



Georgia Bulletin, October 17, 1991

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New Church Adds Another Attraction To Toccoa Area

By Paula Day

Tracks of the Norfolk-Southern Railway parallel Georgia Highway 17 as it makes its way from the interstate toward the city of Toccoa. To the north and west the gray-blue Great Smoky Mountains frame the horizon.

A Jeep with two kayaks mounted on its top takes the center lane as the right-of-way widens into the three lanes typical of mountain highways. A sign invites the traveler to stop for pork barbecue stew. A yard of junked boats hints at one of the area's recreational resources.

More than 200 years ago the Cherokee Indians named this area in the northeast corner of Georgia, "Toccoah." The name means "beautiful" and the site was then the capital of the Cherokee nation.

Today the city of Toccoa is the Stephens County seat and home to 9,000 residents. Since the early 1800s the region has been a transportation hub. More recently it has attracted tourists and vacationers. Lakes Burton, Rabun, Yonah and larger Hartwell are within easy driving distance and the 186-foot Toccoa Falls is on the city's outskirts.

The Tugaloo valley in which the city nestles was once a stagecoach crossroads. In the early 1800s a federal "highway" linked New England and St. Augustine, Florida, and the Unicoi Turnpike began its stretch toward Chattanooga. The Tugaloo River was dredged allowing steamboat passage to Savannah and the Atlantic. Later Southern Railway laid tracks which now slice through the center of the city. A new leg of Georgia Highway 365 has recently opened, extending access to Toccoa from Atlanta by way of I-85 and I-985. Today industry and the area's spaces of beauty and peace draw working adults and retirees alike.

Perched midway up an incline on Rothell Road in southeast Toccoa is St. Mary's, North Georgia's newest Catholic church. On October 6 Archbishop James P. Lyke, PFM, dedicated the new building which replaces an all-purpose structure that had doubled as a sanctuary and parish hall for 37 years.

The church, which will seat up to 275 people, was completed in mid-July at the cost of \$320,000. The parish had been hoping to replace the older structure for some time in order to have more worship space. The former sanctuary will now serve as the parish hall. The parish hall, in turn, will be renovated for much needed classroom space. David Roberts and Mike Collins of the Atlanta firm of Roberts, Collins Architecture designed the new church.

Four white columns bring a Southern flavor to the brick and wood exterior of the new

church. Clear glass windows allow Georgia sunlight to stream in upon the blue-carpeted foyer. Inside and to the right is the day chapel, an intimate space with its gold tabernacle standing firmly on a stone pedestal.

In the main part of the church a crucifix, and above it, a stained glass depiction of the Madonna and Child are the only pieces of art behind the altar, making it the undeniable focus of attention.

St. Mary's pastor, Father William Calhoun, Father John Kelly, pastor of nearby Sacred Heart Church in Hartwell, and Father Edward Branch, chaplain of Atlanta University's Catholic Center concelebrated the 11 a.m. dedication liturgy with Archbishop Lyke. The ceremony included rituals setting aside the space for sacred purposes: a blessing and sprinkling with holy water, anointing of the altar and the church walls, and the incensing and lighting of the altar and church.

"In the ancient rites we perform today," Archbishop Lyke said in his homily, "we look into our past in order to bring alive our ties to all ages of the Church. We hear the word of God in Sacred Scripture, and discover in the timeless actions of our spiritual ancestors, the continuity of God's family on earth."

After the dedication, the family of St. Mary's gathered in the parish hall for a "spread" of Southern hospitality.

St. Mary's now boasts a faith community of 130-households. But its beginnings were not unlike the proverbial mustard seed. In the early 1940's a few devout Catholic families met at the home of Joe Malik to celebrate Mass. Father Michael Manning came from St. Michael's parish in Gainesville, bringing vestments, linens, altar breads and wine in two suitcases. His congregation may have been five people. It was rarely more than 12. The priest would have already celebrated Mass in Gainesville, and he would travel from Toccoa to Clayton to offer Mass there.

