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St. Peter Parish celebrates 150th anniversary

By Mary Caffrey Knapke

ST. MARYS DEANERY — “Faith, family, and farm” — that’s how parishioner Pat Diller summarized the history and character of St. Peter Parish near Ft. Recovery in Mercer County. The parish has served generations of Catholic families in the rural St. Peter community since its founding in 1860.

An anniversary Mass was celebrated by Archbishop Dennis M. Schnurr on Jan. 10, followed by a program to introduce invited guests, including former pastors and priests and Sisters from the parish. A parish dinner was also held in the St. Peter Community Center.

“One hundred fifty years. Wow!” said Father Thomas Dorn, pastor of the Fort Recovery cluster including St. Peter. “In that time, so many blessings have been given, so many prayers have been prayed, so many Masses have been offered. . . . Only God knows just how much good has been accomplished for His greater glory and the sanctification of His children. For certain, though, St. Peter Parish has been a blessing from God, and a blessing to this archdiocese and this country.”

Father Dorn added, “The Catholics of this area are devoted, traditional, volunteer-oriented, respectful and kind to priests, and take good care of their parishes. Because of them, I think Mercer County is the best assignment for a priest.”

Many of the small villages in southern Mercer County can boast a variety of stores and businesses. But in the village of St. Peter, the church and rectory have been the most prominent landmarks for



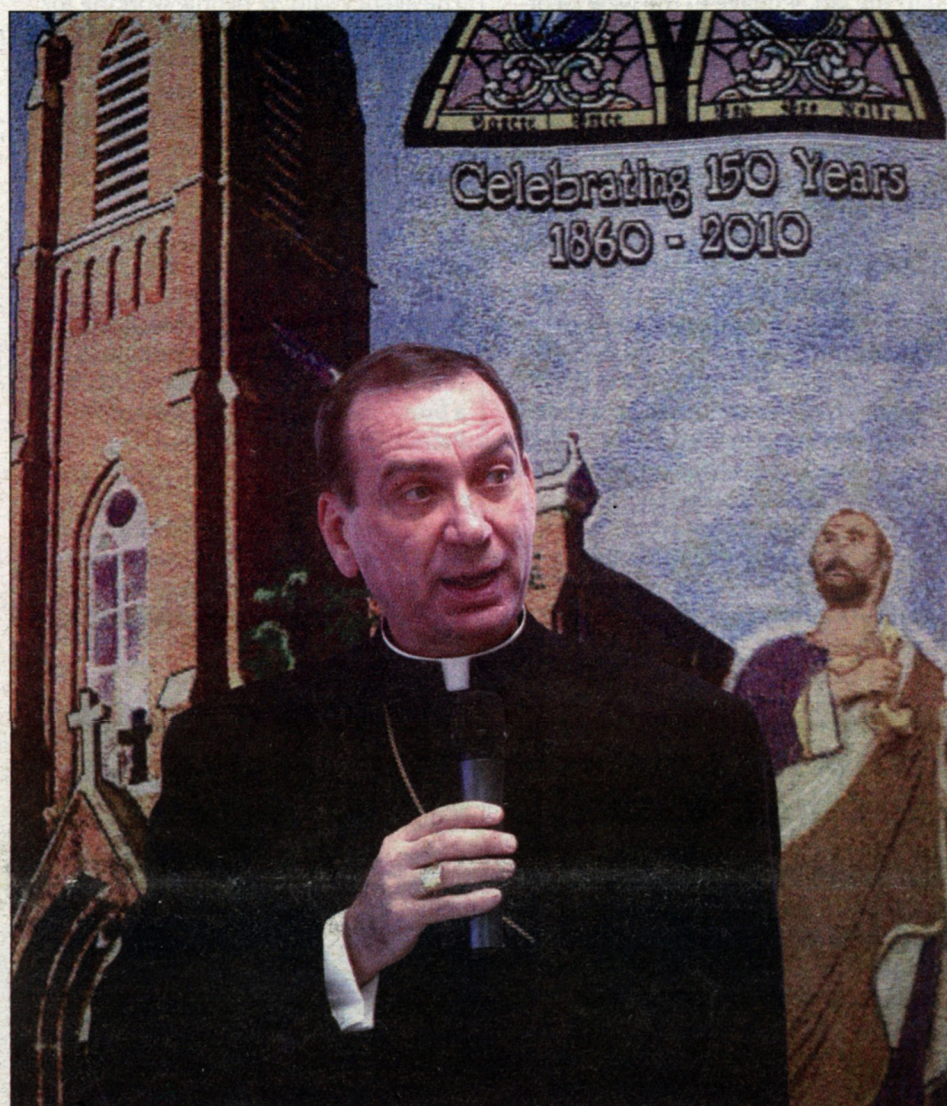
COURTESY PHOTOS

Eva Kahlig is held by her mother, Brenda, during the 150th anniversary Mass at St. Peter Parish in Ft. Recovery.

generations. Other than these structures at the intersection of St. Peter and Philothea Roads northeast of Fort Recovery, St. Peter has seen only school buildings, as well as a post office that existed from 1887 until 1903.

