

Brief History of Saint Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother Parish, Avondale, Pennsylvania

The announcement of the establishment of Saint Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother, New Garden, Chester County, Pennsylvania, was made by the Archbishop of Philadelphia, Anthony J. Bevilacqua, on Tuesday, August 30, 1988, when he met with and appointed Father Richard J. Maisano as the pastor. Father Maisano was installed as the founding pastor on Sunday, September 25, 1988 by the Archbishop's representative, the Vicar Forane for Chester County, Reverend Monsignor Thomas P. Craven, the pastor of Saint Agnes parish in West Chester.

Previous to its elevation to its status as a parish, Saint Gabriel had been a mission of Saint Patrick parish, Kennett Square. The thirty-five and a half acre plot at Saint Gabriel had been purchased in 1965 and a combination church-auditorium-gymnasium building, including a small kitchen, was erected in 1966. Up until then, Saint Patrick parishioners, who lived a distance from the main church, were served by Saint Francis Xavier Mission, established in 1893 and located on Landenberg and Sawmill Roads in Landenberg, New Garden Township, about eight miles southwest of Saint Patrick Church.

Saint Francis Xavier Mission was a small building with little land, very limited parking, and no indoor plumbing, even as late as the 1960's, so the need for obtaining a new site and erecting a new building was clearly seen. Many of the people living in Landenberg were of Italian ethnicity with a devotion to Saint Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother, a 19th century Italian Passionist seminarian, who is buried in Gran Sasso, in the Abruzzi region, from which their ancestors hailed. Their support for the relocation of the mission prompted Saint Patrick pastor, Father Richard Ward, to petition the Archdiocese for a name change for the mission. Cardinal John Krol, Archbishop of Philadelphia, granted the request.

When Saint Gabriel was established as a parish, it was given the spiritual care of people living in New Garden Township, London Britain Township, a portion of Kennett Township, small portions of London Grove, East Marlborough, West Marlborough Townships, and the borough of Avondale. Most of these people were formerly served by Saint Patrick parish and a smaller number by Assumption, B.V.M. parish in West Grove.

The estimated number of founding parishioners was 1300 from approximately 400 households. The parish has continued to grow steadily, although not dramatically, to its present numbers in 2012 of 770 households and 2500 individuals. The original composition of long time residents has been complemented by many newcomers. From the very beginning of the parish, a core group has been and continues to be very supportive and involved.

The parish community worshipped in the original building for almost fourteen years until the construction of a new Church which was completed in 2002. It was dedicated on Sunday, June 16, 2002 by Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua. The Mass was very well attended. Approximately twenty priests concelebrated the Mass. Father Maisano delivered the homily. After the dedication, the Cardinal stayed for over an hour greeting parishioners and visitors. The dedication was followed by a buffet luncheon in Saint Gabriel Hall, the former church building, as well as under a rented outdoor tent. The total cost of the new building and furnishings, which includes an office wing, was almost \$5 million. The loan from the Archdiocese of \$1,051,400 was retired in less than six years of a twenty-year repayment plan. This is a tribute to the exceedingly generous stewardship of parishioners.

The new Church has been lauded for its beauty and functionality. It was granted the "Best Institutional – Religious Project 2002 Merit Construction Award of Excellence" by the *Associated Builders and Contractors, Inc. Southeast Pennsylvania Chapter*. The Church features a local quarried stone façade, beautiful stained glass windows, a large replica of Michelangelo's *Pietà* and a twenty-two rank pipe organ.

The original building, now called Saint Gabriel Hall, is used for many parish purposes. Its primary use is for religious education at two sessions once a week, and also for meetings and socials. The Spanish speaking community, served by *Mision Santa Maria, Madre de Dios* which was a mission of Saint Gabriel and four other parishes in the area, also used the building for some of its functions, especially religious education classes several times a week during the school year. In 2012, the Spanish speaking congregation, served by *the Mission*, was established as a personal or ethnic parish by Cardinal Justin Rigali, made possible by a generous bequest

The name of the new parish, whose Church building is just south of Saint Gabriel Church, is Saint Rocco. The founding pastor is the former chaplain of *the Mission*, Monsignor Francis J. Depman. *The Mission*, as an extension of Saint Rocco parish, serves as its charitable and social service ministry agency. Saint Rocco parish, as did *the Mission*, has continued to use Saint Gabriel Hall and our modular PREP building for its catechetical programs, for children and adults.

A modular rectory was purchased and installed in August 1989 and served as the parish office, meeting room, and daily Mass chapel until 2002, as well as a residence for the pastor, until April of 2012, when a new rectory was constructed. Two other modular buildings, both pre-owned, were purchased and installed for religious education, one in 1989 and another larger one in 1992. The earlier building was demolished in 2004. The parish hopes to erect a more suitable religious education building in the near future. This is Phase 2 of our building process.

To fund this Phase 2, a capital campaign entitled *Heritage of Faith—Continuing to Build God's Kingdom*, has been underway since late 2009. To date over \$1.1 million has been pledged. This campaign is a combined one with the Archdiocese, in which every parish was required to participate. A portion of the funds is directed toward supporting Archdiocesan ministries.

The funds collected thus far were sufficient to complete the erection of a permanent rectory, without the need for a loan from the Archdiocese. The design build firm *Doutrich Homes* completed the project in April of 2012. A blessing and open house was held on Sunday, April 29, followed by a social and luncheon at Saint Gabriel Hall. The pastor began residing there immediately. The future of the former modular rectory is presently uncertain. It may be demolished, sold, or kept temporarily for limited parish use.

The history of a parish is primarily about its people and their faith life, especially their celebration of the sacraments. On May 6, 1989, the first group of eleven children candidates celebrated their first reception of Holy Communion. The first Confirmation of the parish was celebrated on April 28, 1990 for thirteen children. In the first full year of the parish's existence, there were twenty infant baptisms. Every year, thus far, the parish has conducted the R.C.I.A. process and has had almost every year at least one adult initiated or fully admitted into the communion of the Church.

Parish children have been catechized in our Religious Education Program since 1989, at first in one session per week on Sunday mornings, and eventually in two sessions on Mondays. The program has grown from an initial group of sixty-six children to currently about one hundred sixty children per year. Children, whose parents have chosen to provide full-time Catholic education for them, have sent them either to Saint Patrick School or Assumption, B.V.M. School. Saint Gabriel parish has financially subsidized their Catholic school education from the very beginning of the parish. A annual Vacation Bible School one-week summer program was initiated in the summer of 2007.

The parish has conducted regular socials, especially an annual spaghetti dinner, picnics, and an annual pre-holiday bazaar since 2002. Monthly socials after the best attended Sunday Mass, the 9:30 a.m. Mass, have been held since the beginning of the parish.

As the parish approaches its silver anniversary in 2013, it hopes, with the Lord's providential guidance, to continue to build up the Body of Christ, to serve his people, and to be a beacon of Christ's light to all.