

## **History of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish**

Nestled in the northwest part of Illinois, just a few miles from the Wisconsin border, Freeport was a small farming town in the early 1920's. As the population grew and Freeport spread west, the Catholic population grew as well, necessitating a need for a fourth parish.

Bishop Peter Muldoon of the Rockford Diocese originated St. Thomas Aquinas Parish on Sunday, December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1921. At that time, all Catholics living west of West Avenue became members of the new parish, leaving the mother parish of St. Mary. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a Dominican priest, theologian and philosopher. Known as the Doctor Angelicus (the Angelic Doctor) he is considered one of the greatest and most influential Christian philosophers and theologians to have ever lived. The Church has declared him a Doctor of the Church and the Patron of Catholic Schools. How fitting that the new addition to the Catholic congregation of Freeport be named after this unique man. We celebrate his feast day on January 28<sup>th</sup>.

On December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1921, The Journal-Standard reported "Marking a new epoch in the history of Catholicity in Freeport, the first service in the new St. Thomas Aquinas Church, Harlem Avenue, was held Sunday morning at 8 o'clock with the newly appointed pastor, Rev. William G. McMillan, celebrating high Mass in the presence of a congregation that comfortably filled the handsome new edifice. With the soft glow of candlelight above the little altar of brown and gold, the ceremony was an impressive one as the priest, robed in the purple vestments of Advent, sang the Mass and administered Holy Communion to scores who knelt at the altar rail. Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament followed the Mass."

The congregation of St. Joseph Parish, also in Freeport said good-bye to Rev. W. G. McMillan as he left December 8<sup>th</sup> to assume duties of pastor of the new St. Thomas Aquinas Parish. Fr. McMillan was presented with a \$500.00 check following a musical program in the St. Pius hall, filled to capacity by members of the parish, friends and clergy. Beloved by many, Fr. McMillan proved to be a capable and tireless worker as is evidenced by the two new parishes he brought into existence in three years' time. The one redeeming factor to his many friends was the fact that he would remain in Freeport. During this period, bazaars were held to help finance the growth of the new parish.

The first Baptism performed at the new parish was that of a baby girl, Mary Catherine Grant on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1921. Mary Catherine is the daughter of William Grant and Ethel Andre.

The first Midnight Mass was celebrated on December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1921 by the new pastor, Rev. W. G. McMillan. Special music was sung by the choir, Mrs. Leo Thro sang at the Offertory and the juvenile choir sang at the 8 o'clock Mass. Prior to the beginning of Mass, three beautiful altars in colors of pearl and gold were blessed by the pastor and used for the first time during the Christmas celebration.

After much research, little is known of the first marriage performed at the new St. Thomas Aquinas Church on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1922. We know the couple involved were Clifford Simonds, age 21 and Agnes Dunn, age 19. Unknown is why two young people, the groom from Galena, Illinois and the bride from Benton, Wisconsin chose to marry in Freeport when both of the aforementioned areas had Catholic churches capable of performing the rite. We can only romanticize that possibly he was leaving for military service and time was of the essence. World War I had ended in 1918, claiming over 116,000 lives but American forces were still involved in Haiti, Cuba, among others.

Sadly, the first funeral performed at St. Thomas on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1922 was that of a young man of 21, who had suffered for six months from complications of diseases. Vincent Bauch, the son of Mr. and Mrs. F. E. Bauch, 1173 W. Pleasant Street was born in Freeport on April 30, 1899. He was educated in the parochial schools and the high school. He passed away at his father's home on February 3, 1922. Besides his parents, he was survived by a sister, Margaret May Bauch and two brothers, Clement and Ferdinand Bauch. He was laid to rest at St. Mary cemetery.

On a happier note, the first class to receive their First Communion in the new edifice on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1922 numbered eight boys and girls. The Celebrant, Rev. Fr. McMillan wore for the first time a beautiful pearl and gold vestment which was a gift recently imported from France.

