

## A HISTORY OF OUR LADY OF SORROWS

The first Catholic ministry to take place in Frayser for which there are records was a sick call made by Fr. Samuel Stritch (later Samuel Cardinal Stritch) and Fr. James Whitfield during the winter of 1912-13 at which time the two priests realized that there was a Catholic community of truck farmers, many of them Italian, who were losing touch with the Church because of their isolation and lack of instruction. Three years later, in December 1915, Fr. Stritch received permission to celebrate Mass on one weekday each week. The following November, Fr. Whitfield received permission to celebrate Mass two Sundays a month and to have the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia assigned to St. Joseph Church instruct the children in the Baltimore Catechism and prepare them to receive the Sacraments.



*Church of the Madonna, 1926*

The Sunday School flourished and in January 1926, the Fracchia family donated a tract of land for a church and school on what became 1306 Dellwood Avenue. In September of that same year the Dominican Sisters of Nashville opened the Madonna School. A month later construction began on the Church of the Madonna, which was completed by Christmas 1926. Three years later, the Shrine of Our Lady of Sorrows was dedicated on September 15, 1929.

With the Great Depression hitting the country hard in October 1929, everyone was affected. Only fourteen children enrolled in the Madonna School in 1930 and the school was closed. However, the school was presented to the Poor Clare Sisters of Evansville, Indiana, who responded favorably to Bishop Alphonsus Smith's request for them to open a monastery in Tennessee. The Church of the Madonna was divided into a cloister chapel and an external chapel for the Catholic community of Frayser to continue their participation in Sunday Mass while the school classrooms and convent rooms used by the Dominican sisters were converted into the cloistered monastery, which was dedicated on May 22, 1932.

Fr. Natalis Wellner, O.F.M., started organizing a new territorial parish for the areas of Frayser and Rugby Hills in the summer of 1938. The parish boundaries, established in September of that same year, were the Wolf River to the south, the Mississippi River to the west, the Tipton County Line to the north and Raleigh-Millington Road to the east. The first census showed 125 Catholic souls living in the parish and regular weekly services were established that were celebrated at the Poor Clare Monastery.

The small community quickly outgrew the external chapel at the monastery, and land was purchased in March 1939 on Highway 51 near the intersection of Millington Road for the construction of a combination church and parish hall in what is now the Northgate Shopping Center. Bishop William Adrian of Nashville named the church the parish of Our Sorrowful Mother, and the white clapboard structure was dedicated with a Mass celebrated by Fr. Wellner on August 20, 1939. Later, an office, sacristy and bedroom were added to the building. The entire project cost \$4,100.



*Our Sorrowful Mother, 1939*

Fr. Lucius Hellstern, O.F.M., was appointed pastor of Our Sorrowful Mother in January 1942. On July 11, 1944, parishioners purchased six acres of land approximately a mile and a half north of the church on Highway 51 from the Pera family for \$2,800. Plans were immediately inaugurated to build a

school for the Catholic education of the children of the parish. The first registration on August 28, 1945, showed 48 children enrolled (only half of them were Catholic) and classes were held in the church with the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth (KY) serving as administrators and teachers. Sr. Ruth Virginia Sampson, S.C.N., used the altar rail as her desk as she taught the children in grades 5-8. Sr. Lucina Maria, S.C.N., taught the lower grades. Tuition was \$1.50/month for Catholic students and \$2.00/month for non-Catholic students. The sisters lived at the convent in Holy Names Parish.

The first wing of the school was occupied in January 1946, with a student population that had already grown to 70 students. Bishop Adrian dedicated to new facility on May 5, 1946, and six graduates received Certificates of Completion in the first graduation ceremony just a month later on June 2<sup>nd</sup>. During the summer of 1946, Fr. Lucius built a small frame house behind the school for the janitor and bus driver.

In August 1948, the Franciscan Friars gave up the satellite parish in Frayser and Fr. Francis Pack was named the resident pastor with Fr. Paul Trainor as his assistant. A school bus was purchased and the routes were established that covered 100 miles twice a day. Tuition was raised to \$3.50/month and a third sister, Sr. Lawrence, was added to the faculty while the number of students had grown to 137. A rectory that could accommodate two priests was constructed of field stone to match the school on the south end of the property.

The name of the parish was officially changed from Our Sorrowful Mother to Our Lady of Sorrows in July 1949. The crypt of the present church was built that same year and was dedicated in a Solemn High Mass celebrated by Bishop Adrian on January 19, 1950. At that time, many of the furnishings and appointments from the old church of Our Sorrowful Mother were moved to the crypt were used for parish celebrations.

By 1951, the enrollment had grown to 154 students and another sister joined the faculty. The parish purchased a ranch style fieldstone house directly across Highway 51 from the rectory to serve as the convent for the Sisters of Charity. Sr. Dorothy Ann Mandlehr, S.C.N., was the first principal of Our Lady of Sorrows School and the Superior to the community of sisters living in the convent.

