

HISTORY OF SAINT MARGARET'S PARISH

OLD ORCHARD BEACH, MAINE

It was during the later years of the nineteenth century that Father T. P. Linehan, pastor of Saint Mary's Parish in Biddeford, saw a need to serve the throngs of tourists vacationing in Old Orchard Beach during the summer months. In those late Victorian times most vacationers arrived in town by train, and with limited transportation options found it difficult to get to Sunday Mass. Against that backdrop Father Linehan purchased land at the corner of Old Orchard Street and Saco Avenue. A chapel, seating 250, was built and Saint Margaret's opened for the 1895 summer season. Saint Margaret's was named in honor of Saint Margaret the 11th century Queen of Scotland and patron saint of the poor.

During the early years of the chapel's existence tourism expanded at great neck speed. It soon became apparent that the chapel's capacity was woefully inadequate to serve the needs of the Catholic community. Addressing that need gave rise to what was to be Saint Margaret's most interesting and challenging construction project. In 1915 the chapel was cut in half, the sanctuary was moved back toward Staples Street, and a new center section was built. The seating capacity of the chapel was more than doubled. Notable attendees during the early years of the 20th century were 'Honey Fitz' grandfather of President John Kennedy and Bishop William O'Connell, third Bishop of Portland, who had a summer residence at 30 Staples Street.

In 1921 Saint Margaret's was separated from Saint Mary's in Biddeford and began to be serviced by priests from The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland. Father Mullen, who was later to become the parish's first pastor, was placed in charge of the chapel from 1921 to 1924.

In 1924 the needs of year round residents were taken into consideration. Heat was installed. Year-round Masses commenced. Saint Margaret's was poised to become a parish! When winters neared, a partition was put in place by members of the Knights of Columbus, it was about half way back from the sanctuary. The partition went from floor to roof rafters. An organ was moved into place on the heated side of the partition and Saint Margaret's was buttoned down for winter. In those days the church still had the look and feel of a summer chapel. Stations of the Cross were hung on the studdings of it's yet unfinished walls. Gazing upward afforded one a view of boards and roof rafters. The partition was erected each year into the 1940's when a second furnace was installed to heat the rear of the church. Father Bennett served the chapel's needs from 1924 to 1926.

1926 marked the year Saint Margaret's became a full-fledged parish. There were 20 families registered in the parish that year. Father James J. Mullen, a Saco native, was named its' first pastor, a pastor-ship that was to last 28 years. During Father Mullen's years the vibrancy of the parish can be attested to in many ways. Parish happenings abounded; Sunday school, bazaars, field days, 25 cent movies, communion breakfasts, and parish missions were among the well supported activities. Organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, Daughters of Isabella, Lady's Sodality, and the K of C Auxiliary thrived.

Father Mullen, affectionately known as Father Jim by many, was well respected in the community by people of all faiths. An athlete all his life, it was in 1937 that his athletic prowess as well as his caring for others gained him national and international attention. He interrupted his golf game at the Old Orchard Beach golf course to rescue a photographer whose balloons became untethered while attempting to take arial photos above the course. Father Jim jumped into his car, raced to the rectory, grabbed his high powered rifle, chased the balloons to a point on the Old Orchard Road in Saco, took aim, fired three shots and the

photographer gently descended into a tree on the Alfred Road in Biddeford so 12 miles from his take off point!

World War II brought hundreds of new residents to Old Orchard Beach seeking employment nearby in South Portland's shipyards. Hundreds of the town's summer cottages and cabins were winterized, the school age population exploded and there was a sizeable expansion of the Saint Margaret's parish family. Numerous parishioners took up arms during those war years, four made the supreme sacrifice to God and country. The aforementioned winter partition came down for good, but the flavor of a summer chapel remained.

The vibrancy of the parish can be attested to by glancing through the 1946 parish 20th anniversary souvenir brochure listing 7 summertime Sunday Masses vs. two in the winter. There were 39 first Communions, 15 Christian Doctrine teachers, 30+ altar servers, 23 ushers and 34 choir members. As the war ended, so did gas rationing. More families were coming to church by car and a parking lot was built adjacent to the rectory in the early 50's.

The parish had grown to 500 families when in June of 1954 it lost its' beloved first pastor. Father Mullen's passing marked the ending of one chapter in the life of Saint Margaret's and the beginning of another. Quickly after Father Mullen's death, his assistant, Father Armand Landry, undertook a major remodeling of the interior of the church. Insulation was installed, finished walls and a ceiling were put in place. Saint Margaret's had taken on a new year-round look.