It was not particularly easy for the early Catholics who came from out-of-state and were a minority in a bastion of Southern Baptists and Methodists. To be a Catholic was to be "different." It was bad enough being a "Yankee."

One longtime parishioner who moved to Toccoa from the West remembers insisting she was not a Yankee. "They were still fighting the 'big old (Civil) war,'" she recalls, "and the West was still a territory." Those attitudes have gradually changed with the passage of time and the influx of people from other parts of the country, the woman added.

It would be 1954 before those early Catholics had their own building for worship. In the meantime, they gathered for Mass in the American Legion hall and the old Albemarle Hotel which has since been torn down. With the construction of a church in 1954 the parish found a home, not only for worship but for a developing social life which included covered-dish dinners and regular meetings of the Altar Society. The mission was staffed by the Sons of the Sacred Heart, a congregation of priests familiarly known as the Verona Fathers whose headquarters were in Cincinnati.

The new church was named Mary, Mother of Our Divine Savior Catholic Church in recognition of a special diocesan-wide Mother's Day collection to fund its construction. Parishioners shortened the name to St. Mary's in the 1970s.

By the late 1950s the parish had grown to between 25 and 30 families, Dorothy Kelly recalls. She and her husband, Ed, came to Toccoa in 1955.

As in any mission area, the ministry of the Verona priests extended beyond the town's boundaries. Ed Kelly remembers getting a call from Father Geno Doniney after 9 p.m.

one evening asking him to go with him to Lake Rabun, some 60 miles away, to anoint a man who had just died. The couple had a cabin on the lake, a popular summer home area for Atlantans before the construction of Lakes Lanier and Alatoons. Kelly says the two men got back to Toccoa between 2 and 3 a.m.

Mary, Mother of Our Divine Savior came under diocesan jurisdiction in 1964 with the appointment of Father Joseph Drohan, the first diocesan priest to be its pastor. Father Drohan says his was a "hyphenated parish," the Toccoa-Hartwell parish.

In a 1966 letter to Chris Eckl, then managing editor of *The Georgia Bulletin*, Father Drohan wrote, "The two parishes are at the north and south ends of Lake Hartwell, boarder, Toccoa at the north, Hartwell at the south. The new interstate highway, I-85, splits the parish (territory) in the very center. In the parishes are the counties of Stephens, Franklin and Hart."

Eventually Sacred Heart in Hartwell became a separate parish. In 1987 St. Mary's in Commerce with its congregation of approximately 20 families was made a mission of the larger St. Mary's in Toccoa.

In the same letter Father Drohan described the outdoor shrine to the Blessed Mother just completed in the Toccoa parish.

"It is called Our Lady of the Pines," he wrote, "and I'll test your intelligence as to the reason for the name. The statue was carved in Italy at the request of the previous pastor, Rev. Gino Doniney of the Sacred Heart fathers. It is of Carrara marble, resting on a granite block... The concrete-block grillwork was done by parishioners. Various religious groups in the archdiocese have visited the shrine, which is the largest in Georgia dedicated to Our Lady... We have six acres of pines surrounding (the shrine). The pines were planted by Monsignor Michael Manning."

According to Ed Kelly, the shrine has been the site for many parish celebrations, ranging from May devotions honoring the Blessed Mother to the Easter Vigil lighting of the new fire and outdoor Masses.

Father Raymond Horan followed Father Drohan as pastor in 1971. Other pastors have included Father Patrick McCormick and Father John Druding.

Father Druding says St. Mary's parishioners are a "people who seem to value their faith deeply. Their faith is a lifestyle. The priest, who was pastor just before Father Calhoun came to the parish in 1987, estimated that 75 percent take part in parish programs and activities. Calling Toccoa a "typical small Southern town," Father Druding said there is "a lot of work to do" to break down common stereotypes of the Catholic Church and Catholics, but "Catholics in the community are aware of this need and work at it in their relationships."

