

# How we came to be

## The history of St. Mary's Parish in Elyria

*"Look for a worthy person in every town or village you come to and stay with him until you leave. As you enter the home bless it. If the home is deserving, your blessing will descend on it...If anyone does not receive you or listen to what you have to say, leave that house or town, and once outside it shake its dust from your feet."*

— Matthew 10: 12, 14

It's not known whether John Baptist Purcell, the Bishop of Cincinnati, had the above Scripture verse in mind when he made his way through the rough country that was still much of northern Ohio in 1845.

But certainly, in his travels that year, he experienced what one Catholic missionary wrote of his trek through the American wilderness:

*"I have little to tell — Catholics were few, hence the facts cannot be many. I travelled from one small settlement to another through unbroken country — fording streams and camping in the woods, ministering to the wants of the few, that is all."*

Those same hardships must have been experienced by Purcell, who as the only bishop in Ohio, undertook a long, arduous Episcopal Visitation of northern Ohio.

Thankfully, Bishop Purcell, at his stop in Elyria, found enough worthy people. It is with that brief stop that the history of our parish begins.

For 10 years prior to Bishop Purcell's visit, the closest, and in fact the only, Catholic church in Lorain County was St. John of the Cross Church in LaPorte on Grafton Road. The ground for the church and adjoining cemetery was donated by Frank Moran. It was to this little frame church Elyria Catholics travelled over primitive roads to assist at Mass.

### Two brothers

Two brothers, Conrad and Peter Cavitt, are credited by local historians as being the first catholic settlers in Elyria, coming here in 1835. They were soon followed by two other brothers. The families established homes on the west side of the Black River at an area called the Furnace Ground. Furnace Street was named after the area.

Just prior to the bishop's visit, an influx of Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Germany created a sizable Catholic community in Elyria. By 1845 there about 20 Catholic households in the town.

Bishop Purcell saw the need of the Elyria's Catholics for a place to conduct Mass. He established a mission station in town and arranged for Father Peter McLaughlin of Cleveland to make the journey to Elyria to celebrate Mass in a private home on a weekday once a month.

That was the humble beginning of our parish, Saint Mary, Our Lady of the Assumption.

Our church community began even before the Diocese of Cleveland was established. It wasn't until April

23, 1847 that the Diocese of Cleveland was erected and its first Bishop Amadeus Rappe, did not arrive until the following October from his pastorate in Toledo.

Elyria remained a station — without a resident priest and without a church until May 1853, when Bishop Rappe appointed the Rev. Michael Healy as the first resident pastor of the town. There were 15 Catholic families in the village. One year later he purchased a site on the southwest corner of Middle Avenue and Fourth Street to serve as first permanent home of worship for Catholics in Elyria. As part of the purchase agreement, Father Healy exchanged a lot on Second Street where now stands the beautiful First Congregational United Church of Christ.

It was in the summer of 1854 that a little frame church was ready for use. No longer was Mass said in private homes.

Fr. Healy remained pastor here until 1859 when he was transferred to St. Mary's in Tiffin. He served as pastor there for more than 40 years, until his death.

### St. Mary's School begins

The second pastor of our parish was the Rev. Robert A. Sidley. Under Fr. Sidley's guidance, St. Mary's School was founded, the church enlarged and a pastoral residence built on an adjoining lot to the church.

St. Mary's School wasn't much more than a room at the rear of the enlarged church, but it had a classroom and a lay teacher.

After just four years, Fr. Sidley was transferred to serve the English-speaking congregation in Sandusky. Three months later, in July 1863, the Rev. Francis A. Sullivan was named the third pastor of St. Mary's with the additional duties of serving a mission in Vermilion.

The tragically short life of Fr. Sullivan also initiated a somewhat unsettled time for our parish due to the shortage of priests.

Fr. Sullivan, a native of Ireland, died of tuberculosis just six months after coming to Elyria. A scholar, at the request of Bishop Rappe, he had studied for the priesthood in a seminary in Paris. After his ordination in Cleveland in 1860, he served three years as professor of philosophy at the Cleveland seminary.

His body was buried in a vault beneath the church.

The pastorate at St. Mary's remained vacant for a year as visiting clergy such as the Rev. T.F. Halley of Norwalk, would come to celebrate Mass, or minister to the St. Mary's community as the occasion demanded.

That unsettled period seemed to come to a close in February, 1865 when the Rev. Charles Griss was transferred from his church in Perrysburg to Elyria. Yet the needs of his former parish family in Perrysburg kept calling to him, and he was transferred back after just seven months in Elyria.