

History of Holy Family Catholic Church Copperas Cove, Texas

At the turn of the century, Copperas Cove was a little more than open country with only a handful of people. There were only three Catholics—and these attended St. Mary's Church in Lampasas which was established in 1885. In 1934, Rudolph and Elizabeth Troe, who became long-time members of Holy Family, moved here and attended St. Mary's in Lampasas. The population of Copperas Cove numbered about 200 at that time.

In 1954, Father Francis Weber of the Holy Cross Fathers founded St. Joseph's Parish in Killeen. On Sunday, September 2, 1956, he came from Killeen and offered the first mass here in the home of Joseph and Jane LaFountain with about 35 people present. On October 14th, 1956, this small congregation moved to the Hy-Way Hardware and Supply building which was owned by the LaFountains. This building was at the site of the present West Park Shopping Center. Shortly afterwards, Father Weber purchased a surplus barracks, mess hall from Fort Hood, and moved it from there to the LaFountain property on Highway Avenue near Highway 190.

The back section of this building was partitioned off to serve as living quarters for a resident priest. Father Weber, C.S.C. said the first mass in this building on November 25, 1956. Father James A. Donnelly, C.S.C. arrived as the first resident priest on September 8, 1962. The population of Copperas Cove in 1960 was 4,567. The arrival of Father Donnelly marked the beginning of a new era of parish development. More about this in next week's bulletin.

Father James A. Donnelly, C.S.C. arrived in 1962 as the first resident priest of Holy Family. His church was a converted barracks from Fort Hood; and his home was a room partitioned from the rear of the building. Father Donnelly had been ordained a Holy Cross priest in 1946 and had served in various missions conducted by the Holy Cross Priests in central Texas—many of which, such as St. Helen's in Georgetown and San Jose in Austin, have since become large modern parishes.

Within five years from his arrival, Father Donnelly had raised approximately \$300,000 for the construction of the church and rectory—mostly from sources outside the parish. On the feast of the Holy Family in 1967, Bernard Meuth broke ground for the church which was dedicated on May 12th, 1968 by Bishop Louis J. Reicher, the founding bishop of the Diocese of Austin. Within another five years, Father Donnelly had planned and raised the money to build the parish social hall which was completed in 1973.

The census numbers for Copperas Cove reveal amazing growth for the city. From 1950 to 1980, the population doubled every ten years. Between 1960 and 1970, when the parish buildings were planned, the population grew from 4,576 to 10,818. It is estimated that the current population is around 30,000. The buildings completed in an earlier era have served us well through a major population growth.

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On January 1, 1977, Father Lawrence Bauer, C.S.C. joined Father Donnelly as an associate pastor. Father Bauer had been a missionary in Bangladesh for forty years. He was to continue at Holy Family during the tenure of a series of pastors, and brought to the parish a very special model of spirituality and holiness. For a short period of time, Father Joseph Rick, who also had been a missionary in Bangladesh, served as an associate to Father Donnelly.

At this period of its history, the Southern Province of the Holy Cross Priests determined that its pastors should have a limited tenure in a particular parish. This policy resulted in the transfer of Father Donnelly in 1978 from the parish and the area that had drawn his total dedication for 16 years. His transfer was a very difficult time for him. Father Harry Stegman, C.S.C. was appointed to replace Father Donnelly. After being pastor for less than three years, Father Stegman died.

Father William Kelly, C.S.C. of the Eastern Province of Holy Cross came as pastor in September of 1981 and remained until June 1989. Along with his strong Boston accent, he brought with him considerable skill in preaching—which had been developed during the number of years on the “Mission Band”, a group of priests who moved from parish to parish giving missions. Along with being a sensitive pastor, Father Kelly was active in the Copperas Cove civic community which by the 1980 census was 19,469—almost double what it was in 1970.

While Father Kelly was pastor, Edward King, Ph.D., a professor of chemistry at Central Texas College, prepared for ordination as a permanent deacon. After his ordination, he became the first permanent deacon assigned to Holy Family Parish. His wife Janet was both parish secretary and director of religious education. The Kings moved to Levelland, Texas in 1989.

