

The History of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church



1800s

The parish history of the Catholic Community of St. John the Baptist Church is a dramatic story of survival and growth despite great adversity. Benedictine Fathers, of St. Leo Abbey in Brooksville, sponsored the first Catholic Church in Dunnellon.

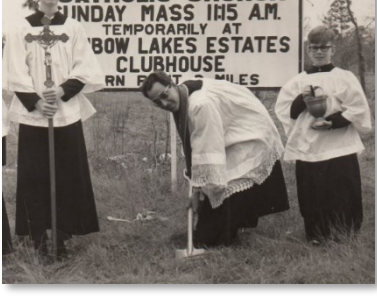
They had been ministering to area Catholics with occasional visits since 1903. Many of the people associated with phosphate mining were Catholic, and by 1905, monthly lectures were held by Father Aloysius Delabar, O.S.B., at either City Hall or the Presbyterian church. In 1908, the William F. Barrett family welcomed a Benedictine priest into their home for a monthly celebration of the Mass. The community was growing and in 1912, on land donated by J.A. Grumbles, the building of Dunnellon's first St. John the Baptist Catholic Church had begun. Architect, George E. Ledvina, supervised and the ornate structure was dedicated on January 4, 1914, by Father Charles Mohr, O.S.B., first abbot of St. Leo.



1980s

World War I ended much of the Dunnellon phosphate mining. European ports were closed and there was no market for hard-rock phosphate. By 1920, the majority of the Catholics had left the area and in 1921 the church building was leased to Marion county. It was used as a school for two years until the Dunnellon Women's Club purchased it in 1923. The altar and statues were taken to St. Leo's Abbey, while Blessed Trinity in Ocala received the sanctuary furnishings and vestments.

During the intervening years between 1920 and the 1960's, the Dunnellon area's few remaining Catholics had to travel almost fifty miles to attend Mass in Ocala. The recession of the 1930's and the hard years following slowed our community's development. Until the rebuild of Rainbow Lakes Estates encouraged local growth in the 1960's, where there were sufficient Catholics to warrant area, which by this time belonged to the Parish, Ocala. Two residents of Rainbow Lakes approached the Pastor of Blessed Trinity, Father a regular basis in the Estates if a minimum of Dunnellon area. Community Clubhouse of Rainbow Lakes The number of Catholics in the area was for land on which to build a church. By July St. Augustine had purchased a ten acre tract Estates, on the west side of highway 41 at



In August of 1965, Father Corry was transferred to Orlando. Father Hochheim became the new Pastor of Blessed Trinity Parish and, therefore, pastor of St. John's. However, on February 6, 1966, parish boundaries were realigned and we became a mission to the newly formed parish of St. Theresa's in Belleview. Father Jose Oti, a young Spanish priest, was assigned to the Belleview parish and its new mission. At this time, serious discussion and planning began for the construction of a church on the parish property north of Dunnellon. In January 1968, ground breaking ceremonies were held and construction began. St. John the Baptist Mission became a reality in October of that year with the celebration of its first Mass.

In the spring of 1969, Father Oti returned to Spain and the parish came under the direction of Father Paul Woodyard. He served as the pastor until his retirement in June of 1970. At this time, Father John J. Mitzi became the new pastor. He immediately began to institute massive renovation in St. John's - a new granite altar was obtained and new pews replaced metal folding chairs. By November 1970, he had helped to implement the organization of a Parish Council. Father Mitzi was assisted at St. John's Mission by several Benedictine Priests: Father Rock, Father Joe Hackett, Father Tracey, and Father Brauner. The Mission attained parish status in June, 1976, and Father Philip Stegeman was appointed Pastor by Bishop Thomas Grady of the Diocese of Orlando. Later, the facilities were expanded with the skills of parishioners. The construction project greatly united the parish. On May 20, 1981, a disastrous fire totally destroyed the church, the attached structure and virtually all its contents. Father Stegeman was miraculously saved after being awakened by two people who had taken the wrong road in the middle of the night. Within hours, the pastor and congregation of the nearby United Methodist church offered to share their facilities with a grateful St. John's priest and parish. With further growth occurring in the area, enhanced by the development of Rainbow Springs, a more centrally located site was purchased by Bishop Grady and the Diocese of Orlando. Located on the East side of Highway 41 near the intersection of State Road 40, the first phase of the new complex was completed by Advent of 1982. Nicholas Mansito served as architect for the hall, the office and the church buildings.

Planning of the second phase, the church, began immediately. However, increased costs in construction as well as the realization that future growth needed to be addressed, slowed the process. An architect, Paul Zelones, was selected to design the church and a building fund campaign was begun. A crescent shape building was chosen to allow for future expansion by an addition to each side of the church. Beautifully faceted stained glass windows were created by the J. Piercy Studios of Orlando.

Father Stegeman transferred to Leesburg and Father Robert Fuchek, an ordained Benedictine Father from St. Leo Abbey, became pastor in February 1983.

November 1985, the long held dream of constructing our church became a reality. An ecumenical service of Thanksgiving was held in the new sanctuary. Pastors and members of the Rainbow Lakes Estates Methodist community as well as Father Stegeman and Father Fuchek all joined in the celebration. As a way to memorialize the celebration, the Methodist church and the Catholic Community of John the Baptist Church continued the ecumenical service every Thanksgiving Eve until the Methodist church

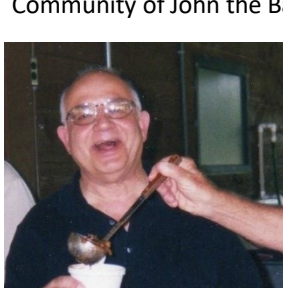
closed in the early 2000s. On June 24, 1986, Bishop Thomas Grady celebrated a joyful Mass formally dedicating the Catholic Community of St. John the Baptist Church.