Also in 1951, the mission church of St. William in Millington was completed. The sisters from Our Lady of Sorrows taught the Sunday School. Fr. Leonard Oglesby, an assistant to Fr. Pack, was named administrator of St. William in January 1953. In the spring of that year the convent in Hwy 51 was enlarged, allowing the accommodation of seven sisters for the 1953-54 academic year.

By the fall of 1956, Our Lady of Sorrows had grown to 1900 parishioners and had a school population of 400. The school was expanded and the first lay teacher, Miss Inez, was added to the faculty. On September 23, the parishioners gathered to watch the erection of the main beams of their soon-to-be “new” church, and on December 4<sup>th</sup> Fr. Pack received notice that he was being transferred to another parish.

Fr. Francis McRedmond was the new pastor and was responsible for supervising the completion of construction of the church. On March 17, 1957, the doors of the beautiful new edifice opened for the first time and Bishop Adrian dedicated the building on April 30, 1957. The crypt was divided into two classrooms for the 1957-58 school year. The following year a third classroom was constructed in the crypt as the number of students increased to 500 under the direction of Sr. Louis Joseph, S.C.N.

By 1959, the parish claimed 2400 parishioners. A new convent was constructed on property donated by the Lee Alexander family from the acreage of their farm which dates back to 1823. An exciting groundbreaking ceremony took place on May 10, 1959, for the new convent and six additional



Our Lady of Sorrows, 1957

classrooms. The total cost of the expansion projects was \$127,000. Although the sisters arrived on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, they were not able to move into their new convent until November 7, 1959.

Fr. James Driscoll became pastor in 1967 and had the monumental task of guiding the Catholic population through the liturgical changes resulting from the Second Vatican Council. During the years that followed, Our Lady of Sorrows continued to grow and held claim to the largest Catholic parochial school in the Diocese of Nashville. The Diocese of Memphis was erected on January 6, 1971, and Fr. James Murphy succeeded Fr. Driscoll as pastor in 1974 and was present to the community when the closings of three major plants employing a majority of parishioners were announced in 1977 and 1978. With the closing of International Harvester, Firestone and Kimberly-Clark, the Frayser community suffered economic difficulty and many families had to relocate in order to support themselves.

In 1979, Fr. Thomas Taylor began a five-year term as pastor. Fr. Joseph Paolozzi became the administrator of the parish in 1984 when Fr. Taylor suffered some health problems. Fr. Paolozzi was then named as pastor in 1985 and served until 1987 when he was reassigned to St. Mary in Camden, TN. Fr. Richard Gantert came from St. Mary in Camden to assume the role of pastor in 1987. Fr. Gantert was a great community builder and held the shrinking parish family together by increasing the awareness that everyone is knitted together in the fabric of God's Family. With enrollment in the parish school decreasing rapidly due to parish attrition, the seventh and eighth grades were closed on campus and were integrated into a Middle School Program at Memphis Catholic High School with St. Anne, St. Michael and Blessed Sacrament students. In 1997, Fr. Gantert led the parish in keeping the parish school open even if at a great sacrifice to the parishioners.

Fr. Gantert was transferred to St. Paul in 2000 and Fr. James Martell became the eighth resident pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows. Etched and stained glass windows were installed in the church, replacing the clear glass window panes and adding a new sense of the sacred and separating the people in church from the outside world. With a growing Hispanic community in the Diocese of Memphis and in the area around Our Lady of Sorrows, Fr. Martell started offering Mass in Spanish on one Sunday each month to address the spiritual needs of immigrants coming from south of the U.S. border with the assistance of Deacon Donald Bennis, who was ordained in 2000.

In May of 2006, Bishop J. Terry Steib announced that Fr. Martell would be transferred to Holy Rosary and the pastor of Holy Rosary, Fr. Bryan Timby, would be assigned as the new pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows effective June 28<sup>th</sup> of that year. Since 2006, the ministry to the Hispanic community has grown to include weekly Sunday liturgies, adult catechesis programs in preparation for sacramental celebrations, and community involvement. From a personal love of gardening, Fr. Timby suggested to the Parish Pastoral Council that the people consider creating a garden in memory of Fr. Rick Gantert, who had died of leukemia in May 2006, and the area behind Krug Hall, the original rectory, was selected as the site that was dedicated on September 15, 2008 and includes the Stations of the Cross, a statue of Mary, and stepping stones that mark the seven sorrows of the Mother of Jesus. In efforts to help the parish grow spiritually, Fr. Timby has expanded the Adult Religious Education programs and added annual "mini-pilgrimages" to places such as the Shrine of Our Lady of Sorrows in Stuttgart, MO, and the Shrine of the Most Holy Eucharist in Hanceville, AL, as well as a 14-day Spiritual Journey to Ireland to mark his Silver Jubilee of priestly ordination in 2008. Fr. Timby is assisted in 2008, and Mrs. Barbara Pettitt, who serves as Principal in the parish school which has 129 students in pre-school through eighth grade as of August 2008.



**OUR SORROWFUL MOTHER, PRAY FOR US.**