

Sacred Heart Catholic Community Muenster, Cooke County, Texas

As Cooke County developed during the latter half of the 19th century, interest peaked regarding development of a German Catholic community. The Flusche brothers of Westphalia, Iowa (a German Catholic community) played a pivotal role in the creation and populating of the town of Muenster. The dream was to create, not just a secular town, but a German Catholic community in which faith could be lived. Thus the founding of the city and the Catholic parish community happened simultaneously.

When the 22,000 acres were platted for city and farms, some 10 acres “in the heart of the city were donated for a church, a school, a cemetery, and a park – in a prominent place, high but also flat, in the middle of town.” Indeed, a glance at the original plat for Muenster shows the church property in the very middle of town. It was intended that the Catholic parish would play a prominent role in the life of the community. The parish was initially named Saint Mary, but after some years because of potential confusion with Saint Mary in Gainesville, parishioners were asked to consider a change. Two considerations were offered: Sacred Heart and Saint Joseph. The designation Sacred Heart won out by only a few ballots.

Until more permanent church leadership could be found, the earliest Muenster German colonists asked the pastor of Saint Mary in Gainesville, the Rv. H. Brickley, to provide religious services. The first mass was December 8, 1889, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Twenty-five men, seven women and six children attended this first mass in the Flusche Land Office. The first Christmas service was also in the Land Office. After that, services were held on the second floor of Frank Hesse’s store at the corner of 6th and Oak Street. In January 1890, work was begun on a building which would serve as school, church and meeting room. It was completed in April of 1890. Although this initial building was torn down in the 1980’s, a modified replica of this structure was built during the 125th Anniversary Year of the parish and serves as daily and adoration chapel. Additional building constructed during the early years included a 16 x 20 rectory or parsonage.

Late in 1891, the first resident pastor, Rev. Joseph Blum, saw the beginning of a frame church to serve the growing Muenster Catholic community. Unfortunately this frame church was destroyed by a December storm before any services could be held there. A second, larger, Gothic frame church was completed by the spring and was blessed by Thomas F. Brennan, Bishop of Dallas on April 24, 1892. On July 31, 1893, this structure was destroyed by a tornado. As a testament to the tenacity of these German Catholic settlers, they immediately began plans for an even larger church in brick. In the meanwhile, they built a larger frame structure to serve as school, church and residence for the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters of Jonesboro, Arkansas who came to Muenster in 1895 to assume teaching duties at Sacred Heart Catholic School. Two years earlier Benedictine priests from Subiaco, Arkansas began providing pastoral leadership for the parishes in Muenster, Lindsay and Gainesville, a role they continued to play in these communities for over 125 years. It took another five years of raising money and planning, but in April of 1898 the Muenster Catholic community dedicated a brick Gothic church, called at the time "one of the most beautiful in North Texas." That church served the Muenster community until 1949 when a weak foundation necessitated the removal of this third church. The current church, a semi-Gothic edifice, deemed by the dedicating bishop as "a poem and a prayer in wood and stone," was dedicated on October 7, 1954.

Some 125 years later, Sacred Heart Catholic parish is still a vibrant part of the Muenster and Cooke County scene. Currently there are 882 registered households in the parish. Interesting to note, the current church includes the candelabra and baptismal font in the current church – they all date to the 1892 church but survived the tornado which destroyed that frame structure. They are visual expressions of the German tenacity under the most challenging of circumstances. The current parish school enrollment, Pre-K through High School, is approximately 275 youth. From humble beginnings, this German Catholic community has grown tremendously. Although it is still predominately German Catholic in culture and faith, Muenster has grown to encompass an increasingly diversified population. But through it all, the mission of Sacred Heart Parish continues the same - to provide for the religious and spiritual needs of parishioners as we serve as a beacon of the Christian faith in North Texas.

Sacred Heart Catholic Church – Muenster, Texas

Established 1889

German Catholics seeking land opportunities and a place to build a solid German Catholic community demonstrated great faith when they stepped off a Missouri-Texas-Kansas Railroad train in North Texas in the autumn of 1889. The stop was 13 miles west of Gainesville on a new stretch of railway running through the windswept, open prairie westward toward Henrietta. The first thing that prospective land buyers would notice when they disembarked from the train was a sign, tacked to a telegraph pole, and marked “Muenster.”

Three enterprising brothers – August, Emil and Anton Flusche – started the new colony on October 3, 1889 after signing an agreement to purchase 22,000 acres of land. They had been prompted in their action by German-born August Pulte who had immigrated to the North Texas area in 1877. Pulte wanted to attract more German Catholics to the area. The Flusche brothers advertized the availability of the new Texas farmland to German Catholic communities in the mid-west and within 40 days the first settlers arrived.

