



St. Malachy, Clontarf

Members of the Church of St. Malachy in Clontarf pose for a photo outside the church with Bishop John M. LeVoor and their pastor Father Jeremy Kucera after their 10:30 a.m. Mass on June 26.



Rita Hanko Erdmann, 99, and Clara Marie Klucas, one month, were the oldest and youngest members of St. Malachy present at the parish's last Sunday Mass on June 26. Clara Marie is being held by her mother Amanda.

(Photos by Krista Hartman)



St. Bridget, De Graff

Members of the Church of St. Bridget in De Graff pose for a photo inside the church with Bishop John M. LeVoor and their pastor Father Jeremy Kucera after their 8 a.m. Mass on June 26.



Mary Collins, 92, and Elizabeth Nelson, one month, were the oldest and youngest members of St. Bridget present at their last Sunday Mass on June 26. Elizabeth is being held by her mother Bethany.

Clontarf, De Graff parishes celebrate last Sunday Masses

by Dan Rossini
The Prairie Catholic

In some ways, June 26 was a Sunday like any other.

A cool night gave way to bright sunshine as the summer's heat built up steadily throughout the morning on the Minnesota prairie. Parishioners at the Churches of St. Bridget in De Graff and St. Malachy in Clontarf gathered to praise and worship the Lord as they had faithfully done for the last 140 years.

Yet this Sunday was different. Bishop John M. LeVoor of the Diocese of New Ulm came to celebrate Mass with them. And the occasion was even more unusual: This Sunday was the last time weekend Masses were to be held in each parish.

"I feel it's important for the bishop to be with you and to go through

the process with you together," the bishop told over 100 people who came to St. Bridget's 8 a.m. Mass. "It would have been much easier for me today to ask Father Jeremy to have the Mass and not to come. But I want to, I want to be here with you, and I want to go through this with you. And that's why I'm here."

Bishop LeVoor pointed to the demographics of the diocese as the reason for the changes.

"I wish the demographics in our diocese were different," he said to another 140 people during his homily at St. Malachy's 10:30 a.m. Mass, echoing his message at St. Bridget. "I wish that there were more priests. I wish there were more people coming to Mass on the weekend, but it's not the case. So we need to right-

size things. I have hope that things will work out and that Jesus will see us through the difficult times."

"I'm here with you and we'll do the best that we can," he added.

Need for change

Bishop LeVoor made the decision to discontinue weekend Masses at the two parishes after extensive

any weddings or funerals that he may have, Fr. Kucera is now able to continue celebrating four Masses on the weekend: one at St. John, one at Sacred Heart, and two at St. Francis.

St. John was integrated into the St. Isidore AFC upon the reassignment of parishes in the Prince of Peace Area Faith Community in the diocese's Region IV. The priests

of that region had proposed the reduction of AFCs to the Committee on Parishes as a way to reduce by one the number of priests serving in the region. Priests throughout the diocese are asked to

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consultations with the diocesan Committee on Parishes, priests, and members of the parishes themselves. St. Malachy and St. Bridget had been alternating Sunday Masses.

What led to the bishop's decision was the July 2016 retirement of Fr. Bill Sprigler, who had been serving as the parochial administrator of the Church of St. John in Appleton. In 2015 St. John became part of the St. Isidore the Farmer Area Faith Community, which includes not only St. Bridget and St. Malachy, but also St. Francis in Benson, Sacred Heart in Murdock, and the Oratory of the Visitation in Danvers.

The change allows a single priest, Fr. Jeremy Kucera, to pastor all the parishes in the AFC. In addition to

baptism in 2012-2013," he said, recalling the discussions.

"There was considerable discussion regarding dwindling finances and maintenance of the churches. We discussed the proximity of these parishes to the larger parishes in Murdock and Benson and the fact that weekend Masses had fewer than 100 participants," he said.

Bishop LeVoor met with parishioners at a meeting in April of 2014 to talk about the future of their parishes and the lack of priests in the area to serve them. He met with them again in March 2016 to go over his decision and its implications. By all accounts, parishioners appreciated his involvement.

