

Priestless County Adapts

by Harry Winter OMI

How does a former Oblate parish covering an entire county, adapt to being priestless? Several very significant elements have developed in Monroe County, West Virginia, to help the faith grow. Jim MacGee OMI became the first resident priest in Monroe County, in 1977. I succeeded him in 1982. When the former Eastern Province had to terminate our presence there in 1991, there were almost one hundred families centered in three areas of the county: St. Peter's Chapel in Peterstown, St. Andrew's Chapel in Union, the county seat, and the historic St. John's Chapel, Sweet Springs.

Mass was celebrated every weekend in all three places. When the Oblates left, a native nun of WV, Sr. Molly Bauer SSJ, was named administrator and resided in Union. For a few years, a priest was able to come from Mercer County to celebrate Mass at Peterstown. But with the diocesan priest shortage, this was terminated and St. Peter's Chapel sold in 2000, despite the fact that the population there was increasing significantly, and is still increasing.

The bishop allowed a priest from nearby Greenbrier County to offer Mass on Sunday at St. Andrew's. But in 2004, Sr. Molly asked for a new assignment and the bishop took the opportunity to close St. Andrew's and sell it also. Union too is growing in population, although not as significantly as Peterstown. The bishop absolutely refused to have Mass in the county more than once a year, on August 15, in the historic St. John's Chapel, where the population is very slowly increasing. Now Catholics of the county must drive at least 30 minutes over treacherous roads to attend Mass.

Of the 100 families, at least 50 have either stopped attending any church, or have joined a Protestant Church. It should be noted that of these 100, 50 attended Mass at least monthly. The others were either homebound or attended at Christmas and Easter.

I was able to participate often in the August 15 Masses, until 2009. This August I was able to return and spend from Aug. 13-18 there. I discovered seven ways in which the Catholic faith continues to be maintained and even strengthened in the county. First is the development of Catholic lay leadership. Because the region is in the rural area known as Appalachia, outsiders might think of hillbillies and ignorant sharecroppers. However, one of the leading Catholic families is headed by a native of the county who spent most of his life as an FBI administrator in Washington, DC, and now has returned to the county. He publishes an internet newsletter for the Monroe County Catholic Community, and is adamant that the Catholic Church still exists and serves in the county. Another leading family is headed by a retired veterinarian and his nurse wife from Florida, who began spending summers in the county and now consider it their home. The mother of another family of 7 children residing in the county has had to drive considerably more than 30 minutes to take part in lay leadership.

The second element is the ecumenical poverty ministry "Monroe County Outreach." MacGee was instrumental in starting it. Although poverty in WV has lessened in recent decades, WV is still among the ten worst states for families in need of assistance. Methodists are the largest Church and have a

good reputation for aiding those in poverty, but the Catholic lay community is also recognized for its awareness of the option for the needy.

The third element is the neighboring Allegheny Highland Council 8689 of the Knights of Columbus . The Knights help keep alive the August 15 Mass, and also hold a Scripture service at the chapel on Memorial Day. The pageantry of the Knights uniform attracts a great deal of favorable comment from the many non-Catholics who follow the growth of the August 15 Mass over the years.

A former Episcopalian pastor and his wife is an unexpected, but powerful fourth element in a priestless county. On August 15, 2013, it was Deacon Jim Conyers and his wife Deborah who were part of the celebration; on Aug. 15, 2014, Father Conyers presided with five other priests at the Mass (for more, see www.harrywinter.org, "Episcopalian Former Priests and Mission," bottom of home page). As more Episcopalian priests become Roman Catholic priests, their taking the place of Oblate missionaries could be a welcome development.

A fifth element is the growth of the permanent diaconate. One resident of the county is half way through the four year program; one of the Knights from Council 8689 is also half way through the program. Both already help maintain and increase the Catholic faith in the absence of priests.

The sixth element is the continuation of Oblate spirituality through Oblate Associates. At the August 15, 2014 Mass, two flyers were handed out describing the Oblate Associates, and St. Eugene as the Patron of Dysfunctional Families. They were received with great interest. Please pray that the Holy Spirit will help form a group of Oblate Associates in the county.

And finally, the continued presence of the memory of a pioneer Catholic feminist, Letitia Preston Floyd (1779-1852) has aroused a great deal of interest. This seventh element attracted the attention of a non-Catholic historian from nearby Blacksburg, VA, Dr. Jim Glanville. He approached me after discovering on the internet an article describing Floyd's conversion to the Catholic Church, and the influence her sons and daughters had on the Church in VA, WV and KY. He quickly built an extensive website www.lynnside.org, which includes the Letitia Floyd article, a description of the chapel, and the August 15 Mass. He is working on a lengthy article describing Mrs. Floyd's in-depth correspondence, especially with Most Reverend Vincent Whelan, the second bishop of Richmond, VA, and the first bishop of Wheeling, WV.

When Oblates leave a parish after many years of service, we are tempted to think that all is ended. But the Holy Spirit is full of surprises. May we continue to aid the Spirit by searching for ways in which we can still be of assistance as the Church develops without our physical presence.