

150th Anniversary: Fourth Of July Special This Year For Saint Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church In Jerseyville

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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JERSEYVILLE - This Fourth of July will be extra special for the Parish of Saint Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church in Jerseyville. Church members will celebrate with a special Mass at 10:15 a.m. on Sunday, July 4, commemorating its 150th anniversary at 506 S. State St. in Jerseyville.

The church was consecrated on July 4, 1871, and established July 5, 1857.

The Reverend Father Martin Daniel Smith, Pastor, and The Reverend Father Donald Patrick Gibbons, Jr., will be the co-celebrant of the Mass.

“I am a convert of 20 years to the Fullness of the Roman Catholic Faith,” Choral Director Foster said, who is one of the leaders of the special celebration. “Two phrases I

remember hearing while in RCIA were ‘To go back in time is to become Catholic’ and ‘Come Home.’ These sayings came to life for me when the church was being renovated to its former beauty and by personally benefiting from the hospitality of its parishioners. I am grateful to be a member of a devout Roman Catholic parish, and the best part of this anniversary for me has been hearing the personal memories of lifelong parishioners and learning the history of this faithful parish.”





The Holy Father Francis

on the 150th Anniversary of the Consecration
of the Church Building

of Saint Francis Xavier - Jerseyville, Illinois

cordially imparts the requested Apostolic Blessing
to the Pastor and to the Priests collaborating with him, to the
parish staff and to the whole parish Community and invokes
on all God's help and celestial comfort wishing that this blessing
might be a stimulus and encouragement for continual growth in
fidelity to the Lord and a reinforcement of the commitment to the
building up of the living Temple founded on Christ the cornerstone

July 4, 2021

Ex Aedibus Vaticanis, die 30.4.2021

Carol Kardinal Wojtyński
Eminentissimus Apostolicus



A HISTORICAL NOTE - This is a historical summary written by Saint Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church of the 150 years:

For 150 years, the spire of Saint Francis Xavier Church on South State Street has stood majestically as the focal point for the people entering Jerseyville from all directions. The spire measures 140 feet from the base of the church structure, and the church's 3,000-pound bronze bell still rings clear today due to the charity of many.

Long before the erection of our present magnificent edifice when Jersey County was formed, there was only one Catholic family - the Carroll family living in Elsay Township. By 1839 there were two more families, a Thomas Carroll family and Mrs. Mary Cummings family.

In 1839 the families of William Shepherd, Fred Bertman, and William Kelly came to reside in Jersey County. There was no church, but Father George Hamilton would come to this area and minister to the Catholic population. There was also a circuit rider, Father Michael Carroll. Father George Hamilton had the privilege of performing the first marriage, that being of William Kelly.

The first Catholic service was held in the William Shepherd home in the fall of 1841. Fathers Carroll and Hamilton of the Alton diocese, which included Jersey County, occasionally visited Jerseyville and held services in private homes and the courthouse. In 1848 – 1849, it was decided there was a need for a Catholic Church. William Shepherd, Fred Bertman, and William Kelly purchased from J.A. and C.J. Barr a plot of ground on which to build that church. It was not until 1857 that a small frame church was erected which was dedicated in July by the Right Rev. Henry Damian Junker, bishop of Alton.

Father Thomas F. Mangan became the first resident priest of Saint Francis Xavier Church where he remained until April of 1860. He was succeeded by Father Marrill until February 1861. His successor was Father Laurent, February 1861 to February 1865, who had a very comfortable rectory built which later became the home for the Dominican Sisters who staffed the school for over 100 years.

Father Laurent also purchased ground for a Parish Cemetery. Father Hovin was here a very short time, 1865 – 1866 when Father John Sullivan was sent to build a new church. Father Sullivan had the overseeing of Saint Malachy Church in Saint Louis. He began a building program at once. The cornerstone was laid in May 1868. Shortly after this, the money ran out and Father Sullivan requested to be transferred to Springfield. He was replaced by Father James J. Harty, December 1868 – 1899. Father Harty took over the building of Saint Francis Xavier Church. The main body of the church was to be 55 by 100 feet. The tower over 150 feet. The inside height of the ceiling in the center of the nave is 43 feet and the side aisles are 25 feet. William Embly and Sons were the architects of the Gothic-style church.

The body being of brick made in Jerseyville and stone trimmings from the Grafton quarries. Masons from Alton did the brickwork, Nichol T. Smith Jr. the carpenter work and Coddington & Irwin the plastering. The roof was covered with slate shingles. This was done at a cost of \$25,000 and took three years to complete. One of our former parishioners had a special pride in our church, Mrs. Hubert (Grace Embly) Allen, as it was her great uncle, William Embly, who was the architect.