Parish growth has been slow but steady, Father Calhoun says. The Gerding family, Randy and Jean, and their daughters, Christina, Kimberly and Stephanie, moved to Toccoa from Michigan four years ago. On the other hand, 84-year-old Mary Hornick has lived in the area 30 years. Her two sons, Howard and Johnny, and a daughter, Marie McConnell, are parishioners, as are 12 grandchildren and a dozen great-grandchildren.

Over the years Toccoa's location and labor pool have drawn a variety of industries to the area including furniture, textile, plastic, casket and garment manufacturing. Ed Kelly characterizes the present situation as being one of expansion of existing industries rather than the introduction of new ones.

For some time the beauty of the region has drawn people to the area. The Georgia Baptist

Assembly has a conference center and resort retreat facility north of the city. The state's Episcopal diocese operates Camp Mikell conference center, used for retreats and a summer youth program. The Georgia Camp Fire council conducts a summer camp in the mountain setting.

In 1966 a 185-year old inn, Travelers Rest, was recognized as a National Historical Landmark. Once it was the manor house for a 14,000-acre plantation as well as an overnight accommodation for stagecoach travelers. The 10-room building retains 80 percent of its original wood. The state purchased the building in 1955, did some cosmetic renovations, and Travelers Rest is now one of several tourists attractions in the Toccoa area. Others include Toccoa Falls, Tugaloo State Park and Tallulah Gorge and Falls.

The newly dedicated church of St. Mary's with its expanded seating can now comfortably accommodate its own faith community and visitors who come to enjoy Toccoa, the beautiful.

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Memories of The Catholic Community in Toccoa, Georgia

My husband and I moved to Toccoa in 1948. There were very few Catholics here at that time. Toccoa was a mission. Each Sunday Father Michael Manning, after having said an early Mass in Gainesville, would drive 50 miles to Toccoa to say Mass at the Albemarle Hotel*, in a tiny room just off the hotel lobby. Following the Toccoa Mass, Father Manning would drive an additional 20 miles to Lakemont on Lake Rabun to say another Mass there. I had great respect for Father Manning (later, much deserved, Monsignor Manning). He spent many long hours traveling the country roads of North Georgia to serve the Catholics of the area.

As our congregation grew, it became necessary to find larger quarters, so we rented the American Legion hall for Mass. The American Legion still meets in the same building near the Toccoa Clinic.

During that period an annual Mother's Day collection was taken up throughout the diocese with the understanding that the funds collected would be used to build a church somewhere in North Georgia. The Toccoa congregation was overjoyed to hear that we had been chosen as the recipients of this wonderful new church. Father Manning continued as our pastor during this period.

Since Toccoa did not have a permanent pastor in the early 1950's, we took our first two children to Gainesville in 1950 and 1952 for Baptism by Father Manning. Our third child, born in 1956, was the first baby baptized in the new church.

The Verona Fathers were the first permanent pastors of the new church, also taking care of missions in Hartwell and Clayton. These dedicated priests were greatly admired and appreciated by the Toccoa Catholic community. In my view, all of the priests who followed deserve a sincere vote of thanks for their devotion to service in the Toccoa area.

* The Albemarle Hotel still stands, but is now known as the Alexander Apartments

Jeanne Cash

(parishioner since 1948)

This is the history written for dedication of new church,
October 6, 1991.

The history of St. Mary's Catholic Church is a story about the growth and strengthening of the Catholic Church in north Georgia. It is one of many stories about God's kingdom.

Catholic residents of Toccoa and nearby areas organized into a parish and occupied their own building in 1954, 37 years ago, but the origins of the parish predate that milestone by at least a decade and a half. The story begins about 50 years ago with the coming of industries and a few Catholic families into Toccoa, which was then a small rural community.

