

Establishing a Catholic Church in the Richlands, VA, area was something that took faithful parishioners a long time to accomplish, but in the end, their efforts paid off and the church in which worship is now conducted was built.

Southwest Virginia was first visited by Father Richard Whelen in 1836, but it wasn't until 1842 – one year after Fr. Whelen was consecrated the Second Bishop of Richmond -- that he made his first Episcopal visitation to the Southwest. When the Diocese of Wheeling was created and separated from the See of Richmond in 1850, Bishop Whelen was given the new Diocese.

The first Catholic family to arrive in Richlands was Mr. and Mrs. Fred Amato and their children, who came from West Virginia in 1909. Mr. Amato was employed as a construction worker in the Seaboard mines. Father Emilie Olivier, a native of France, traveled by horseback and train from Bluefield to serve the family in Richlands.

The next Catholic family to settle in Richlands was the Lorenza Madanno family, from Italy. They opened a store in Richlands. Later, Marco Warner, also from Italy, came to work on railroad construction and a few years later, his brother, Patsy, came to live in the region. Patsy later married and he and his wife had six children, one of whom became a priest – Father Anthony Warner.

In the late 1920s, mass was offered in the Warner home. At first those in attendance were family, but later, as many as 15 to 20 were in attendance. Liturgy was held in the grocery store by Father Wilbert Burke, of Bluefield, who ministered to the small, but growing community of practicing Catholics.

In 1939, the Catholic community continued to grow when Mrs. Ester Forrest, Bill and Kathryn came from Bluefield, WV and Mrs. Evelyn Nassif and her husband, Bob, Lila and Maureen came from Brooklyn, NY.

As early as the late 1940s, Mrs. Forrest requested then Bishop John Swint to establish a church in Richlands, but in the meantime, for 13 years – from 1941 to 1954 – mass was held in the Forrest home whenever a priest was available to come. Mrs. Forrest continued throughout that time to make the request for a church on repeated occasions, however it was not until 1953 that the dream of having a church building in Richlands began to materialize.

In 1950, the Pallotine Fathers from Ireland were assigned to Pocahontas, with Tazewell, Richlands and Grundy identified as missions. Father James Maher was the first pastor and Father Alphonsus Hayes served as assistant.

Dr. A. del Castillo donated land for the site of the church and on November 16, 1953, ground was officially broken for the new church building. James Skewes was the architect and Nick Amelia, of Bluewell, WV, was the builder of the church for the Northfork Supply and Lumber Company. The building was completed in April 1954. Father Michael Gormley was appointed pastor and mass was then celebrated in early April of that year for a small, but joyful and thankful group of people. The church was dedicated in honor of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin and was officially named St. Mary's.

The church grew when in 1959, Dr. Castillo gave two additional lots for the purpose of a rectory and driveway. Father Vincent Cunningham served as pastor at that time with Father James Walsh as assistant. Two years later, in 1961, the rectory was completed, but it wasn't until February 5, 1962 that St. Mary's Church was constituted as a new parish with missions in Tazewell and Grundy. Father James

Walsh was appointed pastor of the new parish. In 1971, Dr. Castillo gave the remaining lots which make up the present day church grounds to the church.

In August 1974, the Southwest Virginia area was transferred to the Diocese of Richmond.

In late August 1975, Fr. Walsh returned to his native Ireland after 18 years of service in Southwest Virginia. During his tenure as pastor, churches were also established in both Grundy and Tazewell. Father Timothy Welsh succeeded Fr. Walsh as pastor in August 1975 and in August 1976, Sister Mary Bowman, SSJ, arrived as minister of Christian education. Fr. Dan Bain was named pastor in June 1983 when Fr. Welsh left and he remained as pastor at St. Mary's until 1996. He was followed by Fr. Joseph Fadura, who served in 1996; Fr. Tom Collins, 1996-2006; Fr. Dan Brady, 2006; Fr. Gaudencio Pugat, 2006-2011; Fr. Burt Sare, 2011-2014; Fr. Paul Muyimbwa, 2014-2016; Fr. Felix Amofa, 2016-2017; and Fr. Jugene Espeleta, who began serving as pastor in July 2017. Along the way, additional priests filled in until diocesan-assigned priests arrived to serve parishioners. Among those who gave of their time and talent to the St. Mary's community were Fr. Francis Musoolooza; Fr. Mike Herbert; and surrounding area priests assigned to regional parishes.

The church building has undergone various renovations throughout its history. The interior space was refurbished in the late 1980s as the church pews were removed and replaced with chair seating. The most recent renovations occurred in 2006 when a fellowship/commons area was added to enhance the ability of the congregation of meet and celebrate as a community together. The bishop came in October 2006 to formally dedicate the new space, which continues to be used today.

Perhaps the biggest change in the church structure came in 2010 when St. Mary's was officially merged with the parishes of St. Elizabeth's in Pocahontas; St. Joseph's in Grundy; and St. Theresa's in Tazewell to form Holy Family Parish. Each of the four churches maintained their own worship sites, but in Diocesan and administrative functions became one church.