Father William Donahue, C.S.C., like Father Kelly, a member of the Eastern Province of Holy Cross, arrived as pastor in June of 1989 when Fr. Kelly was assigned to Holy Cross Parish in South Easton, MA. Father Donahue had been rector of St. Mary’s Cathedral in Austin for the previous 15 years and a professor of Biology at King’s College in Wilkes-Barre, PA for twenty years before coming to Texas. Father Bauer continued as associate pastor until January of 1994 when at the age of 87, it became necessary for him to take up residence at the Holy Cross retirement facility at Notre Dame University. Under Fr. Donahue, long time parishioner John Consentino was ordained a deacon in 2001. After Fr. Donahue left, Fr. Barry Cabell was pastor until 2005 when Fr. Jim Robertson took over the helm. Fr. Jim faithfully served Holy Family until 2011 and under his care, the parish welcomed Deacon Tim Dorsey who has been a deacon since 1987 and Bishop Aymond ordained another long-time parishioner, Tim Hayden, to the diaconate in 2010. The Diocese asked Fr. Jim to take a formation faculty position at St. Mary Seminary in Houston in the summer of 2011, and Fr. Chris Downey came in and has been here since July of that year.

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Reflections on parish facilities

When the government established Fort Hood at the time of the second World War, those people who had homes on the land had to be displaced. One of these, a Mr. Urbanke, moved his house to the spot now occupied by the sign “Holy Family Catholic Education Center”. This was the original structure on the property. It remained vacant for a long time until Frank Seffrood, the parish maintenance man for many years, repaired it and added additional rooms. The Seffroods moved into the house in the time of Father Donnelly, and lived there until 1991. In the fall of 1993, the house was removed from the property to allow for the development of the parish education area.

The first building to be erected by the parish was what we now term the “D-Building”. Mass was celebrated in this building for a short time, but its main function was as a social hall. With a view to possible future use, Father Donnelly had it constructed so that it could be adapted as four apartments.

The “C-Building” was originally a barracks moved from Fort Hood and which later burned down. The present building was constructed using the original foundation. For some years, it was referred to as the “Judo Hall” since it was used for Judo training under the direction of Earl Hussey.

The “B-Building” is a ready made unit that was purchased and moved onto the property by Father Donnelly, who also had the “A-Building” constructed of cinder block by local labor.

All of these buildings of diverse origin, color and design with a dwelling in the center of the group presented an appearance of total lack of unity. Except for the house, all of the buildings had been adapted as classrooms for our religious education program. So starting in 1993, the parish council with direction by Father Donahue was attempted to bring a unity and design to the complex. The dwelling was removed, the current planter and sign identifying the buildings as the “Holy Family Catholic Education Center” (designed by Bernard Meuth) was constructed, and the colors of the buildings were made to match those of the church and the social hall across the street.

Before the departure of Father Donnelly in 1978, all of the major construction of parish facilities was completed. Next week, we will consider some of the recent developments of our facilities.

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Parish Facilities Looking to the future

In this parish bulletin, we have been reflecting for the past several weeks on the history of the parish and its facilities. The buildings were planned and built while Father Donnelly was pastor—between 25 and 30 years ago when the population of Copperas Cove was less than 10,000. The buildings have served the needs of the parish very well even though the population is now estimated at 30,000.

In recent years, there have been a number of maintenance and development projects. Well designed signs identifying the church and educational center have been built. Pews replaced the chairs that were formally in the church. The conference room in the social hall has been developed. The parking lots have been improved by the addition of concrete curbing, lighting towers, and the addition of a new section with additional access. The church entrances have been improved with ceramic tile. Roofs have been replaced on all the buildings. Major air conditioning and heating elements have been replaced. The classrooms in the “C-building” have been refurbished with new ceilings, carpeting and painting. And so on!

Where do we go from here?

In recent times, several needs have become evident. A “cry-room” for small children would be a welcome addition. The one toilet at the rear of the church has an embarrassingly long waiting line before Masses. The office space could be much improved. A “day-chapel” available for daily masses, visits and adoration would do more than save on air-conditioning and heating bills. A larger gathering space at the entrance to the church would be of advantage. Space for the parish library and religious article stand could be improved. Can these needs be met at a cost within our means?

Much thought has been given to the development of our facilities. The parish council and the parish financial council will be discussing these needs. Certain procedures and approvals are required by the diocesan building commission in all of this. Be alert for progress!