

# “Let Us Build the City of God, May Our Tears Be Turned Into Dancing...”

Dan Schutte

By Kathy Warnes

I put my byline on this story because this is part of my personal story as well as your story. The churches and the places are different, but the time and the feelings are just as current and relevant as the years in between. I grew up in Ecorse, Michigan, a small town outside of Detroit, similar to Conneaut. My grandparents went to the Presbyterian Church, my mother was baptized there, and she and my father were married there. I was baptized there and spent my teenage years there. It was so much a part of me, I took it for granted that it would always be there.



Ecorse Presbyterian Church, 1910



Worshipping in the 1950s.

I lived right around the corner from St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church and The Ecorse Presbyterian Church and St. Francis Xavier stood almost directly across Jefferson Avenue from each other. I crossed Jefferson Avenue every Sunday and climbed the Presbyterian steps to the exciting library and ran down the basement stairs to hug my grandmother who spent a lot of time cooking in the kitchen with her friends for congregational events.

I spent much of my free time in my wild eleven-year-old year climbing up to a nook where St. Francis Church Xavier was building an addition and sitting there reading for hours, surrounded by St. Francis Xavier tranquility.



St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, founded in 1848.

Father Morin and pastor friend enjoy the rectory garden of St. Francis Xavier.



Then as most young people often had to do to make a living, I moved away, never dreaming I would come back to my two childhood churches in a new role. This time I came back with the goal of writing a history of my hometown for my dissertation. I ended up paying rent to live in the church parsonage for the years I lived there. What an odd feeling living in the house where Reverend Leonard

Duckett, the minister from childhood who had married my parents, had lived. Sometimes I looked over my shoulder, imagining him cheering me on and other times shaking a finger at me if I did something I shouldn't have done.

I often visited Fellowship Hall next door on various missions and again I saw my teenage self, buried in the issues of growing up. Sometimes the church served as my only refuge and I clung to it as my survival rock.

This time in my Ecorse story, the rock crumbled into heartbreak as the preparations for the last service and the wrecking ball were underway. My church was closing

its doors and I couldn't objectively wrap my spirit around that fact. Writing its history and helping to plan its last Harvest Home Supper didn't soften the sharp edges of the fact that it was closing. The congregation eventually merged with the Lincoln Park Presbyterian Church a few years later.

I tackled the task of helping to plan our last high school reunion. The new high school didn't hold memories and the Presbyterian Church wasn't available so we held it at St. Francis Xavier because the church had a large hall. I felt at home because I felt the reunion belonged in Ecorse and St. Francis Xavier had been there long before our 1960s classes were born.

I left Ecorse again for a job opportunity, and when I returned for a visit, my church was gone. I stood by the empty field with tears in my eyes and memories tugging at my heart. Then I looked across Jefferson Avenue. St. Francis Xavier still stood there.

St. Francis Xavier still stands, in a different version, but the same vision. In 2011, St. Francis Xavier Church merged with our Lady of Lourdes in River Rouge to

form St. Andre Bessette Parish. The new parish lives on the former grounds of St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church.

### **St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception, Conneaut, Ohio**

Mary L. Lardi, a long-time parishioner of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception wrote a history of her church that is available for sale at the Conneaut Area Historical Society. When I saw the recent story in the Star Beacon about the removal of the bell at the church, I thought about her book, her presentation at Time Travel Tuesday, and how I felt when my church was reborn in a different version. This is just a part of the history of St. Mary Church of the Immaculate Conception. Her history is still living and still growing as long as her people do.



Photo by Michael Orlando

Time Travel Tuesday with Mary L. Lardi:

The Spirit of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, Conneaut  
At the May 2023 Time Travel Tuesday Conneaut Area Historical Society program,



Mary  
L.  
Lardi

ST. MARY'S CHURCH & SCHOOL. PROPERTY BOUGHT IN 1887, CORNER-STONE LAID JULY 10, 1887. BUILT AT A COST OF \$10,000. SCHOOL BUILT IN THE EAR 1900. AND COST \$15,000.

presented the historic and spiritual journey of Conneaut's St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Church.

A Conneaut Recorder newspaper story about St. Mary Church gives the bare historical facts of the early beginnings of St. Mary's Church.

