

Our parish was founded in 1886 and has a tremendously rich history. In 2011, we celebrated the 125th Anniversary of her founding. At the time of the Centennial Anniversary a book was published highlighting the history of our parish.

For those who have never seen it or who have forgotten many of the details of our founding and growth, an attempt was made to provide a short synopsis of the first one hundred years, presented below in increments of approximately 25 years, which may overlap in some cases.

PART I - The Beginning

Although officially founded on January 21, 1886, our roots go back much further than to St. Michael's in Pawcatuck—the first spiritual home to many of our church founders—to Ireland, Italy and Quebec. Although thought of as a predominantly Italian Parish today, the first founders, forced to leave their native country due to famine and persecution, were from Ireland. In 1870, 18% of the population was Irish. They worked in the granite quarries, as did many other immigrants upon their arrival here. By the time the Italians had arrived, the Irish had accumulated much wealth. Those who did not, resented the arrival of the new cheaper labor, and considerable animosity developed between the two groups, often handed down through successive generations.

While Irish immigrants dominated the mid 1800's, the Italians began arriving in Westerly shortly after the Civil War. During the 1890's, many northern Italians fled Italy due to political unrest. Many stonecutters emigrated to Barre, Vermont, and later Westerly. The first decade of the 1900's saw an influx from southern Italy, mainly Calabria, and in particular from the mountainous region of Aciri. Many of them found jobs in the quarries and settled in Westerly's north end and in Bradford. They came to America seeking prosperity. In Italy they worked the land for others, not owning land themselves. This agricultural experience stood them in good stead. Upon their arrival, they planted large gardens to sustain their families, allowing them to save their wages and to reach their goal of prosperity.

The arrival of the French Canadians from Quebec was the final ingredient making up our early parish. After the French lost to the English in the Battle of Quebec in 1759, all French in North America were stripped of economic means. They were forced into becoming small farmers, a role for which many were untrained. In the mid 1800's many immigrated to New England because of economic pressures.

After 1840 textile mills began to thrive and the French were welcomed with open arms, working 12 hour days, six days a week. During this migration, the people tended to settle in an area and stay together—in Westerly near the mills in White Rock, Potter Hill, Ashaway, and other textile areas, taking over the menial jobs once held by the Irish before them.

Although these three groups, the Irish, the Italians, and the French-Canadians differed in customs, language, and appearance, they all had a deep and abiding faith in the Roman Catholic Church.

During most of the 19th century Westerly's Roman Catholics attended Mass at St Michael's Church in Pawcatuck. St Michael's was founded in 1858 with its church finished in 1861. The parishioners were mainly Irish-born. There were so few Catholics in Rhode Island and Connecticut that there was one diocese located in Hartford, then transferred to Providence.

In 1872, however the Connecticut and Rhode Island districts divided. Bishop Thomas F. Hendricken became head of the Rhode Island district. On April 19, 1885, he announced that the Westerly side of the river would have its own parish. Rev. William Pyne, formerly of Fall River, Massachusetts, was to lead the parish. The services were held in Hibernian Hall on High Street, which later burned down. It is now occupied by the Barber Memorial Building. After three Sundays they were held in the Wells Block, the site of the former McCormick's Department Store.

Father Pyne's job was not an easy one. Many of the parishioners were not behind him. Westerly received no compensation from St. Michael's, even though many Westerly people had helped build and support the Church. Many of the registered parishioners of Immaculate Conception continued to attend and support St Michael's. Father Pyne led the parish alone. He lived in a house owned by Mr. Patrick Burke and his family on Granite Street. Only his perseverance and zeal allowed him to prevail, organizing a parish, building a church, and gaining appreciation and loyalty from his flock.

Father Pyne purchased the land for the Church on March 1, 1886, a year after he arrived, for a price of \$3,000. The foundation was begun almost at once, under the supervision of Patrick Holliday. The cornerstone was laid and blessed on September 26, 1886 with more than 2000 parishioners and friends in attendance. In a cavity in the stone was placed a copper box containing the currency of the day, notes concerning the church, and a parchment sheet containing an account of the building and the exercises and the names of the clergymen present. Three months later, the basement was ready for use and the first Mass was celebrated on Christmas Day, 1886. The services were held in the vestry, the only part completed. Masses were held there daily until the church was completed three years later.

