

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR LADY OF THE MOUNTAIN CHURCH

It was sunny and warm on June 24, 1969, a half-century ago when Our Lady of the Mountain became an official parish with Father George Dudak installed as our first pastor. Today, we celebrate our Golden Jubilee and take time to reflect on all that has transpired as our parish has grown over the past 50 years into a vibrant faith community. The image of Our Lady of Grace, who stands as the symbol of Our Lady of the Mountain, watches over us as we worship in our beautiful church and as our prayers and hymns rise up along our graceful arches and through our vaulted ceiling on their journey to heaven.

But the history of Our Lady of the Mountain goes back much further, in fact 81 years. It is a story interrupted by war, fueled by a police captain and his wife, a campground for children from broken homes, a journalist, borrowed money, local residents and, appropriately, a carpenter.

In 1938, the Most Reverend Thomas McLaughlin, Bishop of Paterson began a study of the need for a church in the vicinity of Long Valley – Schooley’s Mountain. Believing a place of worship was desirable, a search began for a suitable location but with the outbreak of World War II the effort was abandoned. It wasn’t until August of 1944 when interest in a church on Schooley’s Mountain would be revived.

Dan McLaughlin, a writer with the *Newark Sunday Call* newspaper authored an article about a Police Captain named Edward Durning and his wife Mary, who had created Red Arrow Camp atop the mountain as a summer retreat for children from broken homes. Reading about the camp motivated Bishop McLaughlin to ask Durning if the camp’s recreation hall could be converted into a chapel. The Durnings agreed and the first mass was celebrated 74 years ago on Sunday July 1, 1945 at 10:30 a.m. by Reverend Walter V. Hayes, the pastor of St. Joseph’s Church in Mendham.



Masses at the Red Arrow Camp chapel continued periodically for nine years and were celebrated by several priests from St. Joseph’s until 1954 when the Catholic population had grown to the point where year-long services were required. It was in that year that mission status was extended to the Chester and Schooley’s Mountain areas with Captain Durning continuing to offer the use of the chapel and the same year the first Midnight Mass was celebrated there.

In 1954 Henry Gartner, recently released from military service was attending St. Mary’s Parish in Hackettstown then part of the Trenton Diocese (now Metuchen). A census taker from the Paterson Diocese visited parishioners and suggested they should be supporting parishes in that diocese. The problem for Henry and others was that St. Mary’s was just five miles from Long Valley while the nearest parish in the Paterson Diocese was St. Joseph’s in Mendham, 17 miles away! This gave impetus to the formation of a committee to find a solution closer to home and within the geography of the Paterson Diocese.

The following year, 1955, became a milestone. Father Nicholas Negola was assigned responsibility for the Chester and Mountain missions by the Most Rev. James McNulty, the then Bishop of Paterson, and Fr. Negola established a number of parish programs, some of which had been started by his predecessors. The Rosary Altar Society was formed, a campaign to raise funds for a permanent church was set in motion and altar boy training was started (sorry, it was only boys at this time). A choir was formed and instruction, under the auspices of the Sisters of Christian Charity, was begun for First Holy Communion and Confirmation. However, it would be the active involvement of local residents that would inject energy and impetus into the idea of building a church atop the mountain.

In 1957, Frank and Shirley Koehler felt the time would be right to impress Bishop McNulty with the need for a church on Schooley's Mountain so they invited him, Fr. Negola and Msgr. William Lewis, vicar general of the diocese to a buffet supper...along with 125 active and involved members of the mission congregation! The Bishop got the message. While cornerstones are ceremoniously placed at the corner of a building, one could say the cornerstone for Our Lady of the Mountain was set at a buffet by the Koehlers. Shortly thereafter, a 22-acre parcel of land was located and became available for \$450 per acre. It was purchased thanks to a loan of \$9,000 granted for one year without interest from Mr. Adam Roth. With the loan fully repaid in less than a year the young parish was on its way to finding its permanent home.

Having secured the land, it was decided to allot 10 acres to use as a cemetery prior to beginning construction. A plan for the development of the church property was drawn up but before bulldozing and grading could begin, more funds were required. Captain Durning came to the rescue with a \$3,500 loan, which was repaid within weeks. A committee was appointed to solicit pledges for the construction of the church and an immediate and generous response yielded \$60,000 promised over three years.

