

Saint Joseph Catholic Church Celebrates 100th Year Anniversary

Saint Joseph Catholic Church in Port Saint Joe celebrated its 100th year anniversary March 30, 2025. In honor of this historic event, His Most Reverend William A. Wack, Bishop of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee, will celebrate mass with Father Mathew Abraham on October 19th at 11am at Saint Joseph Catholic Church on 20th Street. All are welcome at mass. But regardless of whether you attend mass, the entire community is invited to join in the reception at 12nn after mass in the church hall to meet Bishop Wack.

Sixty years after the city of Saint Joseph was erased by multiple storms in the late 1830's, a yellow fever epidemic and a fire in 1841, and a monstrous hurricane in 1844, new settlers returned to the area in 1903, and the city of Port St. Joe was established. It thrived with the coming of the railroad in 1909, and was incorporated in 1913.

The Catholic community in Port St. Joe was small. The first Catholic masses were celebrated irregularly in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Sullivan by itinerant priests who came by way of a Cadillac automobile that ran on the railroad tracks from Apalachicola. In 1918 the Saint Joe Company sold the Bishop of Mobile, Edward P. Allen, land for the construction of a church, but the church wasn't built until 1925. Between 1920 and 1925 mass was celebrated once a month in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tapper by priests traveling from Apalachicola. Byron Eells, Nicholas Comforter, and Ivey Nedley, three prominent members of the Catholic community, led the fundraising and oversaw the construction of the church which was named Saint Joseph in honor of the patron saint of the city. Father Thomas Massey served as the mission priest from 1925 until 1943. Charles Brown and Ida Ethel Kilbourne were the first couple to be married in the new church in the late 1920's.

In 1959 the parish moved to a newly constructed building built on seven acres of land on the corner of Monument Avenue and 20th Street. This building was dedicated by His Excellency Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen of the Diocese of Mobile on April 12, 1959, and remains the active church for the Saint Joseph Catholic community today. The original church building was deeded to the Port St. Joe Garden Club in 1969. It is the oldest extant church building in the city and is in the National Register of Historic Places.

The statues of Saint Joseph and Blessed Mother Mary were moved from the original church building to the new church when it was completed. Father David T O'Shea was the pastor from 1970 until 1977. Father O'Shea and the congregation redesigned the sanctuary and added the stained glass windows which depict the events in the life of Jesus and his earthly father Saint Joseph. In 1993 the parish raised funds and purchased a pipe organ built in 1886 by the Hutchings Organ Company. The organ was dismantled at its home in California by the organ

builder John Huening, and reassembled in Saint Joseph's Church where it remained until 2020. The current altar was moved from Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission Church in Mexico Beach in 2006. Our Lady of Guadalupe was reopened in 2011 and subsequently destroyed by Hurricane Michael.

In October of 2018, the entire town of Port St. Joe suffered major damage from Hurricane Michael. The church sanctuary was flooded with two inches of water and the rectory on Monument Avenue was severely damaged. The town was still recovering when the Covid pandemic struck in early 2020. For several years, Father Chris Winkeljohn, the pastor until 2020, and subsequently Father Mathew Abraham, our current pastor, lived in the mission building at Cape San Blas until the purchase of a new rectory on Jones Homestead Road. Port Saint Joe has witnessed an influx of new residents and an increase in tourism after recovery from Hurricane Michael. There has been a parallel growth in attendance at Saint Joseph's, led by Father Mathew's committed encouragement of the parish's spiritual renewal.