

St. Mary still a beacon for East Dayton faithful



St. Mary Church on Xenia Avenue in Dayton is celebrating its 150th anniversary on Sunday, Aug. 16.

Staff photo by Jim Noelker

Parish to celebrate 150 years on Xenia Avenue

By Jim DeBrosse
Staff Writer

DAYTON — A century and a half ago, Xenia Avenue was known as “Dutch Boulevard” for the German Catholic immigrants who settled in East Dayton and founded its brand-new parish, St. Mary.

In 1906, they built a magnificent Romanesque church that 70 years later would grace the National Register of Historic Places. Today, its stately twin towers rise above a struggling neighborhood not only of German descendants but Appalachian, Hispanic, African-American, Russian, Afghan and Iraqi. Not just of Catholics but Protestants and Muslims, too.

On Sunday, Aug. 16, when St. Mary Parish celebrates its 150th anniversary, many former parishioners will return to hear a special Mass by Archbishop Daniel

Pilarczyk, meet old friends at an outdoor festival and reminisce over displays of parish memorabilia.

But the church itself, and its meaning, never left the old neighborhood. “We’re still there, still trying to reach out with our Catholic values and help the people around us,” said Dr. Rose Ebel, who heads the parish anniversary committee.

For area Catholics and non-Catholics alike, the church is an anchor. “It’s why we’re called the Twin Towers neighborhood,” said Diana Watkins, Block Leader chair and a member of New Hope Church across the street from St. Mary. “You can see it from everywhere.”

Members of both churches help with the local food pantry, sponsor clothing drives and serve on neighborhood boards. Starting next month, 40 affordable homes

will be built on vacant neighborhood lots, thanks to a joint effort by East End Community Services and the St. Mary Development Corp., a nonprofit, nonsectarian housing development firm.

But like an aging shepherd among its flock, the church, too, needs help — a half-million dollars in paint and repairs. “We have to find the money somehow,” said longtime volunteer Kay Wolff. “It’s just too beautiful not to save.”

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St. Mary's parishioner Bashar Albanna cleans the windows of the church in preparation of Sunday's 150th anniversary celebration. Staff photo by Jim Noelker

Archbishop's Mass set to highlight celebration

150 years after its original construction, St. Mary 'still a focal point' of community.

By Jim DeBrosse
Staff Writer

DAYTON — During a recent tour of St. Mary Church, volunteer Kay Wolff stopped to show a visitor her latest "find" from the scores of cabinets and storage rooms inside the massive church — a turn-of-the-century statue of the Blessed Virgin.

"She was in the basement below the stairs, in a cupboard that's not used very often," Wolff said. "I've been hunting for her for years because she was so special to people for so long."

The life-size statue, used for decades at the church for the annual May procession and crowning in honor of Mary, was recovered just in time for the parish's 150th anniversary celebration this Sunday, Aug. 16.

A small group of St. Mary parishioners has been working feverishly since last summer to ready the church for the 11 a.m. Sunday Mass by Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk and the expected homecoming of thousands of Dayton-area residents who trace their religious and educational roots to the parish.

The task, Wolff said, has been overwhelming. "We have some very dedicated people, but, unfortunately, they're old and getting older. Aren't we all?" quipped the 71-year-old Dayton resident.

The parish has about 300 members — a fraction of the 900 families who worshipped there at its peak in the 1930s, when the parish drew almost exclusively from the surrounding German neighborhood. Today, members hail from 36 different ZIP codes.

In a year's time, Wolff said, volunteers have been able to inspect only about a quarter of the storage space that honeycombs the church's towers, attic, vestibule, basement and tunnel system, even its three altars. Like an archeological dig, each foray leads to some forgotten artifact from the church's long history, she said.

A final cleaning day this

St. Mary 150th Anniversary

What: A Celebration Mass, followed by food, music and displays of church and school memorabilia.

When: Sunday, Aug. 16. Music begins at 10:30 a.m., with Mass by Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk at 11 a.m.

Where: St. Mary Church, Xenia Avenue and Allen Street, East Dayton.

Information: Call (937) 256-5633

week "will be a top-over," Wolff said. Deeper cleaning, like refinishing the bronze communion gates and resurfacing the marble holy water basins, will have to wait until the parish can raise more money. The congregation already has spent \$60,000 in the last two years, and will spend that much again, for repairs needed prior to repainting the interior and original frescoes, a project estimated at \$350,000 to \$500,000.

St. Mary's 325-foot-tall twin towers are clearly visible from U.S. 35 and much of East Dayton, but fewer people have seen the inside of the magnificent Romanesque structure, which in 1983 was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"People who do visit are always amazed at how beautiful it is," said Mike Eifert, former business manager of the parish.

St. Mary was built in 1906 by Dayton's Requarth Lumber Co. for \$127,951.60 — less than the average suburban home of today. Its current replacement value is about \$30 million, Eifert said. In 1906, the cost of making all 80 of its stained glass windows was about \$8,000. Today, that would be the price tag for cleaning a single window, Wolff said.

Much of the church's Italianate marble work, hand-carved statuary and giant frescoes were added under the direction of Monsignor Bernard J. Beckmeyer, pastor of the church from 1917 to 1967. A Cincinnati native of Old World refinement, Beckmeyer grew the parish and made it famous for its beauty and pageantry — including an annual eight-day Garden Party and a Christmas Midnight Mass that drew overflow crowds to see the life-size Nativity

scene and hear its elaborate choir arrangements.

But Beckmeyer also could be a man of Old World ruthlessness. He would rail from the pulpit against parishioners who dared to drop nickels and pennies in the collection basket. "Keep your buffaloes and Indians," was his frequent refrain. During recess, he would sometimes scatter coins in the schoolyard for students to scramble after on their hands and knees.

Today, St. Mary is a kinder, gentler, though smaller parish that has reached out to the diverse, low-income families that surround it. Its new pastor, Father Francis Tandoh of Uganda, has promised an even closer relationship to the community.

In 1994, with the proceeds from years of parish bingo, Sister Rose Wildenhaus founded the St. Mary Development Corp., a non-profit social services and housing development firm. She renovated the old grade school building, closed in 1971, and turned it into a community center.

The corporation later built low-cost senior housing in the neighborhood and, for a while, ran a grocery store on Xenia Avenue. After spinning off the East End Community Services Corp. to help serve the needs of the neighborhood, St. Mary Development is now a citywide, nonsectarian charity that has built hundreds of affordable housing units throughout the city of Dayton.

Dr. Rose Saluke Ebel, a local pediatrician who heads the church's anniversary committee, hopes Sunday's celebration will lead to a rebirth of the parish and its mission. "We want people to know we're still alive and kicking," she said. "And we're still the focal point for this community."

History of St. Mary Church

1859: St. Mary parish founded in East Dayton by Father John Schiff.

1878: First school building erected on Xenia Avenue.

1906: Romanesque, twin-tower church erected on site of old church.

1915: Second school building opens on Steele Avenue.

1917: Father (later Monsignor) Bernard J. Beckmeyer becomes pastor, a position he will hold for 50 years.

1921: Austin pipe organ dedicated.

1932: Congregation peaks at 900 families, with a record 155,000 communions.

1958: Communions drop below 100,000 for first time since 1923 as construction of U.S. 35 begins and families flee to suburbs.

1971: Last graduating class from St. Mary Grade School.

1983: St. Mary Church placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

1994: St. Mary Development Corp. turns old school into community center and opens 100 units of senior housing on former playground.

Today: Congregation numbers 200 families on eve of 150th anniversary.

Sources: Parish history booklets.