Father Negola, in the company of parishioners and friends, broke ground for the new church in November 1961. The structure was designed by Joseph D. Scrocco of West Orange and constructed by the DiMaio Brothers of Hackettstown. Much of the preparatory work was donated with bulldozing and grading of the church foundation done by Franklin Koehler, and plumbing and heating installed by Charles Naomi and Dennis McKenna and others who volunteered their time and talent. Total cost of the church was \$85,000.



A key architectural feature was the use of beautiful, laminated wooden arches that soared to the ceiling of the church. Normally, the weight of the roof would have pushed the bases of the arches outward thereby endangering the structure with collapse. To prevent this crossbeams are almost always used for support and stability. But look up, there are no cross beams! Instead, steel cables affixed to steel boots were attached to the base of each arch and connected to the arch directly opposite with turnbuckles used to tighten and tension them. Those cables remain buried under the floor of the church to this day and evidence of the steel boots can be seen at the bases of the arches in front of the transepts. This unusual architectural

approach provides an uninterrupted flow for the arches as they sweep from the church floor to the vaulted roof.

November 11, 1962 was move in day and the first mass was celebrated with the mission serving just 60 families. Portable chairs were used but were soon followed by the pews from the camp chapel. A temporary altar was fashioned from an old altar that had been used at Our Lady of Grace Church in Morris Plains. Eventually, a fine tile floor was laid, a new high altar and pews with kneelers were added along with lovely hand carved statues from Italy.



On Saturday, May 30, 1964, the mission church at Our Lady of the Mountain was formally dedicated. Over the next five years the mission continued to grow to the point where Father Negola could no longer minister to both Chester and Schooley's Mountain. It was on June 24, 1969 that Our Lady of the Mountain was elevated to full status as a parish with 180 registered families. Father George Dudak, former pastor of La Parrougia de La Sagrada Familia in Ica, Peru was appointed our first pastor. But there was more work to be done.

During the construction of the church in the spring of 1962, a carpenter and assembler at Pella Windows volunteered to bring an order from a location in South Jersey to a church being built on a mountain in western Morris County. When he arrived at the site his reaction was, "Who on earth would build a church out here in the middle of nowhere!" Well, there's an old expression that says if you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans...because about eight years later that carpenter, John Varga moved out here to Hackettstown...in the middle of nowhere. John adopted Our Lady of the Mountain as his parish and you might say Father Dudak adopted John.

Our Lady of the Mountain was drawing parishioners from Hackettstown, Great Meadows and Washington and growing rapidly, amassing more than 400 families by the early 70s. The need for additional space became a priority and plans were drawn to build a rectory, transept and a parish hall for the church. The addition of parish families also brought talent...electricians, plumbers, carpenters and those simply good with a hammer or the ability to take directions. Under the guidance of Father Dudak and the leadership of John Varga, a band of men and women volunteers came together and over time built not just one but both transepts and the parish center.

In addition to John Varga volunteers included Stan Kafarski, Dennis McHugh, Tony Devenezia, Frank Koehler, George Spivak, Gert Taylor, Dennis McKenna, Marty and Gerry Grogan, Dennis McKeveitt and many others. They gave their time and effort working Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 or 10:00 p.m. and a half day on Saturday. They secured most of the building materials at cost. It took over a year just to complete the interior work that included laying the tile floor and paneling just about anything that didn't move.

It wasn't all work, Father Dudak would often provide a "can of refreshment" at the end of the day's labor, but only one because he wanted everyone home safe. It was all accomplished without fund raisers but there were big local contributors like the folks from Welsh Farms who provided much needed cash. This was truly a labor of love and a story emblematic of the American spirit of volunteerism.



Our Lady of the Mountain's history is the story of how a church building is constructed of wood and steel and a community is built on a foundation of faith. It is a story that spans half a century but one that lives on today and will continue in the future through the grace of God and under the welcoming embrace of Our Lady of the Mountain. So, it is with great pride that today we celebrate our Golden Jubilee and begin the long journey on to our Centennial.

All errors, omissions and misspellings are solely those of the author. The author is indebted to Miss Mary Mulligan who compiled an excellent history of OLM in 1973, John Varga and Jean Hoff for their input. Thanks to Henry Gartner (now 89 and a resident of Cumming Georgia) for also sharing his memories.