

Parish History

Early History of Parish:

In 1889, worshipping Catholics in Novato were a mission of St. Vincent de Paul Church, in Petaluma. One year later the first Church in Novato was erected on land donated by Connell Estate, located on Nave Drive, and now called South Novato Blvd. Two years later in 1892 the Parish of Our Lady of Loretto was formally established and Father Charles E. O'Neile was appointed the first Pastor of the parish. The following pastors succeeded one another in the years of our Parish:

Rev. Charles E. O'Neile (1892-1894)
Rev. J.J. McCue (1894-1898)
Rev. Joseph Byrne (1898-1904)
Rev. James Kiely (1904-1908)
Rev. Michael Clifford (1908-1914)
Rev. F. F. Battesti (1914-1926)
Rev. Henry Raters (1927-1930)
Rev. Peter Weber (1930)
Rev. Patrick Keating (1930-1931)
Rev. James Lennon (1931)
Rev. Lawrence Power (1931-1933)
Rev. Martin O'Fahey (1933-1941)
Rev. James O'Connor (1941-1944)
Rev. Joseph McGlave (1944)
Rev. John Ryan (1944-1950)
Rev. Bartholomew McCarthy (1950-1953)
Rev. Denis Kelly (1953-1956)
Rev. Charles Farrell (1956-1977)
Rev. James P. Keane (1977- 1996)
Rev. John O'Neil (1996-1999)

Rev. William McCain (1999- 2012)

Rev. Honesto Gile Jr. (2012-2014)

Rev. Brian Costello (2014-2020)

In 1935, the Church on South Novato Blvd. caught fire and was razed to the ground. The parishioners heard Mass in the basement of the Rectory until the new Church of Our Lady of Loretto was erected on Grant Avenue. Many parishioners remember with gratitude that the boys and other personnel from St. Vincent's School for Boys near Marinwood, gave continuous assistance and hospitality to the parishioners during this time. In September 1937, the erection of the second Church of Our Lady of Loretto on Grant Avenue was completed. Dedication ceremonies took place on September 19, 1937 with Archbishop Mitty officiating. The clergy of the Archdiocese contributed the furnishings to the Church on Grant Avenue.

Post War History:

The Parish continued to grow and during the pastorate of Father Ryan, (1944-1950) the Parish purchased acreage from the Azevedo Family, which now occupies the present Parish complex, including the Hall, School, Convent, Church and Rectory. Father Ryan died in October, 1950 and was succeeded by Father McCarthy. During Father McCarthy's pastorate (1950-1953) a large portion of the parish's southern territory was given up for the formation of a new parish, Blessed Sacrament in Santa Venetia. Although the parish boundaries were reconfigured during this period, the census during the early 50's increased significantly. Many new families took residence in Novato, and the need and desire for a school and other important parish facilities grew. During 1952, when Father McCarthy

was Pastor, the first Parish Festival was held in October at the IDESI Hall. It was a financial success and a community building event. In 1953, Father Dennis Kelly was made Pastor. During 1953, the first year of his pastorate, the influx of new families increased tremendously and it was necessary to arrange for more Masses each Sunday. Two more festivals were held in the IDESI Hall in 1953 and 1954, the proceeds of which helped to erect the current Parish Hall. In 1956 Rev. Charles Farrell was appointed pastor and oversaw the building and opening of a parochial school in 1958, and the convent and church two years later.

The postwar population boom rocked Marin County, Novato and Our Lady of Loretto parish. By the end of the 1950's, it became evident to pastor Rev. Charles Farrell, that the Grant Avenue church could no longer accommodate Mass attendance for his burgeoning flock. It was necessary then for the new parish hall to be used for Masses. The parish had grown from 500 Catholic families in 1956 to 1,100 in 1960. And so, the culmination of 5 years of prayer, planning and effort by many people brought to realization the present church, formally dedicated, on Sunday, April 21, 1963 by the Most Rev. Joseph T. McGucken, Archbishop of San Francisco.

Father Farrell, having come to Novato from St. Rose Parish in Santa Rosa, requested the Superior of the Ursuline Sisters in Santa Rosa to staff the parish school at Our Lady of Loretto. For two years, Sister Mary William and Sister Florence commuted from Santa Rosa until the convent was completed in 1962 to accommodate the remaining sisters. The parish school grew from three classes to a full student body of Grades 1 through 8. Father Farrell also began a vibrant religious education program staffed

by Holy Family Sisters, Sister Mary Catherine and Sister Joanne, through the late 1960's and early 1970's.

The mid-sixties found growing changes in society and in the Church. The advent of the civil rights movement called forth changes that would impact the quiet rural town of Novato. The rapid growth of a basically rural town, changed Novato into a growing bedroom community. The mid-sixties also saw changes in the Church as a result of the vision of St. John the XXIII and The Second Vatican Council. Our Lady of Loretto grew in tandem with these societal and church events.

In 1960, the first assistant parochial vicar, Father Harrison, was appointed to assist Father Farrell with parish responsibilities. In 1968, the boundaries of Our Lady of Loretto Parish would again be reconfigured to accommodate the establishment of a new Parish, St. Anthony of Padua, on South Novato Blvd. Through the mid-sixties two additional priests were assigned as parochial vicars to assist Fr. Farrell with the growing demands of shepherding the parish.