St. Mary's Church. Conneaut. October 19, 1888

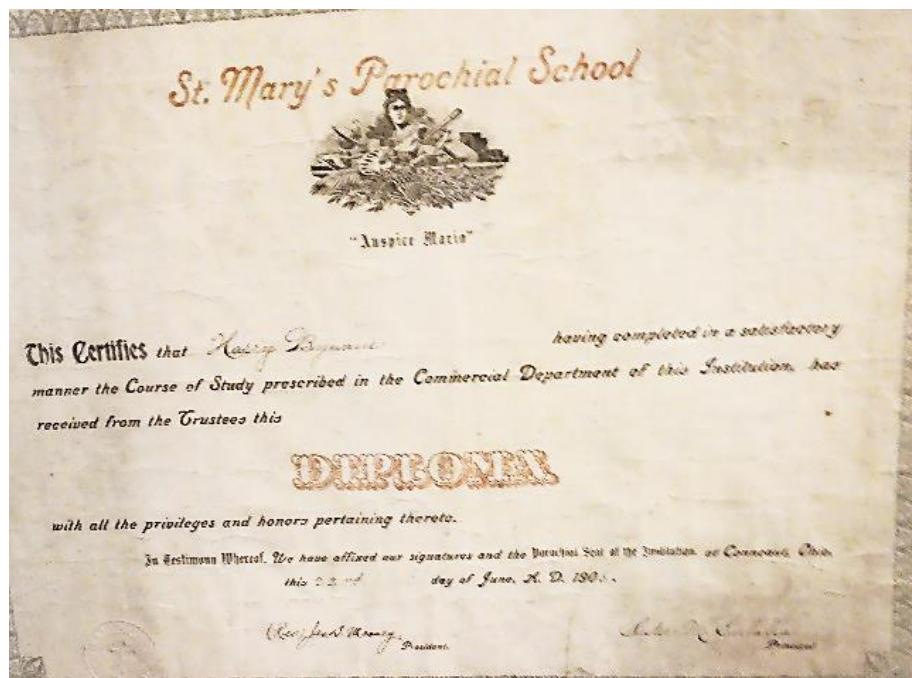
The early pioneers who came to Conneaut were those if they had any religious affiliation at all, almost without exception were Protestants, and moreover.

Protestants from that state, which was most Puritanical among the Puritans, Connecticut. In presenting this brief sketch of St. Mary's therefore, we are dealing with a congregation which is relatively of recent origin and of which it is fair to suppose .made its beginning among those not largely blessed with worldly goods and a community where the existing religious atmosphere was hardly congenial to it. In May 1864, Reverend J. Tracy, secured from Martin Murphy and Terrance

Quinn, the donation of a one-half acre lot fronting on Chestnut Street, though the Catholics of Conneaut were few and too poor to erect a church at that time. Father Tracy bought a small frame building 26x30 for one hundred dollars and moved this former dwelling which had stood on the site of the present town hall. to the new lot dedicated it in 1865 under the name of St. Mary's.

In 1887, Father Jennings bought a new site, being two lots at the corner of State. And Chestnut Streets for \$900 and on July 10 of that year (1887) Bishop Gilmour Laid the cornerstone of the new brick edifice which cost \$10,000. Father Jennings was first resident pastor in Conneaut. In October 1891, the present commodious, Pastoral residence was ready for occupancy. Having been completed at a cost of \$2,200.

Next Sunday morning the dedication services of Conneaut's new Catholic Church will be held at this place. Low masses will be said in St. Joseph's Church at 7:30 and 8:15 a.m. to give all an opportunity to attend both here and at Conneaut. The train fare for the round trip will be fifty cents. A large number from here will take part in the services.



A new parochial school was begun on September 8, 1900. It was a handsome two-story structure of pressed brick and cost \$15,000. It was dedicated in March of 1901 and formally opened in August 1901. Generations of students were educated at St. Mary school until it closed in 1972.

More than one hundred years later, another newspaper story by staff writer Mark Todd in the Ashtabula Star Beacon highlighted one of the current events in St. Mary history.

## 120-year-old Conneaut church saluted by historical society

Sep 18, 2006

CONNEAUT - - The story of St. Mary's Church in Conneaut also is the story of the people who found comfort and faith within its walls, Cheryl Shepard, Ashtabula County Historical Society president, said Saturday.

Shepard spoke at an afternoon ceremony to honor the church at Chestnut and State streets, the latest building to be saluted by the Society.

A plaque that will hang near the church entrance was presented to the Rev. Raymond Thomas, pastor of the St. Mary's/St. Francis Cabrini parish, and Mary Lou Lardi, who did the research that earned the honor.

More than a dozen people were on hand for the brief ceremony, conducted outside the church.

St. Mary's was dedicated in 1885, and it's arrival apparently marked Conneaut's first Catholic church built from the ground up. Until then, Catholics worshipped in existing buildings in town.

Shepard read from a newspaper article of the day, which described the church as a grand edifice tastefully decorated and well-constructed. She agreed, noting the church - - nearly 120 years old - - "still stands proudly today."

The same article noted the church was built, not with money borrowed from banks, but with individual donations." The people built this church," Shepard said.

Conneaut was the first community settled in what is known as the Western Reserve, and St. Mary's Church is a tribute to the city's diversity. "Conneaut was one of the largest melting pots," she said.

Thomas thanked Shepard for the plaque and Lardi for her research, and said he

hoped St. Mary's will stand for many years to come. "We have a responsibility to maintain (the church)," he said. "Not just for ourselves, but for the future."

The Society regularly recognizes "homes and buildings of historical significance throughout Ashtabula County," Shepard said. Eligible structures must be at least one hundred years old, she said. "We have a lot of history in Ashtabula County," Shepard said. "We need more people who are interested in it."

As the 21<sup>st</sup> Century progressed, St. Mary Church reflected the changes taking place in main line Protestant and Catholic Churches in the United States and around the world, heightened by the impact of the Covid epidemic.

A Gallop poll published on March 29, 2021, revealed that Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999.

In a story dated January 22, 2023, the British newspaper, The Guardian, noted in a story dated January 22, 2023,

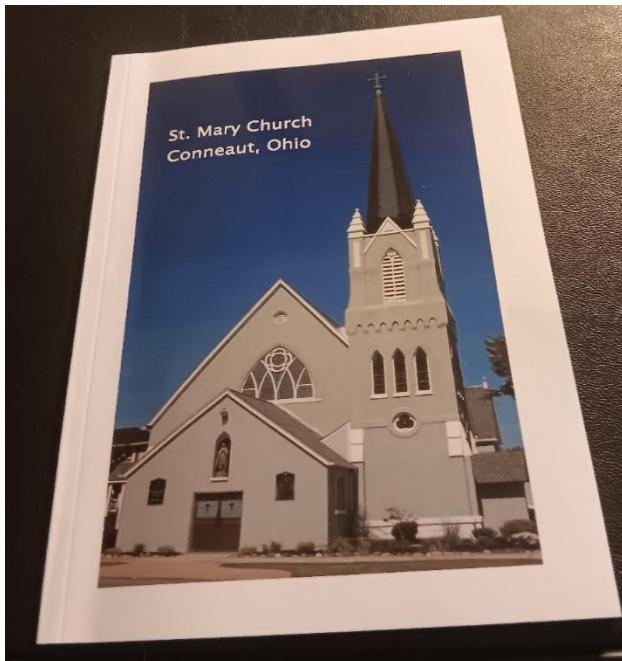
"Churches are closing at rapid numbers in the US, researchers say, as congregations dwindle across the country and a younger generation of Americans abandon Christianity altogether – even as faith continues to dominate American politics.

As the US adjusts to an increasingly non-religious population, thousands of churches are closing each year in the country – a figure that experts believe may have accelerated since the Covid-19 pandemic."

In 2008, Saint Mary Parish merged with Saint Frances Cabrini Parish to create one parish and in 2013, the parish was renamed Corpus Christi Parish. Ten years later April 16, 2023, Bishop David J. Bonnar celebrated a closing Mass at Saint Mary Church.

Knowing that your historic church is part of significant historic changes is small spiritual comfort when its doors close behind you. Throughout her presentation, Mary Lardi's love for her church shone through like an altar candle in a dark church. She spoke of the community spirit that St. Mary inspired among Catholic and non-Catholics who worked together to create Mary's Kitchen which fed hungry people for several years. She spoke of the traditional services, especially

Christmas and Easter, where the joy and meaning of their participation shone on the children's faces.



In her book, St. Mary Church, Conneaut, Ohio, Mary describes the classical Gothic architecture of St. Mary's Church and the unique, original stained-glass windows as well as several location and structural changes. But she wrote that St. Mary never lost its unique identity and "loving, welcoming atmosphere."

Mary identified a roll call of the priests who blessed both Catholic and Protestant lives, including priests like Reverend Gilbert Jennings, the first resident pastor at St. Mary; Father

William F. Murphy; and Father Thomas Fahey. According to St. Mary tradition, while sitting in the hushed sanctuary in quiet meditation, it is possible to see the benign ghostly figure of a priest blessing the worshippers in the church that he served.

Although St. Mary is closed and in the shadow of an uncertain future, Mary closes her book with certainty: "Over 125 years have gone by, yet St. Mary Church is still standing as a monument to the love and dedication of her people. Under the guidance of Mary of the Immaculate Conception, may she continue to prosper long into the future."

The same faith of the Ecorse Presbyterian and St. Francis Xavier of Ecorse, Michigan, and St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception of Conneaut, Ohio, continues and so does the same promise that Dan Schutte puts into song. We have a God that charges us with building his city and the promise that he will turn our tears into dancing. Just in a new ways, but with His people.