The church building that remains in use today was built in 1904 on the site of the original church building. The cornerstone of the original church was laid on Oct. 6, 1858, by Archbishop John Baptist Purcell of Cincinnati, who was joined by Bishop John Henry Luers of Fort Wayne and five priests. Archbishop Purcell returned on Jan. 1, 1860, to dedicate the church.

The founding members of St. Peter Parish were German pioneers who farmed the surrounding land and wanted to build a church within walking distance of their homes. The first Catholic church in the Ft. Recovery area was St. Joseph, two miles



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Archbishop Dennis M. Schnurr stands in front of a throw blanket designed by a parishioner to mark the anniversary.

to the south of St. Peter. A strong and growing Catholic community northwest of St. Joseph led residents to seek permission to build St. Peter. Although two miles is hardly considered a long distance today, it would have presented more transportation challenges 150 years ago.

The building committee, established in 1858, included Wilhelm Wendel, Dietrich Gaerke, Jacob Roessner, Andrew Trautman, Jacob Braun, John Schoch, Joseph Studer and Henry Vonderhaar. Many of these family names can be found in the parish’s membership roster today. Diller’s husband, Neil, is a direct descendant of one parish founder, Peter Kerber; his parents and both sets of grandparents were married in the parish.

“Many people in the parish have very deep roots,” Diller said.

That sense of a parish community with strong roots takes on special meaning in this rural farming community, where the traditional sense of neighbor helping neighbor is often evident.

“Last summer, two parishioners suffered heavy building damage due to wind. The people seemed to just show up in droves to help them through the crisis,” Diller said. “We also do not have a funeral committee to do lunches for funerals; the neighbors still take care of that.”

Charlie Gaerke is another descendant of one parish founder. A farmer and U.S.

Navy veteran of World War II, Gaerke has belonged to St. Peter Parish his entire life. He has served the parish community as a server and church warden; he now helps count the collection. A few decades ago, Gaerke also pitched in on a church renovation project in which the land under the church was excavated and a basement hall was installed. He recalled that his brothers used to mow the church lawn — a job that was eventually passed to his son. “It’s always been a close-knit parish,” he said.

Parishioner Linda Boeckman cited religious education as one of the parish’s strengths. “St. Peter is working well within the Ft. Recovery Cluster of parishes. We joined with our neighboring parish, St. Joseph, many years ago for our CCD program,” she said. “We also have excellent, well-attended CCD and CYO programs which are supported by the students, parents and priests.”

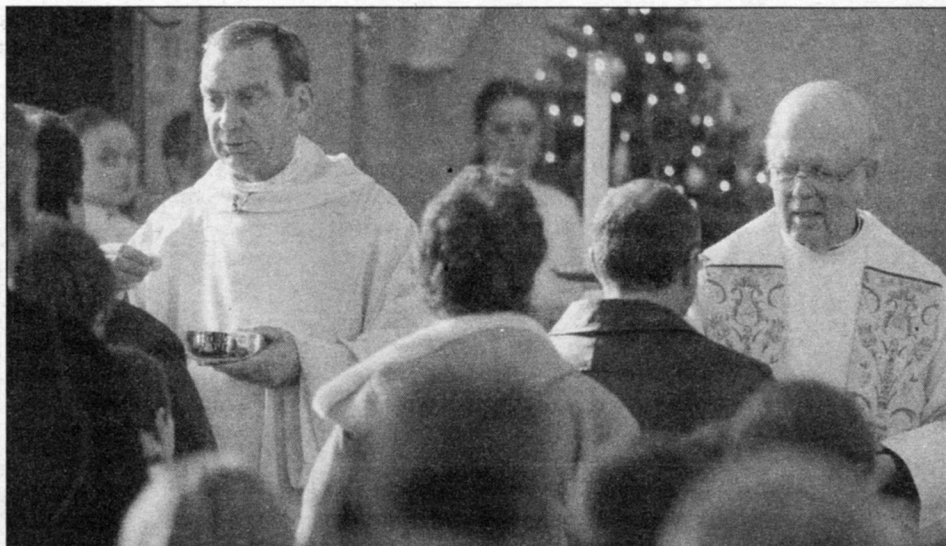
Ginny Fortkamp, parish CCD coordinator, added, “Our program is strengthened by the dedication of our staff. We have numerous catechists who have taught in the program 10, 15, 20, 30, even up to 40 years. Our parents are supportive, as represented by the outstanding attendance and participation of our students.” Adult parishioners also participate in church history classes and Bible studies.



