

# Catholic Sentinel

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## For a century, parish is a beacon of faith in Sellwood

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At night, driving through the heart of Sellwood, it can be seen by all who pass — a glowing light atop the bell tower of St. Agatha Parish.

“We want to show everybody that if you ever need a place to come, you can look for the light,” said parishioner Christine Pashley. “We know that God’s here and we’ll welcome you.”

As the parish community began its yearlong celebration to mark a century since its dedication, the new installment highlighted the year’s theme: “A light in praise of His glory.”

Archbishop John Vlazny celebrated a centennial Mass Oct. 9.

“Generations of parishioners who have been deeply committed to the mission of your parish and school continue to make the parish what it is today,” the archbishop wrote in a congratulatory letter. “The longevity and success of your parish and school are a tribute to your personal sacrifice, generosity, and faith.”

Founded in 1911 when Sellwood was still just a small village with unpaved roads, the church was served by the Benedictines. A few years later, Sellwood Catholics successfully lobbied Archbishop Alexander Christie’s permission to build a parish school. Before then, children walked three miles on board sidewalks and muddy streets to go to school.

Today, the bustling parish is home to 450 people and the school has 178 students enrolled. Sellwood, once heavily populated by Russian Catholic immigrants who worked for the Mill Lumber Co., is now the home of high-end shops and charming historic homes. The area maintains a sense of community and a small-town feel, aspects that keep parishioners nearby and give the parish its trademark multi-generational population not often found in other big city churches.

For 90 years, Benedictine Fathers and Sisters provided leadership and direction to the church until, in 1999, pastoral responsibilities reverted to the Archdiocese of Portland. In 2001, Father Slider Steuernol, then the only married priest in the archdiocese, was assigned to the parish. Parishioners said his background added a special dimension to parish ministry, and his wife Jacque also became an active leader in the parish.

Suddenly, just as planning for the centennial began, tragedy struck. Father Steuernol died unexpectedly of a heart attack in 2010.



Barbara Hill Photography

John Rekart, class of 1929, and Lillian Kotz Inman, 1930, were the two longest-surviving alumni to attend the St. Agatha centennial celebration dinner.

### A cherished memory

St. Agatha parishioner Jeanne May shared this favorite memory in the centennial book.

“On Christmas Eve Mass about 15, or more, years ago, Father Cosmas White’s cat, Damian, came into church during the homily, walked up to the altar and climbed into the manger where he snuggled down for a nap. The congregation exchanged smiles and giggles and Father Cosmas White went on without missing a beat. Damian slept peacefully in the manger throughout Mass.”

The image of that cat sleeping in baby Jesus’ bed is something I will never forget and it makes me laugh out loud whenever I think of it.”

At that time, the archdiocese asked another Benedictine to step in and take over leadership. Father Nathan Zodrow, formerly abbot of Mount Angel Abbey, arrived and said he felt right at home in the parish so strongly influenced by the Benedictine tradition.

Father Zodrow follows a long line of strong and beloved pastors. He brought a gracious warmth and spirit to the parish in a time of mourning, said parishioner Ana Maria McClellan.

“There’s been such a great spirit in this year, one that I could not have anticipated right after Father Slider died,” she said. “It was a hard time. We were grieving and yet [Father Zodrow] negotiated gracefully and with such kindness and compassion.”

The parish strives to be an anchor of faith, Father Zodrow said. With that goal, the parish is looking forward — revamping its faith formation program, working toward restoring the church infrastructure and beefing up the Friends of St. Agatha educational trust so that no child who wants a Catholic education has to be turned away due to lack of funding.

Pat Hainley sees the value of the school very clearly. Theirs is a four-generation family in the parish. His mother Genevieve Hainley was instrumental in planning the centennial events and many of his siblings returned home from places like Alaska and California for the celebration.

“The sacrifice of the nuns, priests and parishioners of St. Agatha over the last century are a gift that keeps on giving to this community, this city, this state, this country and to our world,” Hainley said to attendees at a St. Agatha alumni dinner.

St. Agatha has a strong history of support on the part of its parishioners. After 78 years of use, St. Agatha’s original school building had become a safety concern. In the mid-1990s, though they were warned it would be nearly impossible for the parish of only 400 families of modest income, a group of volunteers gathered together to raise funds for a new school. Tom McClung was the chairman of the fundraising committee that amassed \$3.5 million in four years for the new school.

“St. Agatha rose above any expectations to build this school,” McClung said. “But we step outside the boundaries all the time.”

Another example of this above-and-beyond spirit is the parish’s centennial publication, a professionally paginated 100-page book that not only features history, but also recipes, cherished memories and parishioner bios. Published in a run of 500, the books are available for purchase through the parish office.

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