In early 2000, Father Donald Mainardi became our pastor. In August 2001, Father Mainardi transferred to another parish and was replaced by Father Joseph Pinchock. Under Father Joe's leadership, many meaningful projects were initiated. Among these are the Knights of Columbus' memorial garden for unborn children (now the St. Francis garden), the expansion of a standing pavilion, the complete renovation of the parish kitchen, an outdoor shrine honoring Our Lady of Lourdes and the placement of a St. John the Baptist statue in front of the church. Father Joseph Pinchock was pastor for 7 years before he was transferred to Port Orange in June 2008.

In July 2008 we welcomed Father Emmanuel Akalue. Fr. Emmanuel began the Alive in Christ campaigns in cooperation with Bishop Wenski and the Diocese of Orlando. Renovating the church was the main goal of the campaign.

Fr. Jean H. Desir became our pastor in August of 2012 when Fr. Emmanuel was transferred to Palm Bay, Florida. Under Fr. Jean's leadership the church completed renovations, the Walk with the Lord Prayer Path and Memorial Garden were completed. Our Mission Statement, United as one body in Christ, we show passion for our faith through compassion for our neighbors was developed.

With the transfer of Fr. Jean to St. Rose of Lima in November of 2023, Fr. Ramon Bolatete became our new pastor and initiated an update to the sanctuary. The corpus from the cross was hung above the sanctuary. Icons of St. John the Baptist were added and the statues of Our Lady of Grace and St. Joseph were placed in the sanctuary. The St. Francis and Rosary gardens were completed and blessed.



Fr. Donald Mainardi



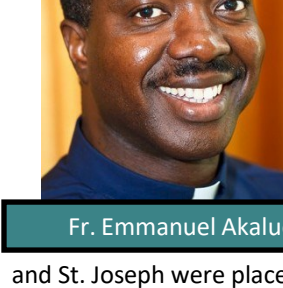
Fr. Joseph Pinchock



Fr. Emmanuel Akalue



Fr. Jean Desir

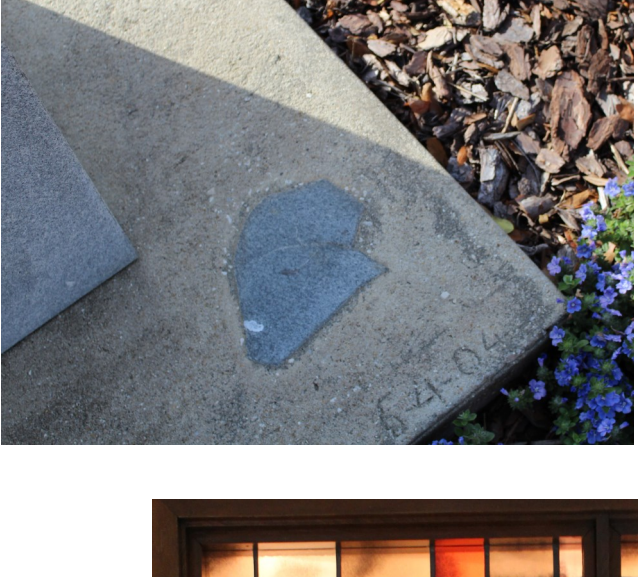


Fr. Ramon Bolatete

DID YOU KNOW?



In the foundation of the statue of St. John the Baptist, which was erected in 2004, there are pieces of the original altar from the church that burned down.



The image of a mother pelican feeding her blood to her young is a symbol of Jesus. Taken from the myth that mother pelicans will injure themselves and let their chicks feed off her own blood if there is no food available reminds us that Jesus gives us his Body and Blood in Holy Eucharist.



Behind the church on the southeast side, there is a small cemetery with thirteen remains of parishioners. They were prohibited to have a cemetery on campus. Unfortunately, we cannot accept more remains.

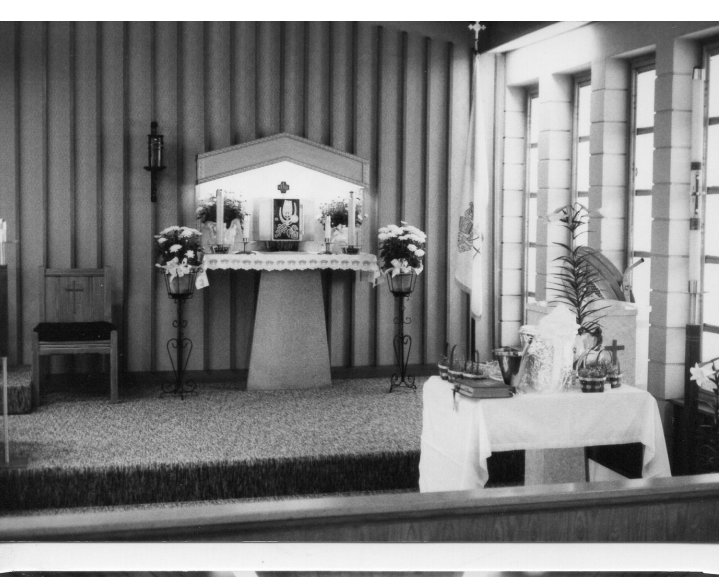


The Memorial Garden not only has bricks that commemorate loved ones but several plants have been donated in memory of someone.



Unlike many Catholic churches, St. John's altar does not have a saint's relic embedded into it.

These are photos of the original church that was located on Highway 41 and 25th Place, approximately six miles north of the current campus.



The original cross that was erected in the front of the campus was from wood pulled out of the Withlacoochee River. Three crosses have stood as the herald to our community.