In the early 1940's in Toccoa and throughout the rural South, being a Roman Catholic was something of a social stigma. We attribute our origins as a parish to those few devout Catholic families in Toccoa who either traveled out of town or met during those times at the home of Joe Malik to celebrate the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist every Sunday. They kept the faith. Father Michael Manning, who later became a Monsignor, traveled from St. Michael's parish in Gainesville to the Malik home, bringing his vestments and the altar linens in two suitcases. He would have already celebrated Mass in Gainesville. He would leave Toccoa to celebrate Mass in Clayton.

Five to 12 people attended Mass at the Malik home. The small group attended Mass in Toccoa at two other locations before 1954: the American Legion building on Doyle Street across from Toccoa Clinic and the Albemarle Hotel, which is now Alexander Apartments, on the courthouse square.

The Catholic community in Toccoa became a mission in 1954. For at least 14 years, Catholics in Toccoa had not had a church facility. They became beneficiaries of a special Mother's Day collection in the diocese. Those funds were earmarked for building a church in north Georgia. That church became Mary, Mother of Our Divine Savior Catholic Church in Toccoa. (Sometime in the mid to late 1970's parishioners agreed to shorten the name to St. Mary's.) Catholics in Toccoa-Stephens County and the surrounding area celebrated the sacraments in that small red brick building on Rothell Road for 37 years, until this year.

It was an all-purpose building for a small parish. The church and living quarters for the priest were under one roof. The church doubled as a hall. It was furnished with chairs instead of pews. A curtain was drawn in front of the altar when the space was used for parish meals and socials. It was a close-knit church family. The mission was staffed until 1964 by priests of the order of Sons of the Sacred Heart, usually referred to as the Verona Fathers. The first of the Verona Fathers was Father Victor Turchetti.

The church family grew, not dramatically but steadily. The rectory was built in the mid to late 1950's. The church hall was built in the early 1970s. Each family who could afford to, donated a case of tile for the floor of the hall, which was built by parishioners.

Mary, Mother of Our Divine Savior Catholic Church became a full-fledged diocesan parish in 1964. Father Joseph Drohan was the first priest assigned to Toccoa by the diocese. For some years, the priest assigned to Toccoa also staffed the mission in Hartwell, Sacred Heart of Jesus Church. In 1982 the diocese assigned a priest full-time to Toccoa. The Commerce mission was added to the Toccoa priest's responsibilities in 1987, when Father William Calhoun was assigned to Toccoa.

About 15 years ago, parishioners of St. Mary's foresaw a need for a larger facility, a larger hall and more space for religious education. A building and development fund was started. Between July 1, 1975, and April 30, 1976, a total of \$652 had been accumulated in that fund. That was the beginning of the church we are dedicating today.

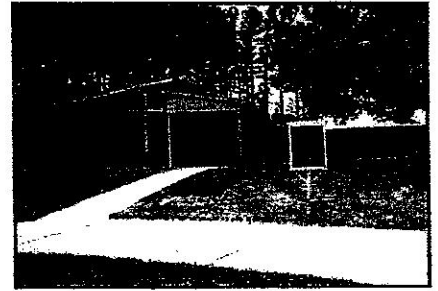
At least two building and development committees were formed during those years to study the feasibility of building a new church. The parish council decided in December 1987 that the time was right. Under the capable and optimistic leadership of Father Calhoun and Marion Rice, who chairs the building and development committee, long years of planning and hoping came to fruition. The result is testimony to God's grace in our lives and faithfulness of parishioners.

Our project architects were David Roberts and Mike Collins of Roberts, Collins Architects of Atlanta. Our general contractor was Swofford Contractors of Smyrna. Our project budget was \$320,000. Of that amount, the building and development fund totaled \$158,000.

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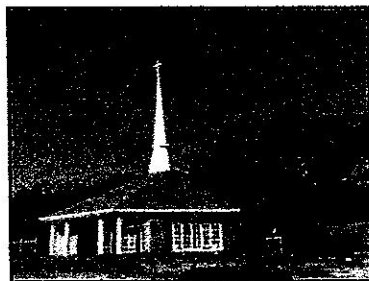
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