The Church was dedicated at a service on Sunday October 19, 1890 in the midst of a driving rainstorm by the Most High Rt. Rev. Bishop Matthew Harkins. He addressed the people first in English then in French. Later that evening, a vesper service was held, during which confirmation was administered to about 40 people, and several young women were received into the sodalities of the Sacred Heart and Children of Mary.

In 1894, Father Pyne was transferred to St. Edward's Parish in Providence, a church with nearly twice the communicants as Immaculate had. The parishioners were sad to see him leave, for they had come to appreciate all that he had done in his 10 years as pastor, and to love and respect him.

The Rev. William J. Galvin became his successor. Although he left his former parish, St. Michael's in South Providence free from debt, he was not able to handle the financial matters in Westerly. He did manage to buy a lot on Clark Street for a burial ground, later becoming St. Sebastian's Cemetery. At this point, in 1906, the Marist Fathers entered the scene.

Part II - Arrival of the Marists

On June 13, 1906, Bishop Harkins went to Boston to offer the parish of the Immaculate Conception to the Provincial of the Marist American Province, the Very Reverend Jean-Marie Portal, S.M. He, in turn, sent a priest to appraise the parish. Returning with a favorable report, the Marist canonical establishment took place on July 12, 1906. Immaculate was the first Marist parish in the state and the eighth in the country.

The Marists were established in Lyons, France in 1823. In 1816, a group of seminarians from the Grand Seminary of Lyons pledged to Our Lady of Fourviere to found a religious society to honor Mary. Venerable Jean Claude Colin conceived the idea and formulated the elements of the Rule of the Order. In 1822 he received praise from the Holy See. When Pope Gregory XVI was looking for missionaries to expand into the South Pacific, he approved the priests of the Society of Mary as a Religious Institute with simple vows. Father Colin became the first Superior General on September 24, 1836, the day when the first Marist profession took place. They were well known for their missionary work in the South Pacific where one of their own, Saint Peter Chanel, was martyred. They were also known for their pastoral work, seminaries, and mission work at home.

Immaculate Conception parish was under the direct supervision of Rev. Fr. Peter McOscar, from Atlanta, Georgia. He had two assistants, Fr. Alfred St. Martin, fluent in both French and Italian, and Fr Ronault, both from Vermont.

Prior to their arrival, there had been two priests for a Catholic population that numbered about 3,000, including those from Watch Hill and Carolina. With the addition of priests fluent in Italian and French, the parishioners had the benefit of being able to hear instructions in their native language.

The arrival of the Marists brought stability to the parish. Father McOscar improved parish finances by directing many social events, which not only brought the parish closer together, but also raised funds to pay off the parish debt. He also had the foresight to purchase a lot on the corner of High and Dixon Streets in 1910, which would later house the Parish school more than a decade later.

Fr. McOscar's tenure was marked with one other significant event—the arrival of Rev. Henry Bruno, S.M. He arrived in 1907 and stayed 36 years!! He is described as a remarkable priest, multi-talented, personable, strict disciplinarian, devout, and zealous. Not only was he involved in the parishioners' spiritual lives, but also in their struggles, working alongside them to help them in their need. Most parishioners continued to bury their dead in St. Michael's Cemetery, but through his hard work, including clearing brush, digging of graves, and saving money to have the beautiful statue erected at the scene of Calvary, St. Sebastian Cemetery became a fitting resting place for the members of our parish.

The Marists, who came here, were busy from the start. For 40 years, they not only tended the flock at Immaculate Conception, but also seven missions—Ashaway, Bradford, Carolina, Hope Valley, Misquamicut, Quonochontaug and Watch Hill. This was a wide territory and had to be

covered without the benefit of an automobile. During the 1930's, St. Joseph's in Hope Valley was the first of the missions to separate and become a diocesan parish. In 1946 the remaining missions became parishes unto themselves.

Knights of Columbus

On April 15, 1885, a group of 25 men from the Westerly-Pawcatuck area formed the Narragansett Council #21 of the Knights of Columbus, the first council in the state of Rhode Island and the first outside the state of Connecticut. Originally the organization was formed in New Haven Connecticut to provide for families of men who were sick, or who had died without leaving behind any means to support them. The first Grand Knight of the Council was Michael Twomey.

In fact, the Westerly organization happened to come into existence by pure fate. The Knights of Columbus was to remain a state organization in Connecticut. A group of men from Pawcatuck applied for a charter, but the site for the meeting burned down, and the only place available was the Grand Army Hall across the river in Westerly. The Narragansett Council continued to meet in Westerly, usually in the building on Union Street, which now houses the Jewish synagogue.