On July 4, 1871, “the Total Abstinence Society” of Alton was met at the depot by the “Hibernian Society” of Jerseyville and with the juvenile band of the Annunciation School of Saint Louis, marched through the main streets to the church. Saint Francis Xavier Church was dedicated by the Bishop of Alton, Reverend P. J. Baltes. The celebrant of the day was Reverend P. Cline of Kaskaskia, assisted by Deacon Reverend John Moher of Alton, and Subdeacon Reverend P. Brady of Springfield, Master of Ceremonies – Reverend J. J. Johnson, Vicar General of the Diocese, Dedication sermon by Reverend David Daley of Saint Louis.

Father James Harty remained at Saint Francis for 32 years until his death in July 1899. He was succeeded by Father Fallon until 1904 when Father Bernard Lee became a resident priest. He was one of the greatest church builders of the times of the Alton Diocese, now Springfield Diocese.

On January 1, 1904, Father Bernard Lee became Parish Priest until July 1, 1907. He accomplished much during his stay. He replaced the old frame rectory with a new 12 room brick rectory and a new brick school for the parish. He also did the first extensive room renovation to the auditorium of the church.

Large pillars and arches were added to support the roof when shearing actions were noted in the south wall. A coach house was also built during this time, and the Dominican Sisters were moved to the old frame rectory where they stayed until the 1970s when Father Shea built a new rectory and convent.

Father Joseph Driscoll came to Saint Francis from 1907 until 1914. He had a very quiet residency. In October of 1914, Father John. J. Clancy came to Saint Francis to assume the task of paying off a large debt and remained for 53 years until his death on November 16, 1967. During this time, the bell tower became weather weakened and there was talk of its being removed.

Cost of the renovation was believed to be prohibitive. This became common knowledge around town and Attorney Theodore Chapman wrote to Father Clancy that the removal of the tower was a concern of the entire community. To impress upon Father Clancy his earnest concern he offered to pay the entire cost of the renovation if parish funds were

not enough. Mr. Chapman was not a member of Saint Francis, but he contributed much financial help, and in 1944 Joseph G. McDaniels, a member of the parish, undertook and completed the rebuilding and painting of the English Gothic tower and belfry with its 3,000-pound bell. He took great pride in doing this which was refused by large Saint Louis firms because of the possible dangers involved. Father Clancy had the roofs of the church and school roofed with slate as they were in original fashion.

Father Clancy broke his hip in 1965 and since resided in Alton's Saint Anthony's Hospital but returned to Saint Francis Xavier Church, August 15, 1966, to say Mass in celebration of his 75th year of Ordination. In his 52 years as a pastor, he baptized more than 950 and married 280 couples. He administered First Holy Communion to some 1,200 children and held funerals for 570 souls in his long pastorate. Father Clancy died at 8:30 a.m. on Thursday, November 16, 1967, at Saint Anthony's Hospital in Alton, Illinois at the age of 101.

Since Father Clancy was in the hospital, Father Francis D. Lee was assigned to Saint Francis in 1966. During his tenure, the church was redecorated. He was replaced in 1971 by Father Terrence Shea who undertook the task of paying off the debt of renovations. Father Terrence Shea was here from January 1971 to March 1977. During that time, he razed the 12-room rectory and sisters' frame home to make room for more playground space and an addition to the school. This building, known as Shea Stadium, was complete with a kitchen and restrooms and was attached to the school. It serves as a parish hall, gym, and school cafeteria. A new, smaller rectory and convent were added to the parish. Mary Witt Heitzig gave the church a beautiful pipe organ. It was introduced to the Parish by Mary Witt Heitzig's daughter, Mary Ann (Sug) Heitzig Rydzeski and Doug Updike. In June 1977, Father Patrick Morrow came to Saint Francis Parish and remained until January 24, 1987.

Father Morrow died while serving Saint Francis Parish. Father Henry Schmidt served as pastor from 1987 to 1991 until he was assigned to Saint John's in Carrollton, Illinois. Father William Kekeisen then served as pastor from 1991 to 1998 when he retired. Father Donald Patrick Gibbons, Jr. was assigned to Saint Francis Xavier on July 4, 1998. During Father Gibbons' tenure, a statue of Saint Michael the Archangel was placed on the steeple tower of the church around 2002. At that time Father Gibbons blessed the statue and the church with holy water from Lourdes, Fatima, St. Peter's Basilica, as well as holy water from Fr. Clancy. Dean Montgomery rebuilt the 3 crosses on top of the church as well.

