campion noted. Nashville elected its first ever Catholic mayor only four years ago, when Karl Dean took office.

Welcoming the stranger

For those Catholics who were both religious and ethnic minorities, life could be extremely difficult. But the church has long worked to respond to the needs of its most vulnerable members.

When black Catholics had nowhere to worship at the turn of the 20th century, Bishop Thomas Byrne worked with Mother Katharine Drexel to found Holy Family Church and School, as well as Immaculate Mother Academy. Later, the Sisters worked with Bishop Alphonse Smith to open St. Vincent de Paul Parish and School.

During Bishop William Adrian's tenure as bishop, the Civil Rights movement kicked into high gear in the South, and the Catholic church played a key role.

In September 1954, four months after *Brown v. Board of Education* ended school segregation, Father Ryan High School became one of the first schools in the state to accept black students.

In the 1960s, Paulist priests serving in Memphis were active in sit-ins and



Photo by Rick Musacchio

The body of Bishop Pius Miles, the first bishop of Nashville, lies in a small room connected to the penance chapel at St. Mary of the Seven Sorrows Church in downtown Nashville. St. Mary's was the second cathedral of the diocese, from 1847-1909.

Father John Kirk, pastor of the Church of the Nativity in Spring Hill, distributes Communion during the first Mass for the parish on Christmas Eve in 2008. The parish was established to serve a growing Catholic population in southern Williamson County and northern Maury County, which has been swelling as more Catholics moved to the area from the North and Midwest.

Bishop David Choby accepts the offertory gifts during the dedication Mass of the new St. William Church building in Shelbyville in 2006. An influx of Hispanic parishioners has affected all corners of the diocese in recent years.



File photo by Andy Telli



File photo by Theresa Laurence

marches demanding equal rights for blacks.

Bishop Joseph Durick, who took the helm of the Diocese of Nashville in 1969 and was a nationally prominent leader in the Civil Rights movement, worked to shift attitudes at home.

While not always popular, church leaders have long worked to ensure equal rights for minorities and immigrants. The fact that the Catholic Church is present,

and the Mass will be celebrated the same in Nashville as it is in Phoenix or Mexico City, and will welcome all who gather, can provide comfort to immigrants.

"When I arrived here in 1984 from Phoenix, there was a minuscule Hispanic population and I knew no one. I was full of trepidation. It was very nice to see a Catholic church," said Ramos, an attorney who relocated to Nashville for his wife's music career.

Now parishioners at Holy Family Church in Brentwood, Ramos and his family started out at St. Ignatius of Antioch, which they still attend occasionally. "It's like a mini UN there. There are so many countries represented," said Ramos, whose parents are from Mexico. "It fills me with pride."

The idea of welcoming immigrants, travelers, strangers, is consistent with the history of the church, Ramos said. "That

was Jesus Christ and his own family once upon a time."

Looking forward

The good news is that in 2011, more men are answering the call to dedicate their lives to minister to Catholics and welcome the stranger into the fold. Parishes continue to sustain Catholic life in a culture that is increasingly indifferent and

even hostile to religion.

But the church is also challenged these days. It struggles to carry out its mission to serve the needy and vulnerable in a time of budget cuts and a slow economy. It must also find a way to make Catholic education accessible to more families who cannot afford tuition. Religious education must strive to be more vibrant for Catholic students of all ages. Catholic health

care must fight to remain true to its gospel mission in the face of vexing questions of morality and ethics.

The first 175 years of the Diocese of Nashville have been marked by tremendous growth and change. Middle Tennessee's Catholics, still at the beginning of the 21st century, no doubt have many challenges ahead, but with their strong faith, can expect a bright future. ✠

Historic timeline for the Diocese of Nashville



Small wooden church, Holy Rosary, is built near Capitol Hill for Irish bridge builders.



St. Mary's Orphanage is opened by the Dominican Sisters and Father J.A. Kelly.



Yellow Fever strikes Memphis. Over 3,000 Catholics die, including 22 priests; 48 nuns ministering to victims.



Cardinal Samuel A. Stritch, appointed to Rome by Pope Pius XII. (First Tennessee clergy appointment to Roman Curia)

- 1810** — Father Stephen Badin from Bardstown, Ky., becomes the first missionary priest in Tennessee.
- 1820** —
- 1837** — Tennessee designated a diocese by Pope Gregory XVI, on July 28, 1837.
- 1838** — First Bishop, Richard Pius Miles, arrives in Nashville.
- 1842** — St. Michael Church in Cedar Hill is built. It is the oldest continuously operating mission in the state.
- 1847** — St. Mary of Seven Sorrows in downtown Nashville becomes the second cathedral.
- 1860** — Four Dominican Sisters arrive in Nashville, and enroll the first young women in their new school, St. Cecilia Academy.
- 1864** — St. Mary Cathedral is converted into a military hospital during the Civil War to treat wounded soldiers of both armies.
- 1864** —
- 1865** — Third Bishop, Patrick A. Feehan, is installed and serves until 1880 when he becomes first bishop of newly created Diocese of Chicago.
- 1866** — The Sisters of Mercy establish St. Bernard Academy in Nashville.
- 1873** —
- 1898** — St. Thomas Hospital is opened by the Daughters of Charity and named for Bishop Thomas Byrne's patron saint.
- 1900** — Holy Family Church is opened in Nashville to serve black Catholics.
- 1902** — The first Knights of Columbus Council, #544, is established in the diocese.
- 1909** — Cathedral of the Incarnation is dedicated in Nashville.
- 1929** — Father Ryan High School for boys dedicated by Bishop Alphonse Smith, in memory of the Confederate poet-priest.
- 1937** — Centennial Celebration of the Diocese of Nashville.
- 1946** — Camp Marymount opens on Highway 100, for Catholic boys and girls, replacing Joelton's Camp Happy Hollow.
- 1954** — The Nashville Chapter of the Serra Club is formed.
- 1958** —
- 1961** — St. Cecilia Dominican Sisters open Aquinas College.
- 1962** — Pope John XXIII convenes the Second Vatican Council in Rome.
- 1962** — Bishop William Adrian starts Catholic Charities of Tennessee.
- 1965** — St. Mary's Orphanage's name was changed to St. Mary Villa and children were moved to the White Bridge Road campus.
- 1971** — The Diocese of Memphis is established on January 6, 1971.
- 1971** — Search Retreats of the Catholic Youth Organization begin.
- 1988** — The Diocese of Knoxville is established September 8, 1988.
- 1991** — The new Father Ryan High School in Oak Hill is dedicated.
- 1992** — The Hispanic Ministry Office is established for the Diocese of Nashville.
- 2002** — Pope John Paul II High School in Hendersonville is dedicated.
- 2003** — Mary, Queen of Angels assisted living facility is opened at St Mary Villa Campus.
- 2006** — 11th Bishop, David R. Choby is installed as Bishop of Nashville.
- 2012** — 175th anniversary of the founding of the Diocese of Nashville.