During the first years the councils provided funds for sick members—five dollars per week. They also served as pallbearers for brother Knights, and they would sit with sick brothers at night. Unfortunately this came to an end in 1919 because money was lacking.

In the beginning, most members were of Irish heritage. In 1914, they reached out to the Italian community to join and slowly, during the next decade they did. The first Italo-American to become Grand Knight was Fiore Pignataro, serving from 1936-1938.

In the period before World War I, the Narragansett Council began social activities for its members. It formed a baseball team-1919, a track team-1920, a basketball team,-1922, a bowling team-1924, and a football team-1930. In addition card tournaments are held every year.

In the 1920's the Council became issue-oriented. In 1923, it demanded and received a public apology from the Westerly School Committee for allowing the Ku Klux Klan—which was anti-Catholic, as well as anti-Jewish and anti-black—to hold a debate at Westerly High School. In 1929, the council raised the awareness of the problem of birth control, a topic that continues to be controversial.

During the 1930's, the Knights began to extend their charitable works outside the organization. Eventually the insurance policy became solvent and members were provided for through council and organizational funds. The Knights began to assist other church members and the general public as well. Their charitable works continue today.

Part III - 1920's to 1940's

After World War I, Westerly started to grow and Immaculate Conception grew along with her. In 1922, the church purchased the Eddy property for \$8,500. This was located to the south of the church and became the site of the former rectory. The pastor Rev Thomas J. Larkin, S.M. took advantage of the parish's excellent financial condition and began to make plans to build a parochial school on the lot that Father McOscar had purchased 12 years earlier. By 1925, the church had \$60,000 to use to build the school and to remodel the Eddy property for the rectory.

Father J.F. Vincent, Fr. Larkin's successor as pastor, took advantage of the momentum begun by Fr. Larkin and rapidly expanded the church property in the next nine years. The school was completed for \$125,000 and was ready to open in the fall of 1926 staffed by the Sisters of Mercy who continued there until it closed 50 years later. He renovated the rectory, built the convent, and enlarged St. Clare's Chapel. In 1933, he purchased the Potter Property at the corner of High Street and Narragansett Avenue for \$13,000 to be used for a new church. Fr. Vincent never saw the project to its fruition, for the church was not built until 1968, 35 years after it was proposed.

THE NEW PAROCHIAL SCHOOL

The parochial school opened 12 years after the land was originally purchased. The principal address was given by Rev. Gerald Shaughnessy, S.M. He said "religious education one day a week was insufficient and said that many states have awakened to this fact and are making it possible for such instruction to be given by ministers and priests in the schools." The Westerly Sun reported, "He said that the parochial schools which dot the land are but a continuation of the Christian system of education which the founders of our country—Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, and others—believed necessary." These words would create quite a stir if uttered today in light of the separation of church and state debate.

When the school first opened, it accommodated grades one through three. More than 100 students were enrolled that first year. By 1929 the enrollment doubled and the school expanded yearly until eight grades were taught in 1931. Three sisters, Sister Superior Mary Casimir from Newport, and two assistants, Sister Mary Denise and Sister Mary Gemma from Providence, comprised the staff.

The nuns lived in a refurbished convent next door. It had been completely renovated. There was also a small chapel in the house. On April 1, 1933, Fr. Vincent was authorized to expend \$40,000 for a new Convent to house the Sisters of Mercy. The wooden building, which had housed the Sisters, was moved into the parochial school yard while the brick building with accommodations for 12 nuns was being built.

Father Vincent was at Immaculate for only nine years, but during his tenure he built a school, a convent, enlarged a chapel, renovated a rectory, laid the groundwork for a new church building, and reduced the parish debt from \$105,000 in 1927 to zero in 1932.

THE MOUNT CARMEL COMMITTEE: BEGINNING OF A TRADITION

The 1920's saw the beginnings of one of our church's most beloved traditions and celebrations, the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. This feast honors a miracle that occurred in a small Italian village in 1892. The village, Toreannugita, had been suffering a 19 month drought that had parched the earth and withered the crops. The villagers, mostly farmers, turned to Our Lady of Mount Carmel in prayer. Miraculously, on her feast day July 16, their prayers were answered, the rains came and the drought ended. Legend has it that it always rains on the feast day, for at least a little while in the village where the miracle occurred.