The official dedication of St. Thomas Aquinas Church took place on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1922, a very impressive ceremony unto itself, officiated by Most Rev. Bishop P. J. Muldoon of Rockford. Immediately following the Mass and a very moving sermon, the Sacrament of Confirmation was bestowed on a class of fifty-two children and adults.

In September of 1929, the second pastor appointed to St. Thomas, Fr. Daniel O'Connell added a second floor to the church building providing four classrooms, the beginning of the elementary school. Two of the rooms were opened September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1931 by the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa. Seventy-two children were registered for entrance which represented 100% of the Catholic children of school age within the parish. For almost twenty years, the Sisters teaching at St. Thomas lived in the convent at Aquin

High School. In 1932, Fr. O'Connell sold the rectory and moved into the rectory at 11 North Harlem, immediately adjacent to the parish property.

On June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1936, diplomas were presented by Fr. O'Connell to the following students...Verne Francis Baker, Robert Raymond Balles, George Paul Fusco, Betty Mae Jacobs, Anna Mary Kornfeind, Fred Paul Lerch, Margaret Elizabeth Luecke, Robert John McCool, Carl Lynn Meyer, Robert Joseph Moore, George Francis Moran, Loyal Bernard Portner and Joseph Francis Pospischil.

Fr. Alex Mclsaac became pastor in August, 1936, during a period of expansion for the parish. In May, 1950, a home at 1146 West Stephenson Street (formerly the home of J. Fred Smith) was purchased and made ready by September for use as a convent. In 1954, there were one hundred and eighty-one pupils in the school. The population of the parish increased in these years to three hundred families.

Ed Bald recalled Fr. Mclsaac had some connection with the Cubs, either through a player or the organization itself. Once every summer, Fr. Mclsaac would take all the altar boys from St. Thomas on an outing to a Cubs game. Ed Bald, being an altar boy at this time, got to enjoy the day's festivities. Ill health forced Fr. Mclsaac to take a leave of absence in 1954. In 1957, he resigned his pastorate. On February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1958, he died in Chicago and was buried from St. Thomas on February 15<sup>th</sup>.

Fr. Arthur O'Neill had been appointed administrator of the parish in October of 1954. With the resignation of Fr. Mclsaac, he was appointed pastor on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1957. The school enrollment had grown to two hundred and twenty-five by the school year 1956-1957. A temporary classroom was erected in the parish auditorium to make the fifth classroom in use.

At that time, Margaret Kornfeind was the sole religious vocation from this parish. She took the name Sister Mary Richard, O.S.F.

Confirmation was an intricate part of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration of the parish on Sunday, October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1946. A solemn high Mass was sung at 11 o'clock with Monsignor W. G. McMillan of Rockford, the first pastor, as celebrant. At a 4 o'clock ceremony the same day, forty-three children and nine adults were confirmed by the Most Rev. John J. Boylan, Bishop of the Rockford diocese.

Construction began the week of October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1962 on the addition to the parish grade school at North Harlem Avenue and West Douglas Street. It adjoined the church-school building then in use which was erected in 1921. The building, estimated to cost \$325,000, included a gymnasium and all-purpose room, a principal's office, library, work

room, heating plant, a nurse's office, in addition to four new classrooms. Dedication of the new building took place Thursday afternoon, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1964.

A house located at 11 North Harlem Avenue, which once served as the Rectory for St. Thomas Church, was occupied by Jose Bardelas, a Cuban refugee who lived there for eight years with his family. When the property was sold, the two-story house was in the path of the new Freeport Clinic development and the site ultimately became a parking lot. On September 22, 1971, Bardelas then contracted to have his big house moved, as a whole, from his Harlem Avenue address to the new address on Whistler Avenue. In all, the house moved about a block. The huge house was taken across the St. Thomas Church parking lot and passed through the back yards of two houses. Movers had a special problem to deal with to move the house. The structure had to be turned 180° so that its front would face Whistler. The critical rotation was accomplished on the playground's blacktop surface. Supported mainly by two I-beams, it was mounted on three large eight wheel dollies. To get it off the foundation, it was slowly rolled on wooden runways built under each set of wheels. Working with winches and cables, movers crawlingly inched the house toward the St. Thomas Church parking lot and on to the Whistler site. The foundation was dug after its arrival. The house still stands today at 24 North Whistler Avenue, a symbol of years past and an exciting relocation.