A major renovation of the church was undertaken in 2011-2012 to bring back the original beauty and splendor of our church. The church had been painted in a monochrome light gray-blue, as well as all of the statues. Utilizing his undergraduate degree in Art and his love of history, Father Gibbons had the wisdom and foresight to

bring back the church's original splendor starting from the outside - repairing the slate roof (Lorton Construction), tuck-pointing, and sealing the brick (Mark Babor) and restoring the stained-glass windows (Jacksonville Art Glass). At this time, the beautiful leaded glass windows of the Saint Francis Xavier School that had been boarded up were uncovered and restored.

Larry and Dennis Imming painted the church interior, highlighting and trimming the accent areas and stenciling fleur de 'lis. Michele Dumey Bowman of St. Louis restored the statues and stations to their original glory including the original Crucifix Father Gibbons found that is now displayed in the vestibule. New pews were procured from of the Louisville, Kentucky Cathedral and were restored by Terry Stewart. The precious original 1901 oil paintings on each side of the Sanctuary illustrating Jesus and Mary in the Book of Revelation were able to be restored because of Joe Molloy's loving act of saving them and storing them for such a return. Andrew Hatterman of Murals by Jericho from Peoria painted the sanctuary murals portraying Christ's Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, and Pentecost.

The old red carpet was replaced with tile embedded with marble medallions in the center aisle designed by Murals by Jericho. At this time, a new marble baptismal font inlaid with gold tile was purchased from Italy. Amazingly during this project, the original communion rail was returned having been removed and sold at auction many years prior. All of this work would not have been possible without a very generous bequest from Edna Carroll. In July 2013 Saint Francis Xavier was inducted into the Illinois Historical Society of Sesquicentennial Churches.

Also under Father Gibbons' leadership, the Jersey County Saint Vincent DePaul Society became one of the largest charities in Jersey County assisting those in need. Father Gibbons was assigned to Saint Cecilia Catholic Church, Glen Carbon, on July 1, 2017. Father Martin Daniel Smith was appointed Pastor at Saint Francis Xavier in July 2019 and currently serves. While Father's legacy has yet to be fully established, only having been here for such a short time in priestly years, we owe him a debt of gratitude for his care during trying times. Not only did our Parish lose its Pastor of nearly 20 years, our neighboring Parish, but Holy Ghost also lost their beloved Pastor of 40 years, Father William Hembrow in 2018. Father Marty's leadership was instrumental in helping both parishes emerge strong after a difficult time of transition.

In early 2020, our country was struck with the COVID-19 Pandemic. In March of 2020, our church, as well as many others, had to be closed for about two months, which meant no Masses or Sacraments for parishioners, a first since the flu of 1918. Working quickly and with the aid of parishioners, Father Marty was able to pivot from in-person to live stream Masses so that all could "attend" Mass from their homes. Other creative adjustments had to be made, such as distributing palms on Palm Sunday in drive-through

fashion on the church parking lot. Once Church re-opened in June of 2020, social distancing and cleaning guidelines had to be established and followed until just recently in May of 2021 when our church was finally freed of major restrictions.

Though it all, Father Marty has led by example, with responsibility and the voice of encouragement and prayer. We look forward to his continued guidance until the Lord may call him elsewhere. At various times, the parish has been served by the following assistants: Father Curran, Father Mee, Father Shields, Father Frank Lawler, Father McKeough, Father A. J. Harty, Father Terrence Brady, Father Eugene Griffith, Father Thomas Gorman, Father Francis D. Lee, Father Terrence Shea, Father William Maul, and Father Roger Simpson. Father Brady was killed in WWII and the Jerseyville Knights of Columbus Council is named for him. Fathers Francis D. Lee and Terrence Shea are the only two priests to come back to Saint Francis Xavier as resident priests.

“We thank God for His Gift of Jesus Christ’s Church at The Roman Catholic Parish of Saint Francis Xavier, and we ask the Blessing of the Holy Spirit in the many more years yet to come in Her Life. “Thank you... May God continue to Bless us all!”

This is the Saint Francis Xavier Parish Prayer

Almighty and ever-faithful God, you have blessed us with many gifts. We give thanks for all that we have and all that we are. Most of all, we give thanks for the great gift of Your Son, Jesus. In gratitude, we seek to shape our lives in imitation of Christ, Your Son, as faithful stewards of Your gifts of time, talent and treasure. May we share these gifts with others willingly, with increase, both in practice and with love. Loving God, our fervent hope and prayer is that You will continue the building of our faith community of Saint Francis Xavier. Send labourers into Your harvest: holy priests, deacons, religious and seminarians, generous single men and women, loving husbands and wives. Give us the special graces that our lives require to participate in your mission. Bless us, our families and those we love. Help us to be gifts to others in Your Name. Form us all in the likeness of Your Son, so that in Him, with Him and through Him we may love You more deeply and serve You more faithfully, always and everywhere. We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen.