

Catholics to Celebrate 60 Years in Marshall County and 50 Years as a Local Parish

*From an article in the Guntersville, AL Advertiser-Gleam Newspaper—
Wednesday, May 13, 2009*

A handful of people attended the first Catholic Mass in Marshall County 60 years ago in a vacant Guntersville store building. That mission became a parish 50 years ago this month.

Those events in 1949 and in 1959 will be celebrated this Sunday by St. William Catholic Church with a Mass at noon at Civitan Park. The service will be followed by a picnic and games, with inflatables for the kids and live music. The 11:00 am and 2:00 pm Masses will not be held.

The church at 929 Gunter Avenue serves Catholics from all parts of Marshall County. St. William also operates the Chapel of the Holy Cross in Albertville, which primarily serves the Hispanic community.

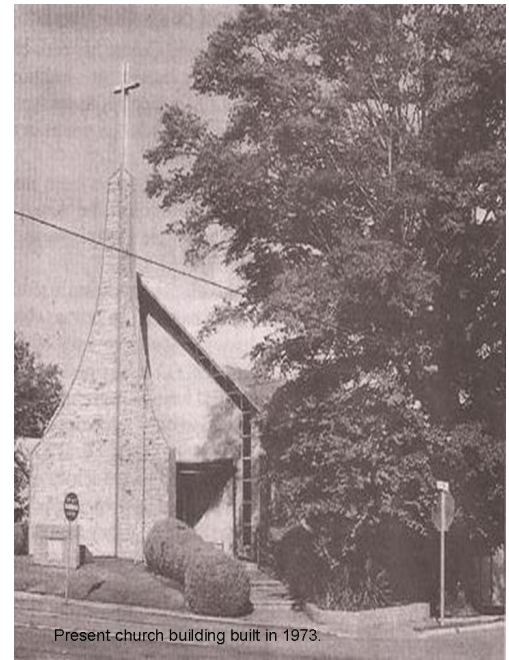
There was no Catholic church in the county before 1959 because there were almost no Catholics. That began to change as people from other parts of the country moved to Redstone Arsenal. Lake Guntersville was also attracting a growing number of weekend visitors. St. William began July 17, 1949 as a mission in a vacant store in Northtown, just south of Hammer's Store (now Fants). The building, owned by Dr. Edward Venning, was vacant. When he rented the store space, the mission moved upstairs and used an empty room there. A priest came from St. James parish in Gadsden. By the end of 1949 there were 20 Catholics from 10 families attending Mass. By 1951 there were 30 attending, and the treasury had grown to over \$4,000.

In 1952 the Birmingham diocese bought the property of the First Baptist Church of Guntersville at Gunter Avenue and DeBow Street. First Baptist had built a larger church building catty-cornered across the street. The Catholics used the Baptist building with classrooms and kitchen facilities. By the end of 1958 there were 90 Catholics from 30 families. After 10 years as a mission, St. William became a full-scale parish. The first resident priest, Rev. Paul Mullaney, served the first Mass of the new parish on May 17, 1959 – 50 years ago from this Sunday's anniversary celebration.

In 1972 the old church building was torn down and the present church building was constructed. It was dedicated March 4, 1973. By then the parish had grown to more than 300 members.

The Chapel of the Holy Cross in Albertville was built a few years ago. It primarily has Masses in Spanish, with one Mass in English. The church in Guntersville has 3 Masses in English and one in Spanish. English-language Masses currently average 390 to 420 in attendance. Spanish-language Masses usually have 1,000 to 1,200 attending.

Most of the early pastors came from Ireland, where they had been recruited by the Bishop of Birmingham in Alabama. The first priest here, Rev. Paul Mullaney, was a native of Pennsylvania. He was followed by 4 Irish-born priests, Rev. Owen Connaughton, Rev. Joseph Gill, Rev. Patrick Murphy (who spearheaded the drive to build a new church) and Rev. Paul Donnelly. After that came Rev. Bernard Mulcahy, Rev. William Jones, Rev. Francis Wade, Rev. Charles Cross, Rev. Frances Craven, Rev. Paul Donnelly (for a second time), Rev. Thomas Kelly and the present pastor, Rev. Thomas Ackerman.



Present church building built in 1973.



Former First Baptist church building from 1952 to 1972.