Our parish observed its Golden Jubilee on the weekend of November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1971 with a Penance service, share-a-dish dinner, dance, a concelebrated Mass and banquet. On Friday, all church members were invited to attend a family Penance service at 6 PM at the church. This was followed by a share-a-dish dinner in the school gymnasium. The Dan Heine Orchestra provided the music for dancing at a Golden Jubilee Dance Saturday in the gym from 9 PM to 1 AM. At 4 PM on Sunday, Bishop O'Neill concelebrated a Mass with priests who had served at St. Thomas. Special music was presented by the church choir. A social hour at 5 PM at Germania was followed by a banquet at 6:30 PM.

The Rt. Rev. Msgr. Raymond Wahl, the Rev. Thomas Zielak and the Most Rev. Arthur J. O'Neill, Bishop of Rockford, broke the ground for the all new facilities of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church on Kiwanis Drive on Sunday afternoon, the 21<sup>st</sup> of October in 1973. The ten acre site is adjacent to the east side of Highland Community College on the Pearl City road. The building cost \$602,000 and was built by Cheeseman Construction.

"It will be prayerful, yet modern and lively", said Rt. Rev. Msgr. Raymond J. Wahl (pastor of St. Thomas from October 1<sup>st</sup> of 1973 to February 1<sup>st</sup> of 1978) about the new St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church under construction. "Things are going smoothly," he added.

“It will probably be finished in late fall or at least by Christmas.” Msgr. Wahl said on April 26<sup>th</sup> of 1974. “The college has been very kind and cooperative. There used to be a fence between our property and the college’s property but I asked if it could be taken down as a visual sign of the unity between us and it was.”

The laying of the cornerstone took place on June 30<sup>th</sup> of 1974 followed by an outdoor picnic. However, the actual dedication of the new church took place December 15<sup>th</sup> of 1974. The sanctuary of the new edifice seated 550 persons and included a marble altar and a 20-foot colored tapestry of Christ. The tapestry was formed by a series of lengths of various colored material, held down by weights. The color of Christ’s garments were to be changed for the seasons by moving the material.

The new church building also included a parish center with an apartment for the pastor, a large room for wedding receptions or committee meetings and a room with a sunken conversation pit. Plans called for a canopied drive and an outdoor courtyard.

One of the unique features of the church is the Basilican bell instrument by the Schulmerich Carillons, Inc. It was donated by a St. Thomas parishioner who wishes to remain anonymous. The instrument consists of miniature bell units of bronze bell metal which are struck by metal hammers. It can play any chimes or songs, produces tones equivalent to 16,900 pounds of cast bells. The new bells provide the ringing of the Angelus and Mass calls automatically, under clock control.

Don Brunette was ordained Deacon in 1980. On July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1992, Fr. P. William McDonnell was named as the tenth pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish.

Two subsequent additions occurred, with the intention of moving the parish into the next century. On October 24<sup>th</sup> of 1994, construction began on a 3,600 square foot educational wing with a maximum of seven classrooms using dividers. Without the dividers, there will be five rooms. They are used for two pre-school classes and religious education classes for the church.

On the other end of the church, a new social hall was added. The 7,125 square-foot addition can accommodate 250 people. Also included is a new kitchen and storage area. The social hall was located at the former main entrance, necessitating creating a new entrance with a canopy.

Also included in the renovations were the sanctuary, nave and narthex of the church. The narthex was enlarged to make room for gatherings before and after Mass and for various programs. In the same area, new restrooms and a classroom/brides’ room was added.

Seating in the nave was increased from 550 to 750 by opening portions of the rear wall. The dark brick was painted to match the muted walls and a sound system was installed, as well as new carpeting. The altar was downsized and a new ambo, or pulpit, was made from the remaining materials from the downsized altar.

