

St. Mary's Parish 1859 - 2008

During the settlement of Goodhue County, immigrants from Luxemburg settled in an area that included Southern Belvedere Township and Northern Chester Township in Wabasha County, which is now known as Bellechester.

A young missionary was given charge of the Catholics in Wabasha and Goodhue Counties and said Mass in Bellechester homes as early as 1859. In 1862, Thomas Frenier donated 40 acres of land to St. Mary's to be used for Church purposes. President Lincoln signed the document transferring the land to St. Mary's Parish on December 1, 1862. This historical document has been preserved and is still in possession of the parish. A small frame church costing \$1000 was built on this land and St. Mary's became a mission of Red Wing. According to the St. Paul Archdiocese, the St. Mary's Parish was established in 1865.

The first baptism recorded in the parish was on August 20, 1865. Baptism was conducted for Ann, the daughter of William Befort and Anna Deville. The first marriage was that of William McBride and Julia Mallon. As the congregation of St. Mary's grew, the original wood frame church was adapted for use as a school and a new stone church costing \$1,600 was built in 1877.

Under an act passed by the legislature in 1877, the congregation incorporated as the Belle Chester Church Society, thus satisfying the parishioners in both Bellevedere and Chester Townships. The name Belle Chester now became Bellechester, the name of the village in which the church was located.

The first school was established in 1881 with an enrollment of 90 students. The teachers were the Sisters of the Notre Dame, who were living in a nearby convent. A new school was built in 1902 and operated until it was closed in 1969. In 1987, the school building was torn down. A monument was erected at the site of the school to commemorate the dedication and service of the Sisters. The rectory was converted into a convent in 1955 and later was also torn down. In 1959, a new rectory was built as part of the church structure.

St Mary's was twice ravaged by fire. In 1926, the stone church, built in 1877, was destroyed. In 1942, the interior was ruined by fire. The interior was rebuilt and, in 1951, a modern addition to St Mary's school was completed. In 1952, the school basement was converted from a coal bin to a parish meeting room and school lunchroom.

In 1970, St. Mary's parish began sharing a pastor with the Zumbrota parish. In 2002, St. Mary's joined with Goodhue and Belle Creek as a third parish to be led by one Priest. There were originally over 100 families belonging to St. Mary's parish. Around 90 families remain active in the parish today. Many are descendents of the original settlers.

Several members of the parish have chosen the religious life as their vocation. Peter W. Bartholome advanced to become Bishop of St Cloud, six became priests and sixteen others have joined the religious order.

CCD classes are held every Wednesday in the church and meeting rooms for grades 1-12. Volunteers of the parish teach these classes.

Current parishioners take immense pride in their church, as did the early settlers, by continuing to make improvements such as remodeling bathrooms, creating a new meeting room, placing a fence around the cemetery. In 2008, the parish added a new state-of-the-art heating system. Monuments have been erected to commemorate our special loved ones, the unborn babies, those members who served in the military and the Notre Dame Sisters.