

St. Maria Goretti Church: Serving Catholics in Arlington for 75 Years

In the 1930's, Arlington was changing in many ways. The small cotton-farming community between Fort Worth and Dallas was growing in population, from 3,700 in 1930 to 4,200 in the early 1940's. The Catholic community was growing, as well.

With no Catholic church close-by, Catholic families were forced to travel the then main roadway, Highway 80, to east Fort Worth to attend Mass at St. Rita Parish.

An assistant pastor at Fort Worth's then St. Patrick Church, Msgr. Ernest Langenhorst, recognized the growing number of Catholics in Arlington and recommended to Dallas Bishop Joseph P. Lynch that a parish be established there. With the Bishop's approval, St. William's Catholic Church was created, and doors to a new church on Division Street opened on June 15, 1941.

Now, 75 years later, the small Arlington Catholic community now named St. Maria Goretti has grown to more than 1,500 families and is the Mother Church of the three other Catholic parishes in Arlington.

This milestone will be commemorated with a 75th Anniversary celebration on May 14, 2016, beginning with a Mass at 10:00 a.m. followed by a picnic until 3:00 p.m. for all parishioners.

"St. Maria Goretti was established by a small group of Catholic families who had a burning desire to bring a Catholic church closer to their homes," explained pastor Father Luke Robertson, TOR. "Today, 75 years later, St. Maria Goretti is a much larger parish, but our parishioners remain known for their deep faith, their devotion to the Church, and their generous spirit."

The face and soul of St. Maria Goretti parish mirrors the changes of the community around it. Sherry Lewis, a life-long parishioner, whose father Fred Boundrant is a founding member of the parish, says that as growth came to Arlington so did growth come to the parish.

The parish started as a "mission" of the Catholic Church Extension Society which was created to raise money that would help bring the Catholic Church to isolated faith communities across our nation. The Extension Society donated \$5,000 and asked that the church be named St. William.

By the early 1950's, the Catholic population was growing so fast that the pastor, Father James Tucek, convinced then-Dallas Bishop Thomas K. Gorman to allow him to spend \$12,000 to buy almost 10 acres of property away from downtown Arlington, on South Davis Street, so a new parish facility could be constructed to serve a Catholic community that had grown to 300 families.

Mrs. Lewis recalls that the arrival of the aerospace industry in the form of LTV Corporation and then the General Motors auto manufacturing plant fueled the rapid growth of Arlington and the parish. Under the leadership of Msgr. Robert Forliti, the parish began construction in 1953 of an "auditorium church," an eight-grade school, a convent, and a rectory. Because no one remembered which of the fourteen St. Williams that the parish was dedicated to, Msgr. Forliti petitioned the Bishop to change the parish name. He submitted three names: St. Dominic Savio, St. Francis Cabrini, and St. Maria Goretti. Bishop Gorman chose St. Maria Goretti, the recently- canonized patron saint of children.

St. Maria Goretti was the center of Catholic life in the early days of the parish, Mrs. Lewis notes. "When it was noon, everyone would stop whatever they were doing and pray the Angelus prayer."

New jobs in Arlington and surrounding areas as well as new homes attracted new residents, Mrs. Lewis recalls, particularly Catholics from the northeast region of the United States and parts of rural Texas. By 1963, St. Maria Goretti had grown to more than 1,200 families, and this spurred the construction of a new, 850-seat church designed by Fort Worth architect Preston Geren. The modified Spanish Mission-style church featured fourteen stained glass windows that depicted the Apostles' Creed. The main altar was carved from a large block of marble quarried in Carrara, Italy. The new church was formally dedicated on January 30, 1966, three years before the Diocese of Dallas was divided. On August 9, 1969, the Diocese of Fort Worth was formed, with St. Maria Goretti a part of the new diocese.

From the 1970s through the early years of the 21st Century, growth continued. Ministries at the parish, such as the Music Ministry and the Social Outreach Ministry, blossomed and matured during this era. From the move to South Davis, Catholic education has been the bedrock ministry of the parish; the thriving school educates young people from pre-K through eighth grades, with an emphasis on academics, faith formation, and leadership skills.

In 1987, the last diocesan priest left St. Maria Goretti, and the Sacred Heart Order of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis arrived to administer the parish. The late Father Gilbert Barth, TOR was the first Franciscan to serve the parish as pastor.

Today, St. Maria Goretti remains a vibrant Catholic community, a community which is diverse by nationality, by tenure, and by background. "One of my greatest blessings has been to look out over our congregation every week. I see the faces of people from all over the world. People from west Africa and Vietnam and Mexico and the Philippines, native Texans and newcomers alike, young and old, who have heard the words of Jesus Christ and answered His call to worship and serve in our Church. We mirror the larger community in Arlington. I love the passion, the energy, and the

commitment our parishioners bring to their faith and to our parish. I believe Catholicism is at its best in our community."