The first celebration was on July 16, 1928. Four men hoisted the statue of Our Lady on their backs and marched through the streets of the parish along with 300 parishioners. The processions began under the guidance of Father Bruno. The men on the first committee included Frank Regine, Natale Emmanuel, Pasquale Pellegrino, Nicolo Lupica, Nicholas Ferrigno, Antonio Trebisacci, Joseph Turco, Natale Turco, F. Samuel Nardone, Frank Toscano, John Salimeno, and Antonio Turco. The group started to plan in 1926. They wanted a celebration that was similar to those held in the "old country". They traveled to Providence to see similar celebrations.

In 1927, the parish bought the statue of the Blessed Mother that is still used in the procession today. In the old days the statue was carried by four men, each on one end of the two handles that held the platform on which the statue rested. There were three groups of four men who alternated carrying it for 30 minute intervals.

During the procession the parishioners would pin money on the statue. This helped the Church to remain solvent during the Depression and the war years. During World War II, mothers, who had sons serving, would make special prayers for their safe return, during the procession.

Today, once the procession is over there is a solemn adoration and benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament in the church. That is followed by a social gathering in the church hall where refreshments are served. The festivities conclude with a band concert and fireworks.

PARISH REMAINS FREE OF DEBT

The Rev. Jules Cassagne, S.M., serving as a priest at Immaculate since 1920, became the pastor for the remainder of the 1930's. His gift to Immaculate was spiritual growth. Under his pastorate, services were largely attended and many converts were welcomed into the Church. He was successful at keeping the debt clear from the rapid expansion of the church's physical plant.

NEW CHURCH PLANS ON HOLD

The Depression and war years must have put a crimp on the plans to build a new church. When Fr. Cassagne left in 1940, he was replaced by Rev. Daniel F. Sullivan. He was pastor for a very short time due to illness. His successor was Rev. James McKenna. He saw the church through the difficult war years and was pastor when the mission churches were assumed by the diocese.

During the 1940's, the school was becoming crowded. Plans were made and approved to enlarge it by eight classrooms, under the direction of Pastor, Rev. Ronald Haffner, S.M. These plans

were put on hold until 1954 when a new plan was conceived to build a new \$500,000 school. The new school would have accommodated 800 students with two rooms for each of the schools nine grades. However, the building fund stood at \$111,000, so these plans were also put on hold. Apparently the long talked about new church was a higher priority.

Although Immaculate, as a parish, grew smaller in 1946 when the missions became parishes on their own, the number of Catholics in Westerly began to grow, especially in the southern end of town. By the mid 1950's the Church lost a good part of its parishioners when St Pius X, staffed by diocesan priests, opened its doors on Elm Street.

Part IV - The Story Continues...

DAUGHTERS OF ISABELLA

Originally the Daughters of Isabella was started as an auxiliary to the Knights of Columbus, deriving its name from Queen Isabella of Spain, who was known for her charities and her sponsorship of Christopher Columbus. After many years of working together for charities and the projects of the Knights, the women formed their own organization. In 1949, the women of the parish formed the Immaculate Conception Circle of Daughters of Isabella #816 to put their talents and energies to work. Aside from the social aspects, the group was very active in raising funds for various local charities, raising funds for hospital equipment, spending time visiting the sick and serving meals to senior citizens. The group was active for over 35 years and its contributions were greatly appreciated.

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION CYO ORGANIZES

During the period of the 1950's, Catholic youth were discouraged from participating in YMCA functions because of the organization's Protestant origins and requirements. In 1956, with the arrival of Fr. James Kiley, the parish began to fill a void for the youth of the parish. Fr. Kiley, a Westerly native, organized the Catholic Youth Organization with its first activity, basketball.

Within a few months, he organized three distinct youth groups—a junior CYO for grades 4, 5, 6, a junior high CYO for grades 7 and 8, and the Parish CYO Youth Council for those students in grades 9-12. Each held activities appropriate for their age groups. The activities were based on the CYO's four point program—of physical, spiritual, cultural, and social health. For the first years, the group met in the parochial school, but it wasn't long before Fr. Kiley's dream of a CYO center was realized. Grace Methodist Church, near the corner of Grove and High Streets, had moved into a new building on the corner of Park Avenue and Spruce Street. So Immaculate turned the old Methodist Church into a CYO Center. The building was used for several years, but it was in such poor repair that it was eventually demolished when the new church was constructed and is now Immaculate's High Street parking lot.