Before the carpenters retreated from Saint Margaret's, Father Edward Walsh, its' second pastor arrived in September 1954. The parish shifted its' focus to a recurring problem – serving the rapidly increasing number of summer visitors. During the early and mid 1950's Masses in church were at either 30 or 45

minute intervals and at alternating times in the town hall and in the New Theater on Seavey Street. Visiting priests could be saying Masses simultaneously at one of the two side altars at Saint Margaret's. People lined up outside waiting to get into the next Mass! As one waiting visitor said to this writer, "this is what I call Mass on the assembly line."

Father Walsh readily saw the need to serve summer visitors to the area. In anticipation of building a summer chapel in the Pine Point area of Scarborough the new pastor purchased marsh land on the Pine Point Road. Forty foot pilings were driven into the ground to support the structure. 1957 marked the opening of Saint Jude's Chapel with a seating capacity of 800, thus alleviating the summer crowding – for a little while!

Father Walsh was a builder; he expanded the sanctuary at Saint Margaret's to what it is today; obtained 20 acres of land on Saco Avenue for what was later to become Saint Luke's Chapel. Father laid the ground-work aimed at obtaining an order of nuns to run the Catechetical program for the youth of the parish. Father Walsh remained at Saint Margaret's until the time of his death in the fall of 1962. During his tenure the parish grew by another 200 families.

It wasn't until February 1963 that Saint Margaret's parishioners would greet the arrival of its' third pastor, Monsignor Edward O'Leary. Early in his assignment here he brought to fruition Father Walsh's efforts to bring an order of nuns to the parish. A home at 25 Portland Avenue was purchased and the Sisters of the Holy Rosary moved in. In the fall of 1963 the 5 nuns in residence were greeted by 525 registered youth in the parish's religious education program. The 60's were also active years for the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), and the first Folk Mass was celebrated at Saint Margaret's in November 1966.

Monsignor O'Leary modernized the parish hall. Gone forever were the stage and the stone fireplace in the center of the first floor. A new stairway to the second floor was built on the church side of the hall and the kitchen was enlarged. The first floor got a restroom, and folding walls would allow for separation of classrooms when needed. The ever increasing need to accommodate summer visitors was temporarily met in June of 1966 when Sunday Masses commenced at the Old Orchard Beach High School Gym, with 600 folding chairs and an additional 400 bleacher seats available. The bell tower at Saint Jude's Chapel was built during Monsignor O'Leary's stay. In June 1967 the monsignor was reassigned to Saint Charles' Parish in Brunswick.

Music has always played an important part in our liturgy, and no one could do it quite like the parish's original organist, Mrs. Blanche Boisvert. Whether in the choir loft or at the winter wall of yesteryear, she served Saint Margaret's well for 38 years until her passing in 1969. Her flamboyancy, manifested by her colorful flowered and plumed hats as well as her playing style, was a hallmark of the uniqueness of the parish.

Portland native Father John Clancy, a man of quiet demeanor, moved into the rectory in June of 1963 becoming the fourth pastor of Saint Margaret's. Father Clancy's interest in building and remodeling soon became evident as he laid-out plans for the second major remodeling of Saint Margaret's and the building of a chapel in the Halfway section of town on land previously acquired by Father Walsh. Major features of the remodel at Saint Margaret's were new walls, new pews a new configuration of pews and aisles that allowed for an increased seating capacity, and for the first time a carpeted floor. The work was completed for the 1969 Palm Sunday Masses.

Construction was started on Saint Luke's Chapel in June of 1969 and was nearly completed when the chapel collapsed under the weight of a heavy wet

snowstorm on Christmas Eve of 1969. The building plan was reengineered and a new octagonal chapel was constructed. Saint Luke's Chapel was dedicated on June 24, 1971. The chapel had a seating capacity of 800 with added seating around the periphery in folding chairs. With its' two chapels Saint Margaret's could seat in excess of 2,200 at any given hour. In 1976 Saint Margaret's celebrated its' 50th anniversary. Masses of anticipation had begun. A summer Mass schedule of that year listed seventeen weekend Masses at the parish's combined three locations.