Margie Tolles is a member of St. Malachy and the secretary for the St. Isidore AFC. She thought the meetings with the bishop were "a good opportunity for parishioners to speak their mind." "If they had questions or concerns they could ask them to Bishop directly, and I thought that was a great opportunity and wonderful that he was able to do that," she said.

Storied histories

Both Clontarf and De Graff are railroad towns, established under the patronage of Bishop John Ireland of St. Paul. Seeing the need to improve the plight of poor immigrant Catholics, Bishop Ireland formed the Catholic Colonization Bureau in 1876 to act as an agent of the St.

Paul and Pacific Railroad to sell off 117,000 acres of railroad land grants in Swift County.

The bishop's plan was to attract poor Irish immigrant families from eastern cities to join Norwegian and French Canadian settlers on the fertile prairie of Minnesota. There they would enjoy affordable land, a Catholic Church with a resident priest, and a community of Irish Americans. They would also be free of the immigrant bias that hindered their new life in America.

De Graff was the first settlement in Bishop Ireland's colonization efforts. Originally called Our Lady of Kildare, St. Bridget was formed as a faith community in 1876. Mass was celebrated in parishioners' homes until a wooden church was erected a year later. The current building, a red brick structure with an impressive three-and-a-half-story bell tower, was dedicated in 1901. The church is on the National Register of Historic Places.

According to St. Malachy's centennial history book, the Catholic Colonization Bureau selected Clontarf as its second immigrant colony in 1876. The first church was constructed in the fall of 1877. The present-day St. Malachy Church, a white wooden building, was built in 1896.

St. Malachy was a mission church of St. Bridget when its first pastor, Fr. Anatole Oster, was assigned in 1878. Parish membership had blossomed

to over 500 people when it became a parish in its own right in 1880. Sacred Heart was also a mission of St. Bridget, with its first Mass celebrated in 1879 and first church erected in 1894.

In turn, St. Malachy was the mother parish of the missions of St. Francis, the Church of the Visitation, and St. Agnes in Hegbert before each became parishes in their own right. St. Agnes merged with St. John in Appleton in 1976 and Visitation was designated an oratory in 2006.

In 1978, St. Bridget joined with St. Francis and Visitation to form the Catholic Area Parishes – a precursor to today's area faith communities. St. Malachy joined the group in 1980, and Sacred Heart was added in 1988. The group became the St. Isidore the Farmer Area Faith Community in 2010.

Pastoral approach

Fr. Kucera, who has been intimately involved in planning discussions for the two parishes since becoming pastor of the parishes in the St. Isidore AFC in July 2014, has emphasized a pastoral approach in trying to help his parishioners grow closer to Christ in the midst of difficulty.

In the months leading up to the June 26 Masses, he used his homilies to help his flock deal with the change. In one homily, he encouraged parishioners "to look back and remember that Jesus came to us to

give us life and how we now need to go to him to continue to receive the gift he has given us in the Eucharist."

In another, he reminded them that the Catholic Church is "where our lives find a home and place to belong anywhere in the world, not just in our local parish only." He stressed that their faith can be nurtured anywhere Christ and his sacraments are found, and that does not end if their local parish no longer has Sunday Mass.

Fr. Kucera added that it was also important "just walking with people and helping them to tap into their grieving and acknowledging the good of what has happened in the past and how that needed to be respected and remembered with gratitude to God."

Fr. Kucera's guidance and support paid off. On June 26, parishioners could commemorate the rich histories of their churches without being too saddened by the current situation.

"We weren't in a celebratory mood," said Charlotte Rosemeier, a St. Bridget parishioner who also serves as financial secretary for the AFC. "I don't think there were as many people there as they hoped. But I think it also indicates where we're at. That's the reality. There just aren't a lot of people...."

"I felt like it was everything it needed to be," she added, reflecting on the occasion. "It wasn't exciting and great, but I didn't walk away depressed or sad about it either."



Bishop LeVoor celebrates the Liturgy of the Eucharist with Father Jeremy Kucera, pastor of the parishes in the St. Isidore the Farmer Area Faith Community, at St. Bridget's 8 a.m. Mass on June 26. In his homily, the bishop told parishioners that he wanted to be there "to pray with you and to ask Our Lord's guidance" during this difficult time.

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