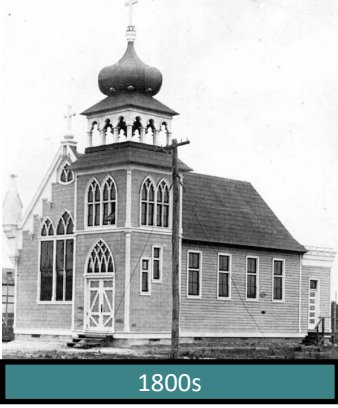




The story of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Dunnellon is one of perseverance, faith, and renewal through adversity. From humble beginnings, through years of loss and rebuilding, to a thriving parish community today, the history of St. John’s reflects the steadfast devotion of the Catholic faithful in Marion County.



Early Roots (1903–1914)

Catholic presence in Dunnellon can be traced back to 1903, when the Benedictine Fathers of St. Leo Abbey in Brooksville began traveling to minister to scattered families in the area. Many of these early Catholics were connected to the booming phosphate mining industry. By 1905, Father Aloysius Delabar, O.S.B., was offering monthly lectures, often held in public spaces such as City Hall or even the Presbyterian church. In 1908, the William F. Barrett family opened their home for the monthly celebration of Mass, allowing the community to gather more regularly. Growth followed quickly, and in 1912, local benefactor J.A. Grumbles donated land for a Catholic church. Architect George E. Ledvina supervised the project, and on January 4, 1914, Dunnellon’s first St. John the Baptist Catholic Church was dedicated by Father Charles Mohr, O.S.B., the first abbot of St. Leo Abbey.

Decline and Loss (1914–1960s)

The church’s early promise was soon overshadowed by economic hardship. When World War I closed European ports, the phosphate industry collapsed, leaving Dunnellon’s economy in ruins. By 1920, most Catholics had moved away, and in 1921, the church was leased to Marion County as a schoolhouse. In 1923, it was sold to the Dunnellon Women’s Club. Sacred items were redistributed: the altar and statues were taken to St. Leo Abbey, and furnishings were donated to Blessed Trinity Parish in Ocala. For decades, Dunnellon’s few remaining Catholic families had no parish of their own. They traveled nearly fifty miles to Ocala to attend Mass. The Great Depression and its aftermath further slowed the possibility of rebuilding. For nearly forty years, the Catholic presence in Dunnellon remained only a quiet hope.



Renewal in Rainbow Lakes Estates (1960s–1970s)

The tide began to turn in the 1960s with the development of Rainbow Lakes Estates, which drew new families to the area. Two residents, Earl Gratton and Joseph Fraser, approached Father William Corry of Blessed Trinity in Ocala to request local Mass. Father Corry agreed, provided at least thirty-five Catholics could be found. In May 1963, Mass was celebrated at the Rainbow Lakes Estates Community Clubhouse, marking the birth of the Dunnellon Mission. That same year, Archbishop Joseph Hurley of St. Augustine purchased ten acres north of Rainbow Lakes Estates along Highway 41 for a permanent church site. With the realignment of diocesan boundaries in 1966, the mission became part of the newly established St. Theresa Parish in Belleview, under the care of Father Jose Oti, a young Spanish priest. In January 1968, ground was broken for a new church. By October, St. John the Baptist Mission had celebrated its first Mass in a dedicated building. Over the next several years, the mission grew under the leadership of Father Oti, followed by Father Paul Woodyard and later Father John J. Mitzi, who renovated the church, added a granite altar, and replaced folding chairs with pews. In June 1976, Bishop Thomas Grady of the Diocese of Orlando elevated St. John’s to full parish status, appointing Father Philip Stegeman as its first pastor.



Fire and Rebirth (1981–1986)

Disaster struck on May 20, 1981, when a fire consumed the church, its attached structures, and nearly all its contents. Miraculously, Father Stegeman escaped after being awakened by two strangers who had taken a wrong turn that night. Within hours, the pastor of the local United Methodist Church offered their sanctuary to St. John’s, beginning a deep ecumenical friendship. The Diocese of Orlando soon purchased a new, more central site on Highway 41 near the intersection with State Road 40. The first phase of construction, including a hall, offices, and classrooms, was completed in 1982. Architect Paul Zelones was later chosen to design a crescent-shaped church building, with stained-glass windows by J. Piercey Studios of Orlando. In November 1985, the long-awaited church was completed. An ecumenical service of Thanksgiving brought together Catholics, Methodists, and former pastors. On June 24, 1986, Bishop Thomas Grady formally dedicated the Catholic Community of St. John the Baptist.

