

St Henry Parish: Madonna Center Ground-breaking, August 16, 2020

GRESHAM — Despite a pandemic and recession, St. Henry Parish has broken ground on a \$4 million welcome center to enhance community life and outreach. The 6,000-square-foot building was a long time coming. It had been on the drawing board in 1963 when the parish built a new church, but funds ran short. The idea reemerged in 2013, and fund-raising started in 2017. Again the target was elusive.



Father Charles Zach, pastor since 2009, revived the idea recently and this time the people nailed it. At an Aug. 16 groundbreaking rite, Father Zach said he wanted to introduce some dignitaries. He pointed gratefully to dozens of

Parishioners watch the ground-breaking at St. Henry Parish Aug. 16 from a distance, as part of coronavirus protocol. Fr. Charles Zach recognized them as dignitaries of the ceremony.

parishioners standing on the lawn, safely spaced and tucked in shade out of the blazing heat. “We are God’s coworkers,” the enthusiastic priest said. “You are God’s field, God’s building.”



Kathy Thompson, one of the parishioners guiding the welcome center project at St. Henry Parish in Gresham, speaks during an Aug. 16 ground-breaking. The new building will enable the parish mission of meeting spiritual and human needs.

Showing his rascally sense of humor, Father Zach added: “If anybody falls prostrate to the sun today, I’ve got the holy oils.” Kathy Thompson, a parishioner who helped lead the project, said a survey identified a welcome center and appealing outdoor plaza as key to attracting neighbors and helping the parish grow. “We need to remember that church is not a building,” said Thompson. “Our work as a parish is just beginning. Once the welcome center is complete, it is what goes on inside that will further our pastoral mission, which is to address the spiritual and human needs of our parish family and of our surrounding community.” The building will be called the St. Henry Madonna Center, since it will be dedicated to the Blessed Mother. A focal point of the design is a bas-relief image of Mary and the child Jesus that was donated to the parish by the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist in Bridal Veil. Mary was the topic of Father Zach’s Aug. 16 homily before the ground-breaking rite. Mary, he said, was an unlikely person to carry the Lord of the universe — a poor, rural teen girl. But out of her mouth comes the great declaration, the Magnificat, that turns the world asunder and reorients humanity toward the ways of God. Father Zach compared Mary to an umbrella, shielding us from the bright lights of the world that distract us from God.



“Mary is a guide for us,” Father Zach said. Parishioners hope the new construction helps lead people to Jesus and Catholicism, figuratively and literally. A path from the parking lot through the plaza and to the center will feature Jesus’ key teachings — the beatitudes. The parish bell sounded as Father Julio Torres, parochial vicar, strode around the site and sprinkled it with holy water. Also getting a wet blessing was the bas-relief Madonna and child. “We are glad because we know this step is going toward the future,” Father Torres said. “It is a legacy for those who will come after us.” More than ever, Father Torres said in English and Spanish, parishioners must remain united. “Talk to one another. Support one another,” the priest said. “As we honor our God with this building, we also honor God in how we treat one another.”

The architect is Soderstrom, and contractor is R.A. Gray. A.J. Michaud of R.A. Gray said he knows how important the building is to the parish. “It is a very significant project to us, too,” said Michaud. “We are going to pay a lot of attention to it, give a lot of time to it. Thank you for allowing us to be part of your church for the next few months.” Bob Gray, a founder of the firm, admitted it’s fun to build buildings. “It is especially fun when a congregation works as hard as all you have.”

David Mastroeni, the project manager retained by the parish, also recognized the faithful for their diligence and patience. “The foundation of every parish, along with our love for the Lord, is community, and so today we begin the construction of space that will bring us together whereby we can enhance our community spirit, build solid relationships with each other and ultimately grow closer to Jesus Christ.” edl@catholic sentinel.org