In the sanctuary, a risen Christ was erected and the tapestry removed. David Seagraves of Elizabeth created the wooden sculpture. The cross is in the background but Christ is depicted as the risen Christ, combining the central event of Christianity, Jesus' death and resurrection. Seagraves also constructed life-size models of the Holy Family installed in the church.

Fourteen stations of the cross are now mounted along the front wall of the church. They were part of the original St. Thomas Church on Harlem Avenue but had been in storage for twenty years until being restored by parishioners Duane Smith, Tim McGinnis, Cathy Hiveley and Dick Hauser. These stations, depicting the last hours of Christ, were erected in place of the existing ones.

The additions and renovations were dedicated on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1995. In the spring of 1996, Fr. McDonnell was elected by the priests and appointed by Bishop Thomas Doran to become Dean of the Freeport Deanery. Deacon Dick Dinneen and his wife, Marie moved to Freeport and Dick was assigned to serve St. Thomas in 1998. In 1999, Vincent Drees was ordained Deacon and began his service at St. Thomas. We as parishioners are fortunate to have three Deacons of such high caliber still serving our parish.

It was a dream, only a dream, the same dream all of us have at one time or another....to win the lottery. For Dick Edler, a special parishioner at St. Thomas, that dream actually did come true. But unlike a lot of people with thoughts of exotic trips and elaborate purchases, Dick, motivated by the loving memory of his wife Jeanne, decided to pursue a second dream; namely, to share some of his lottery winnings and have a Eucharistic chapel built at our parish.

Groundbreaking for the chapel took place on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2000. On November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2000, Fr. Mc Donnell was invested as papal chamberlain with the title of Reverend Monsignor.

The chapel was dedicated by Bishop Thomas G. Doran on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2002 during a Mass celebrated by Msgr. P. William McDonnell, our pastor.

Dick's enthusiasm and his generosity were the major sparks that led to the building of our new daily Mass and adoration chapel located on the southwest corner of our church. Designed by architect Gene Elliott of Larson and Darby Group and constructed by Giles Construction, the chapel, which seats 95 people, is quaint and simple, yet

exudes solemnity and reverence to those who enter it. The comfortable chairs, the warm wood tones of the furnishings, and the richness of the ornate gold tabernacle make for a beautiful and serene place to spend time at Holy Mass and before the Blessed Sacrament in adoration. A simple, plain crucifix hangs behind the altar.

Six stained glass windows crafted by Botti Studio of Evanston adorn the chapel. In the lobby are two windows depicting St. Richard and St. Joan of Arc (Jeanne d'Arc) honoring Dick Edler and his wife, Jeanne. The four remaining windows are on the west wall of the chapel. They portray the Blessed Mother with the infant Jesus, a large host and chalice, wheat and grapes and Mary caressing her deceased Son taken down from the cross. The windows give a colorful and moving visual display of the life of Jesus from birth to crucifixion, as well as how the Eucharist unites all of us as Catholics.

Sadly, Dick Edler departed from this life on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001. His memory will long be cherished by the St. Thomas Aquinas community. Msgr. McDonnell stated "this gift in Jeanne's memory is such a beautiful example of Dick's undying love for his wife." This gift is also a reflection of a man who was devout in his Catholic faith and chose building a chapel for his parish over exotic vacations and extravagances.

Members of the parish can be very proud of the landscaping around the parish building and the beautiful berms. We have our Building & Grounds Committee and a large group of volunteers whom we can thank for its beauty. St. Thomas parish is fortunate to have an impressive percentage of parishioners who volunteer when there's a job to do. When a call goes out, someone steps up to share his or her time and talents to further God's work.

The fledgling parish of the 1920's is now the largest parish in Freeport. The generosity of the parishioners funded the continued growth and modernization of the parish. The faith of many grew along with the education of our youngsters and the facilities needed to educate them and strengthened the bond of the parishioners through recreation and celebration, as well as prayer and devotion. As St. Thomas Aquinas parish enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we stand ready to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

By: Ellen E. Turner  
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