No history of Saint Margaret's would be complete without mention of Monsignor Robert J. White. Father White, as he was popularly known, was born in 1893 and came here as a youth to the family cottage in the Grand Beach area of Old Orchard Beach. He served in the Navy during World War I attaining the rank of Lt. Commander. He earned a law degree from Harvard in 1920, and in 1931 was ordained to the priesthood. Father White became a law professor at Catholic University in Washington D.C. while earning degrees in cannon law and sacred theology. He was later dean of the Law School at Catholic University when in 1941 World War II broke out and he reentered the Navy as a chaplain. Monsignor White attained the rank of Commodore and was in charge of the Navy's Chaplains Corps when the war ended. Monsignor White's service continued intermittently at Saint Margaret's for nearly 50 years. His scholarly sermons were thought provoking. His multitude of writings on Naval and Church Law were well received. Monsignor White received numerous awards and citations and was known in the parish for his charity and good works.

It was in 1978 that Father Clancy, the parish's second longest serving pastor, was replaced by Father Laurent LaPlante Saint Margaret's first Franco-Canadian pastor. Father LaPlante was an astute administrator, making many refinements to services as well as instituting a program for those contemplating marriage. In addition to his priestly and administrative abilities Father LaPlante was very handy

with his hands, and personally undertook several remodeling projects at the church, rectory and parish hall.

Few remember that from the parish's founding until 1979 Saint Margaret's had its' own resident bishop, James F. 'Junior' Foley, a charter member of the parish. Junior, a bachelor, devoted his life to Saint Margaret's Parish. As sacristan Junior was the go-to person for whatever the need or question. Junior's departure left a significant void that Father LaPlante had to deal with for the remainder of his tenure at the parish.

Father LaPlante was reassigned in the spring of 1983 and Saint Margaret's welcomed its' sixth pastor, Reverend Norman Cormier, a serious cleric and military veteran with a deep sense of religious purpose. Father Cormier's assignment was shortened due to health issues. He departed in June of 1985 after serving the parish for two years.

Father Armand Bill, a Biddeford native, and the parish's seventh pastor, arrived at Saint Margaret's in time for the 1985 summer season. Father Bill was a tireless worker who expected parishioners to be actively involved in the parish. When meeting people Father would ask what commission or committee they served on or what parish ministry they would like to become involved with. It was during Father Bill's time that Saint Jude's Chapel in Pine Point became part of Saint Maximilian Kolbe Parish in Scarborough.

The parish's 8th pastor, Father 'Norm' Carpentier, was assigned in June 1993. In 1995 Saint Margaret's celebrated the 100th Anniversary of its' founding. That year also marked the last major remodel of the interior of the church. Extensive changes were made to the sanctuary including new stained glass windows and furniture. The interior was repainted and new carpeting was laid. For the first

and only time Saint Margaret's retained the services of a full-time Deacon, Daniel J. Delargy. Father Norm's interest in music was evidenced by the participation in singing he achieved among the members of the congregation. The parish reached another milestone during Father Norm's stay when in 2001 it celebrated its' 75th anniversary as a parish.

In June of 2003 Saint Margaret's saw the arrival of what would come to be its' last resident pastor. Father Coleman Patrick O'Toole, a man of quiet and humble demeanor, and also a devoted priest. No matter how early one arrived for weekend Mass Father O'Toole could be found at the rear of the church greeting parishioners and visitors alike. Never did he miss acknowledging youngsters with a high-five. Father O'Toole claimed a unique bond to Saint Margaret's, his parents were married by its' first pastor the Reverend James J. Mullen. Father O'Toole had hoped to serve until Saint Margaret's was merged into Good Shepard Parish but, due to illness, was forced to retire from active ministry in November 2009.

Upon Father O'Toole's departure Father David Schlaver, a retired missionary priest, was appointed administrator of the parish. Father 'Dave,' as he is known, traveled the world as a member of the Congregation of the Holy Cross Fathers. Having family in the area he retired here in 2008. A friendly and jovial Midwesterner, he quickly made many friends and was warmly welcomed by the Saint Margaret's family. Father Dave's administrative abilities provided a smooth transition of Saint Margaret's Parish into Good Shepard Parish which occurred on July 1, 2010.

Saint Margaret's stands tall in its' austere simplicity as well as the far reaching impact it has had on the community and surrounding area. It is a place where Jesus can be found and souls have undoubtedly been saved. Its' strong influence on parishioners over many decades is unquantifiable. It has offered hope to the

downtrodden. Over the years its' members have generously given to the needy in the spirit of the parish's namesake Saint Margaret Queen of Scotland. It has provided a way for many thousands of summer visitors to practice their Catholic faith while away from home. The history of Saint Margaret's Parish is now secure, its' future will be determined by humanities willingness to know, love and serve Him.

Written by Robert Quinn