

History of Sacred Heart Church

QUESTIONS

1) Tell me about the first Sacred Heart Church in Bellevue that predates the current structure.

In 1870 the town of Bellevue incorporated with 381 inhabitants. The Catholic families needed to go by horse and buggy to St. Stephen's in Newport.

In 1873, efforts began to build a new Catholic church in Bellevue and the new, small one story building was dedicated in November of 1874, under the patronage of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. At that time there were 40 Catholic families in Bellevue. Two months later, in January of 1875 a school was opened with 50 children. The same one story building was used for both the church and school. This first church sat where our convent building is now.

Because the bishop did not have enough priests to give this new church a resident pastor, a priest from the Passionist Fathers in Cincinnati was brought in to serve as acting pastor. In October of 1875 the church received its first resident pastor.

In 1876 they added a second floor to the church building. The worship services then took place on the second floor and the first floor was used for the school. There were three sisters of Notre Dame who served as the first teachers in the school.

2) When did they build the current structure?

Over the first 16 years of the parish, the congregation grew 5 fold requiring a larger church. Fr. William Cassander received permission to build a new church and employed the services of architect Louis Pickett of Cincinnati. The cornerstone of the current church was laid in 1892 and this beautiful gothic structure, with flying buttresses, was dedicated in 1893.

It was made out of brick and the exterior dimensions are 141' long x 68' wide, excluding the width of the flying buttresses. The apex of the roof 71' high. The length of the church is 25' shorter than was planned in order to keep within a budget of \$25,000 for the church. The total cost of the church and its furnishings came in just over \$30,000.

3) I see that it has a slate roof. Is that the original roof?

Yes, this is the original slate roof, although the copper was added later. They used a Virginia Buckingham slate that was the best slate available in the world. I am told that the slate itself can last up to 300 years. It was laid at a steep pitch to increase its life span.

4) I see that there is a historical plaque outside of the church.

Yes, it was placed in the National Register of Historic places in 1974.

5) On the historical plaque it lists the name of the church in German: Herz Jesu Kirche (Heart of Jesus Church). Was this once a German speaking church?

Yes, while the parish was established for people of all nationalities, it primarily served the German speaking population. Only 9 of the 36 charter members of the St. Joseph's men's society bore Irish names. The church's first resident pastor, who came in 1875, was a native of Germany and word spread among the German community that they now had a "German priest at Sacred Heart." The prayers of the Mass would have all been in Latin but German was used for the preaching and religious instruction. The school used both German and English in their classes and the practice of using both German and English continued until the First World War in 1917, when the parish eliminated the use of German as a patriotic gesture.

6) On the front of the church there are two plaques. One that says Sacred Heart Church and the other says Divine Mercy. What is the significance of these two names?

When the first church was built, the population of Bellevue was about equally divided between families of German and Irish heritage. While the German speaking population took the initiative to build the first Catholic Church in Bellevue in 1874, fifteen years later, in 1889, St. Anthony's was erected just a block away for the English speaking Catholics. In 2003, St. Anthony and Sacred Heart merged to become Divine Mercy Parish and St. Anthony's church building was sold.

Although the name of the parish changed with the merger, under canon law in the Catholic Church, once a church building has had a name for 100 years, it cannot be changed. So the name of the church remains Sacred Heart Church, but the new merged parish is now called Divine Mercy Parish.

7) I see from the old pictures of the church that there was originally a different spire on the bell tower. Can you tell me about that?

Yes, in the original construction there was a tall, octagonal wooden spire. In 1915 there was a violent windstorm that twisted the spire beyond repair. It was replaced with the present more durable curved, octagonal, rounded cupola. Clocks face in all four directions. The clocks have been updated multiple times over the years.

8) There is a beautiful high altar with a tall ornate backdrop. Can you tell me about this?