On December 8, 1889 – the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception – before any legal survey had been completed, the town of Muenster was dedicated. The start-up of the new town was not officiated by a formal public proclamation but rather by the celebration of mass by Rev. Henry Brickley, Pastor of Saint Mary Catholic Church in Gainesville. The mass was celebrated in the Flusche Land Office and was attended by 25 men, 7 women and 6 children. According to the founding documents, when the 22,000 acres of land were platted for city and farms, “not more than twenty-five acres in the heart of the city were donated for a church, a school, a cemetery, and a park – in a prominent place, high but also flat, in the middle of town.” Sacred Heart Catholic Church has been from the beginning the center of the Muenster community.

Soon the town would be more than a sign nailed to a telegraph pole. Early settlers constructed two barns, one used as a community kitchen and the other as a bunk house for the men. Women and children were housed in the Flusche Land Office. In January of 1890, only a month after the formal dedication of Muenster, construction began on a school building. It was completed in April of 1890 and served as school and a place for mass to be celebrated until a permanent church could be built. Although this initial building was torn down in the 1980’s, a modified replica of this initial structure was built during the 125th Anniversary Year of the parish and serves as daily mass and adoration chapel. It includes the Baptismal font from the 1892 church.

By 1891 construction began on Muenster’s first church – then known as Saint Mary – under the supervision of Muenster’s first resident pastor, Rev. Joseph Blum. That frame church was destroyed by a December storm before services could be held there. The first year was difficult in other ways as well. A summer drought devastated crops and an outbreak of typhoid fever claimed the lives of eight people. But the German pioneering spirit prevailed and parishioners began work on a new church which was

completed in 1892. However, the next year, that second church was destroyed by a tornado. After the second church was destroyed in 1893, additions to the original school building were completed to serve as school, church and residence for the religious sisters teaching in the parish school. From March 1893 until July 1997, Sacred Heart was pastored by Benedictine priests from Subiaco Abbey in Arkansas. In 1895, Rev. Bonaventure Binzegger, OSB, negotiated with the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters of Jonesboro, Arkansas to assume teaching duties at Sacred Heart School; today, although the majority are lay teachers, the Benedictine sisters are still an integral part of the school community. In 1898 the parish dedicated a new red brick church which served the community until 1949. On December 8, 1924 the cornerstone for a new Sacred Heart School was laid. The building still houses the Elementary School, Grades 1 through 8. Due to structural problems, the 1898 church was removed in 1949 and construction was begun on the current church. This semi-Gothic church, as well as a new high school, was dedicated by Bishop Thomas K. Gorman of the Diocese of Dallas on October 7, 1954. Included as part of the church appointments are candelabra from the 1892 church and Stations of the Cross dating from 1890.

On December 11, 1898 a child – Augustine Wenzelaus – was born to Joseph and Theresa Dangelmayr. He attended Sacred Heart School and at age 13 heard God's call to priesthood. Ordained for the Diocese of Dallas, he served for over 70 years as priest and then as Auxillary Bishop of the Diocese of Dallas. Bishop Dangelmayr (he dropped the "e" from his last name) was but one of many men and women from Muenster who have served the Catholic Church. On June 4, 2017, Sacred Heart parishioners celebrated this long tradition of religious vocations from the parish, featuring the 175 cumulative years of vocation of three living natives of Muenster including Rev. Kyle Walterscheid (15 years of priestly ordination); and Sisters Francesca Walterscheid, SSMN, and Roberta Hesse, SSMN, serving 60 and 65 years respectively; also honored was Sacred Heart Pastor, Rev. Ken Robinson, for 25 years of priestly ordination. This special celebration also noted the numerous vocations to priesthood and religious life for the Benedictines of Subiaco Abbey and the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters of Jonesboro, Arkansas as well as numerous diocesan priestly vocations.

Sacred Heart parish began in 1889 with less than a dozen families, with 38 participants at the first mass. Today Sacred Heart is a vibrant parish community of 890 families, with a weekly mass attendance of approximately 1,100; it is home to multiple parish ministries, as well as Sacred Heart Catholic School. During 2014 parishioners celebrated 125 years of Catholic presence and pastoral ministry in North Texas. The parish is one of only seven in the Diocese of Fort Worth established before the founding of the Diocese of Dallas in 1890; the Fort Worth Diocese was established in 1969. When founded in 1890, Sacred Heart School had one teacher who instructed 40 students. Today 235 students, Pre-School through High School, are taught by 33 teachers and staff. From small and humble beginnings, Sacred Heart parish has grown and prospered, continuing to serve Catholics in the western half of Cooke County. Although still predominately German-Catholic in culture and faith, Muenster has grown to encompass an increasingly diversified population. But through it all, the mission of Sacred Heart Parish continues the same – to provide for the religious and spiritual needs of parishioners as we serve as a beacon of the Christian faith in North Texas.