Growth and Enrichment (2000–2012)

The early 2000s were marked by new projects and renewed energy. Under Father Joseph Pinchock (2001–2008), the parish established the Knights of Columbus’ memorial garden for unborn children (later renamed the St. Francis Garden), expanded the pavilion, renovated the kitchen, built an outdoor shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes, and placed a statue of St. John the Baptist at the church entrance. In 2008, Father Emmanuel Akalue began the Alive in Christ campaign in partnership with the Diocese of Orlando, focusing on renovating the church.

A Mission for Today (2012–Present)

In 2012, Father Jean H. Desir became pastor. His leadership oversaw significant parish improvements, including the Walk with the Lord Prayer Path and the Memorial Garden. During his tenure, the parish also developed its Mission Statement: United as one body in Christ, we show passion for our faith through compassion for our neighbors. When Father Jean was transferred to St. Rose of Lima in 2023, Father Ramon Bolatete became pastor. He guided the parish in further beautifying the sanctuary by placing a crucifix corpus above the altar, adding icons of St. John the Baptist, and installing statues of Our Lady of Grace and St. Joseph. The St. Francis and Rosary Gardens were also completed and blessed. In 2026, our parish joyfully marked its fiftieth anniversary with a year of celebrations. The festivities culminated on Saturday, June 27, with a special anniversary Mass, followed by a luncheon and family activities. Preparations included repainting the interior walls and new tile in the nave.

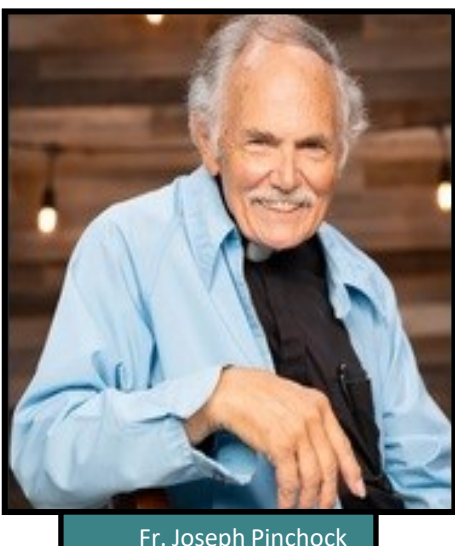
A Living Testament of Faith

The parish of the Catholic Church of St. John the Baptist has endured more than a century of change, challenge, and renewal. From makeshift gatherings in private homes to the loss of a beloved church, and from rebuilding through fire to celebrating an enduring parish community, St. John’s stands as a living testament to faith and perseverance. Rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition and nourished by the Diocese of Orlando, the parish continues to grow as a vibrant witness to Christ in the heart of Dunnellon.

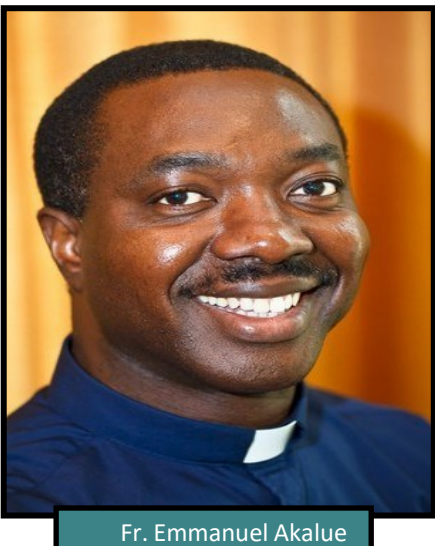
Pastors of the Twenty-First Century



Fr. Donald Mainardi



Fr. Joseph Pinchock



Fr. Emmanuel Akalue

Obituary: www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/orlandosentinel/name/donald-mainardi-obituary?id=36399738

Podcast: divinemercyradio.com/fr-emmanuel-akalua-2025



Fr. Jean Desir



Fr. Ramon Bolatete