A NEW HOME

From the beginning the people of Immaculate Conception were always proud of their parish buildings. The old wooden structure had beautiful acoustics, hand carved altar rails, wonderful

stained glass windows and statues. Many parishioners had a difficult time accepting the need for a new church. The church was 80 years old, and had a seating capacity of only 500. In addition, many upgrades were needed to bring the building into compliance with modern fire and construction standards.

The Rev. Sylva LeCours, pastor, announced in June 1962 that plans were being made and that permission had already been given by Bishop McVinney to construct a new church. It took longer than expected, but the ground was finally broken on December 8, 1966 for a unique church-in-the-round. The \$650,000 building was designed by Robert A. Green of Westerly. The building seated 750, is 128 feet in diameter, and 48 feet high to the top of the cross.

Mantle of Blue describes the interior of the church well “Every pew, has an unobstructed view of the sanctuary, and the benefit of architectural innovations to provide good acoustics. Simplicity prevails in every detail of the church with neither side altars, baptistery, statues, nor ornate decorations, distracting from the altar and the Crucifix above it. A 35 foot raised clerestory with 12 skylights above the circular sanctuary floods the Italian Travertine altar and the Crucifix with sunlight, while the parishioners sit in the muted light. ...The 13 stained glass windows in the nave and narthex were designed by Mary Ambrose Green and executed by the studios of George L Pasyne in Chartres, France. The windows depict various liturgical symbols in semi-abstract design.”

Parish leaders considered turning the former church into a CYO Center, but practical considerations made it unfeasible. The church, the rectory, a one family structure, and a three story house were sold to Westerly Automatic Oil Heating for \$80,000. The old church eventually became the Westerly Center for the Arts continuing to make use of the building’s fine acoustics for its many concerts and other activities.

Fr. LeCours, who had been at the parish since 1950 and pastor since 1961, supervised the construction from beginning to end. He is remembered for his gracious manner and sympathetic understanding, as well as his outstanding ability in the administration of the parish.

The new church placed an enormous financial burden on the parish. Fund raising began even before the groundbreaking. A committee, chaired by Leo F. Manfred Sr., and about 250 workers went house to house around the parish asking that each family to pledge a day’s pay a month to the building fund for the next 30 months.

For once, the groundbreaking took place on a sunny spring like day—even though it was in December. The atmosphere was festive with members of the clergy from various faiths, proud parishioners, and school children in attendance. The Church was dedicated two years later on December 8, 1968 at a mass celebrated by Bishop McVinney. Giving the first sermon was Rev. Francis Giudice, a Westerly native, who said his first mass after ordination in the old church.

THE 1970’S BRING MORE CHANGE

As the seventies drew near, religious vocations declined. It became more and more difficult to

find nuns to teach at the parochial school. More lay teachers were hired increasing the cost of education. In January 1969, Fr. LeCours announced that 7th and 8th grades would be discontinued. The 9th grade had been discontinued two years earlier. Enrollment continued to decline, along with vocations. Changing demographics and economics caught up with the school and in June 1973 the parish was forced to close its doors for good.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CCD PROGRAM

The development of a CCD program became that much more important with the school's closing. It took another four years for the program to flourish. It had a history of difficulties. It was started in the 1950's by Rev. Frances Marino and his committee. The purpose of the program was to help those students who didn't attend parochial school to prepare for first communion in the second grade and confirmation in the sixth grade. Nuns taught the public school students who were given released time to attend.

As the number of nuns declined, Fr Euloge LaPlante began recruiting volunteer lay teachers in the 1960's. Among these was Sylvia Gulla who in 1971 took over administration of the program. Once the shock of the school closing passed and the CCD program began to grow, as many as 50 teachers were recruited for not only grades 1-6, but also for older students because confirmation was delayed until tenth grade.

A PARISH COUNCIL IS ORGANIZED

Shortly after the church was built, Fr. LeCours formed an advisory committee which began planning the first parish bazaar. The bazaar became a tradition for the next 15 years or so, and the committee became the base for a formalized parish council. Fr. Norman Guilmette further developed it, including representatives of virtually every parish organization, but it became too unwieldy. A commission style council was then tried. In 1985, at the direction of the Diocese, a Parish Pastoral Council and a Parish Finance Council were established. Both serve in an advisory capacity to the Pastor.

THE CHURCH OPENS ITS DOORS

The multitude of changes brought on by Vatican II in the 1960's has been felt at Immaculate. Many groups were formed to meet the spiritual needs of the parish family. The parish continues to grow and meet the challenges and spiritual needs of its members.

PART V - IMMACULATE CONCEPTION TODAY

To be continued...