Yes, this and the two side altars were added as part of the renovations done by Fr. Aloysius Roell between 1920 and 1924 for the golden jubilee. The ornate gothic artwork with statues built into it behind the altar is called a reredos. It is 33' high and 16' wide. It is hand carved and was imported from Western Austria. It has scenes from the old testament and features statues of saints and angels with a beautiful statue of Jesus revealing his sacred heart crowning the apex. At that time the priest would have faced this magnificent structure while saying Mass. The symbolism is that through the prayers of the Mass, the priest, representing Christ, leads the people of God into Heaven.

The side altars with the statue of Joseph and Mary are 19' high and 8' wide.

9) Tell me more about some of the sculpted scenes and statues that are included in the backdrop of the high altar.

(I will explain the various statues and sculpted art)

10) Tell me about the shrines in the back of the church.

We have two ornate shrines depicting our Sorrowful Mother (Mary holding the body of Jesus after his crucifixion). This work of art was imported from Munich, Germany. Next to it are statues of St. Ann, the mother of Mary, and St. Anthony.

On the other side is the Purgatorial Shrine, depicting the poor souls in purgatory, the Sacrifice of our Lord on Calvary, and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. This three quarter size relief shows how the Mass applying the merits of Christ upon the cross to help the souls in Purgatory attain more quickly their eternal reward in Heaven. It is also interesting because it shows how Mass was celebrated prior to the Second Vatican Council.

These two shrines are each 19' high and 8 feet wide.

The third shrine in the corner is newer and was added after the merger of St. Anthony with Sacred Heart to become Divine Mercy Parish. The pastor at the time intended to replace the Sacred Heart statue of Jesus at the apex of the high altar with this new Divine Mercy statue of Jesus, which show the rays of his mercy coming from his heart. The parishioners

of Sacred Heart were happy when they found that the new statue would not fit where the old one was. They wanted to keep the original one!

For awhile the new statue was kept in the sanctuary, but later a shrine was made for it in the back corner of church.

11) What about the murals in the church?

These were also part of the renovations for the golden jubilee. The beautiful murals, which line the side walls of the church, depicting scenes from the life of Jesus, were done by artist Leon Lippert of Newport.

The three murals over the sanctuary and the medallions on either side of the sanctuary were frescoed by Theodore Brasch.

12) What about the sculpted stations of the cross?

These were imported from Dusseldorf, Germany for the renovations of the golden jubilee.

13) You said that the church was of brick construction but the outside looks like it is made of stone block.

Yes, as part of the renovations for the golden jubilee in 1924, the exterior brick was finished with imitation Indiana limestone. A new front was also put on the church with three entrances.

14) I notice the green copper on the roof gives the church a special distinction.

The copper cornices, gutters and downspouts were also part of the golden jubilee renovations.

15) Were there other things done as part of the renovations for the golden jubilee?

Yes, they added a new pipe organ, lighting system, boiler and a clock in the bell tower.

16) How did they pay for this?

An explanation is recorded in the Centennial program as to how Fr. Roell did all this, fifty years earlier:

"In 1922 it was announced that, starting January 1st 1923, all adults would be expected to use the new weekly church envelopes and suggested that each wage earner contribute the equivalent of one hour of his weekly wage. All other forms of revenue raising were to be abolished. This resulted in an increase of approximately 4 times as much revenue as was formerly realized."

17) Was the pulpit also added at this time?

No, the pulpit was added in 1930 and was originally raised on a pedestal and connected to the wall to the right of Mary's altar. An arched doorway was cut into the wall so that it could be entered from the side sacristy. It originally had a shell type covering that was designed to help project the sound as there were no microphones used at that time. (We have a picture showing it.)

Later it was brought out on to the floor of the sanctuary and the opening in the wall was sealed over in 1976.

18) Tell me about the stained glass windows.

The original windows were simpler in design. They were replaced by the current windows in the early 1950's as part of restorations done by Msgr. Carl Merkle, where the interior of the church was completely redecorated and repainted. You can see a sample of the old windows in a side entrance that is rarely used. To save money, they didn't replace the windows in places where they wouldn't be seen.

The new windows were designed with a protective storm glass on the outside with an air space between the outer, protective glass and the inner, stained glass.

The 20 stained glass windows were designed and installed by a Wisconsin company following a geometric pattern that gives them a German look.