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From left, Sisters of the Precious Blood Noreen Jutte, Marita Beumer, Patricia Will and Laura Will, attend the Mass.

News



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Archbishop Dennis M. Schnurr and Father Thomas Dorn, pastor of St. Peter, distribute Communion during the anniversary Mass.

ANNIVERSARY

Continued from page 1

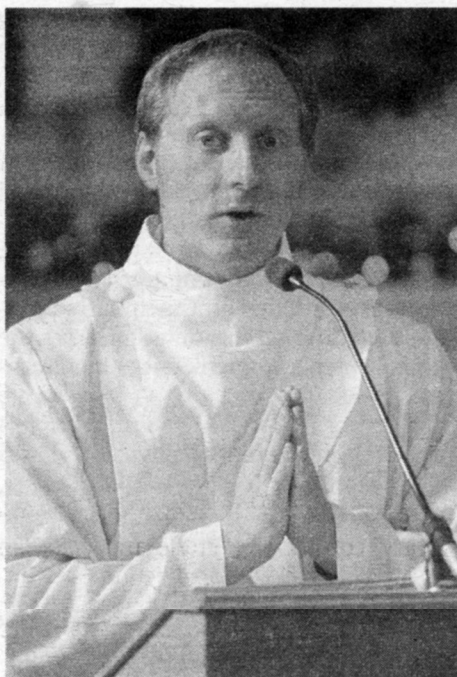
Both women also emphasized the parish's community spirit. "Whenever something needs done, the volunteers get the job done — whether it be with their time or monetary donations," Boeckman said. "You can see this with our beautiful church and well-kept buildings and grounds."

"Many donated hours were given by men and women during the recent renovation of the church building," Fortkamp added. "When painting needed done in our school buildings, parishioners spent their evenings helping out until the job was done."

"We are very proud of our Catholic parish," Boeckman said.

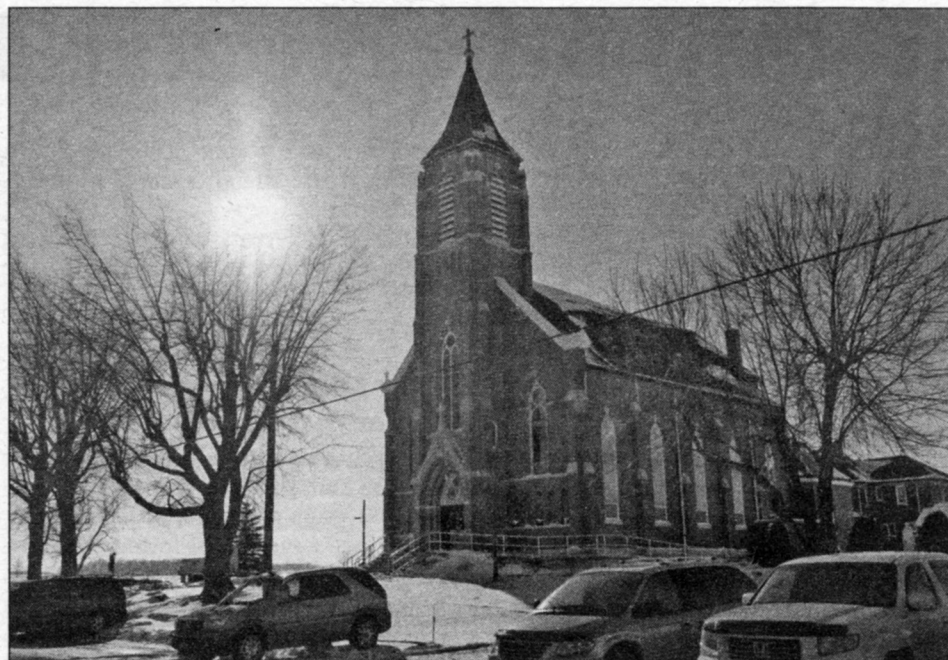
In addition to the anniversary Mass, a St. Peter parishioner designed a blanket to commemorate the anniversary, which is available for sale until the end of January. A book on the history of the parish will be available by the end of the year.

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Rev. Mr. Rob Muhlenkamp, a transitional deacon who will be ordained a priest in May, assists during the Mass. His grandmother, Mildred Will, is a member of St. Peter Parish.



E.L. HUBBARD

St. Peter Church in Fort Recovery.



E.L. HUBBARD

Parishioners fill St. Peter Church to capacity for the Mass.