Unfortunately, the illness of Father Farrell in the mid-seventies, led to his no longer being able to fulfill his pastoral duties. Msgr. James P. Keane coming from St. Vincent's School for Boys in Marinwood, took over as administrator of the parish during Father Farrell's time of illness. Msgr. James P. Keane would become pastor in 1977. Our Lady of Loretto continued to grow and build upon the foundation established by its forefathers and foremothers, never seeming to completely lose its rural roots from which it came. In the late 1970's and 1980's Our Lady of Loretto Parish, school and religious education reflected the growth of Novato. The school was at full capacity with a waiting list. Religious Education also, was a four day after school program under the direction of Sister Lucille

Edwards, O.P., an Adrian Dominican, and then later lay catechetical leadership and volunteers. During, this time Sister began a popular Family Program, which was an intergenerational religious education program. Families met on Sunday for religious education. Groupings of children and of parents gathered for classes in the morning culminating at noon with a Family Mass. The school, religious education and family communities all contributed to the overall prayer and communal spirit of the parish.

Quietly, growing during this time was the ministerial outreach and growth of the Hispanic Community in Marin county. To this end, in the mid to late 1970's, Our Lady of Loretto joined with Saint Raphael's Parish to provide a Spanish Mass on Sunday evenings. Masses were well attended and served those living in lower Marin and West Marin and increasingly those living in Novato. This continued well into the 1990's when a regular Spanish Noon Mass was added at the parish.

Parish organizations, Holy Name Society, Men's Club, Catholic Daughters of the Americas, St. Vincent de Paul, Knights of Columbus, School PTG, Cursillo and Bible Study Groups, were among the many avenues that provided opportunities for service, community and spiritual sustenance for parishioners. In 1976, members of the parish formalized their outreach to parishioners in need by beginning Our Lady of Loretto Helping Hands. "Helping Hands" was an outreach of parishioners that helped others in a variety of ways: welcoming new parishioners, prayer during illness, meals to assist families during illness or difficulties and providing funeral receptions, to name only a few.

During the 1980's, Our Lady of Loretto Parish enjoyed the appointment of several newly ordained priests, assisting the pastor in providing for the spiritual growth of the parishioners. The youth of the

parish, too, were recipients during these years of engagement with cleric and lay staff in sacramental preparation, confirmation retreats, and youth group activities. Many memorable spiritual occasions, as well as, festivals, bingo, dances, fashion shows, and parish picnics transpired during these years. Most especially, dedicated parishioners gathered as community to form and build upon the foundations of Our Lady of Loretto Parish and work hand in hand with the dedicated pastors, priests, religious and laity serving the parish.

The 1990's was a decade of many celebrations and recognition of those who served our parish. The celebration of the 100th Anniversary of Our Lady of Loretto Parish in 1992 provided a time to express gratitude for the history and foundations of our parish. In 1995, Msgr. James Keane's 50th Anniversary of Priesthood served as an opportunity to recognize and honor his service as a priest in our parish, as well as, express appreciation for his civic outreach in Novato and Marin County. Msgr. Keane retired as Pastor the following year.

The installation of new pastors, Fr. Jack O'Neil in 1996, Fr. Wm. McCain in 1999 and Fr. Honesto Gile Jr in 2012, Fr. Brian Costello in 2014 highlighted a new period of change and catapulted the parish into a new era of growth. The significant growth in the Hispanic community, realized the beginnings of the Spanish Directiva, Religious Education Programs and numerous organizations for the spiritual and social well being of both adults and youth of their community. With this growth brought the challenge of inclusion and integration to grow as one parish. To that end, bilingual Masses began to be celebrated for major feast days, as well as, special occasions and celebrations. Through the years we have made significant progress in appreciation of the diversity of our parish, learning from one

another and forging ahead for continual growth. In the late 1990's new policies related to Archdiocesan centralization and organizational changes, increased administrative duties for pastors, requiring assistance in the day to day running of a parish. Additional staffing, while necessary, also put strain on the parish budgets. The challenges of transitioning from a modest parish operation to a more corporate-like company have been many. Through this time of transition Our Lady of Loretto Parish, continued to grow into the faith-filled parish it is today. The parish, today, reflects the strong faith and commitment to the Church witnessed through the years by founding parishioners. Prayer, Faith and community have provided a firm foundation for the parish through the years.

As in the past, vibrant parish organizations, school community, religious education, youth and adult programs continue to be a venue of outreach and service to our community; nourishing the spiritual and communal needs of parishioners and those they serve. All are navigating their continued dedication and service in the midst of Covid-19 during these unprecedented times.

Within the last 5 years, expressed grief and dependence on the Providence of God has strengthened the Parish. In this short span, school and parish communities have experienced the loss of 4 staff members and most recently we have journeyed with our pastor, Fr. Brian during his brave battle with cancer. Embracing challenges, walking with those suffering illness and loss, uplifting one another in their need, have strengthened the parish to appreciate its core values of faith and reliance on the Providence of God. All has seen our parish grow in faith and prayer to live the legacies of those gone before us. Our Lady of Loretto continues to be a community of faith, taking up the daily challenges of parish living,

embracing faithful prayer, gospel living and service of others, a
consistent tripod of the parish through its 128-year history.