They were hand-crafted just as it was done in the middle ages. The glass is hand-blown with the coloring mixed in and imported in small sheets from England, Germany and France. The pieces of glass are then held together with virgin lead. These panels are held in place with copper wire.

19) I understand that he installed a new pipe organ in the 50's as well. Can you tell me about it?

Yes, in 1951, a state of the art Wick's pipe organ was installed that we still use today. There are 1,046 pipes with one valve each, which are electronically controlled rather than by leather pouches which wear out. They are located above the side altars on either side of

the sanctuary and covered by cloth. They range in size from 16' long and 1' in diameter to 6" long and ¼" in diameter. They rely on air from a fan system installed in the basement, which fills the bellows. The air flow is now controlled by a solid state switching system that was installed in 1984.

The new organ was installed to the side of the sanctuary in front of St. Joseph's altar. The old organ was then removed from the balcony and donated to St. James in Ludlow. The removal of the organ from the balcony enabled them to double the seating capacity in the balcony. This was a time when there was standing room only at Mass.

20) Do you ever use the balcony?

We now usually only open up the balcony for Christmas and Easter. I hear that, back in the day, if it was filled with adults that it would sag. In the 50's Fr. Merkle used to seat the first and second graders up in the balcony because they weighed less and it wouldn't sag! That was when the parish had over 700 children in our school.

21) Tell me about the bells.

We are not sure what happened to the original bell of the first church. It was not brought over to the new church.

Currently we have two bells in our bell tower. The larger of the two bells was purchased in 1894 from Vanduzen Tift of Cincinnati for \$600. It weighs 3,335 lbs and is 55" wide at the bottom.

There is an inscription in German that reads "Hertz Jesus Gloke," which translates to Heart of Jesus Bell. It can be heard at all points in the city to call all people, young and old, to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The second bell was purchased for \$300 in 1903, weighs 1000 lbs and is 36" wide at the bottom. It has an inscription on it in both Latin and German in a gothic script that is no longer in use. In Latin it says: "Holy Mary pray for us." In German it says "St. Mary's bell, donated by widow Maria Paul, June 1903.

In 1945, Fr. Merkle installed an electric system to ring the bells. This was updated to an electronic system in 1976 and in 2017 we added an electronic controller so that the bells would be struck, rather than swung.

22) Early pictures of the church show a Communion rail. When was it taken out?

On July 21, 1978, the day before a son of the parish, Fr. William Cleves was to be ordained a priest at Sacred Heart Church, they were wondering how they would fit all of the priests of the diocese into the sanctuary for the ordination. One of our parishioners then pulled out a screw driver and began to unscrew the fasteners that held the communion rail in place. It was removed to make space for the celebration and never put back. I was told by Msgr Cleves, that no one seemed to object to its removal. This was a time, after Vatican II, when many churches were removing their communion rails.

23) I hear that during the Christmas season there is a Star of Bethlehem that hangs from the ceiling of the church and that there is a story that goes with it. Can you tell me about this?

This ornament has hung in our church every year for the last 99 years. The star was made and donated by Bernard Lutkenhoft in thanksgiving for his son Herman Lutkenhoff's safe return at the end of World War I. Herman's name is included on "The Roll of Honor" of Bellevue's men and women who served during WWI, located in the stairwell of the Bellevue City Building.

24) Were there other renovations?

Yes, in 1976, Fr. Joseph Boschert led the parish in changes that resulted from Vatican II. The sanctuary floor was extended to allow room for an altar where the priest could say Mass in English, facing the people.

The floor, which was in poor condition was completely redone. This required the temporary removal of the pews and for a time, Mass was said in the cafeteria of the school.

Outside lighting was installed to light up the church at night.

In the 90's the church was again repainted and the electrical system updated;

The outdoor shrine was added to celebrate the Centennial anniversary and a fountain and lighting for the outdoor shrine was added on the 125th anniversary of this beautiful church.

Sacred Heart Church / Divine Mercy Parish

318 Division St.
Bellevue, KY 41073
(859) 261-6172
dmsbcatholic.com