



THE HISTORY OF ST. MARY'S CHURCH, WEST PLAINS, MISSOURI

St. Mary's Catholic Church, West Plains, Missouri, celebrated the 100th Anniversary of its founding in September 2002. The current building housing St. Mary's Church was officially dedicated June 6, 1983 in observance of the 81st anniversary of the founding of the West Plains church.

When Catholicism first began in the Ozarks, priests came on horseback from the remote areas of Poplar Bluff, Salem or Rolla. Masses then were held in the homes of various Catholic families. The probable site of the first Mass offered in West Plains was at the home of Mike and Annie Fitzgerald, located on the corner of Jefferson and Cleveland Avenues.

Church services were soon held regularly in the room above Fitzgerald's Tin and Plumbing Shop on Washington Avenue until the new church was built on South Hill Street. The church was to be placed under the protection of the Mother of God and called Saint Mary's. The cornerstone date of the first church was 1908, although the records begin before that with a few baptisms.

A financial report of 1910 shows a congregation of 52 families. An interesting side note to the report is that approximately one-third of the income for the year came from businesses and citizens of West Plains who were not Catholic.

St. Mary's became a parish in 1948, with Father Francis Donovan the first pastor. During the 1950's, under the direction of Father Sylvester Bauer, St. Mary's was a Mission Center for the guidance of young priests working the vast area of the Central Deanery under the Missionary Apostolate Plan, which included five Missouri counties: Howell, Oregon, Ozark, Shannon and Texas.

In 1957, Mr. & Mrs. Robert Butler donated the seven acre tract of land on which the current church, parish center and rectory are built. The land was developed over the subsequent years by several pastors.

Many years have passed, and the church has continued to grow and change to accommodate the needs of its families. In February 2003, the latest addition, a gathering area which connects the parish center and church, was completed.

St. Mary's Church currently has about 250 families, with the Rev. James L. Reynolds as pastor and Rev. Mr. Patrick Keefe as permanent deacon.