

Recalling the history of St. Walter, a mission church in Estes Park

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Our Lady of the Mountains Catholic Church is preparing to celebrate its 75th anniversary on June 30, 2024. Part of the preparations has been looking back to recall the parish's history.

Before there was an Our Lady of the Mountains there was a wood-framed mission church built in 1915 named St. Walter.

Who was St. Walter? The story is not entirely clear on this as there are at least three canonized St. Walters, but the small mountain church was most likely named for St. Walter of Pontoise, an 11th century French Benedictine who is the patron of prisoners, prisoners of war and vintners, and who is invoked against job-related stress.

Walter, whose name in French is Gauthier, was a professor of philosophy and rhetoric before entering the Benedictine abbey of Rebais-en-Brie. Because he was a scholar, he was tapped by King Philip I of France to become the abbot of a new abbey, the Cross Benedictine Abbey in Pontoise, located about 45 minutes north-

west of Paris.

Walter was a reluctant abbot. He yearned for a private, quiet life of prayer and tried to escape the duties and responsibilities of being the abbot by running off, first, to the Benedictine Abbey at Cluny before being pulled back to Pontoise by the monks.

He ran away again to another abbey, and then again to Rome to appeal to Pope Gregory VII, but the pontiff told him to return to Pontoise and serve the monks of the order. In church lore he is remembered as a reformer who campaigned against abuses and irregularities in the Benedictine order and among secular priests. He was persecuted for his efforts and at one point put in prison.

Walter died on Good Friday, April 8, 1095, and his remains were stolen during the French Revolution. He was canonized by Hugh de Boves, the Archbishop of Rouen in 1153 and was one of the last saints in Western Europe to have been canonized by a metropolitan instead of a pope. His feast day is marked on March 23, and alternatively on April 8.

Walter is the patron of prisoners because while he was a novice, he once took pity on an inmate at

the monastery prison and helped the prisoner to escape. He is also known for a strong devotion to the poor and the sick.

The two other Walters who have been canonized are St. Walter of Serviliano, a 13th century Benedictine hermit who founded the monastery in the Marches of Ancona, Italy, and St. Walter of Fontenelle, a 12th century Benedictine abbot of a monastery at Fontenelle, France.

Why was the Estes Park church named St. Walter?

Beginning in the summer of 1909, Fr. William Howlett, a pioneer priest who was assigned to St. John's Parish in Loveland, would come to Estes Park to offer Mass for tourists.

Howlett, the son of Irish Catholic immigrants, was born in New York state in 1847. After moving to Indiana as a boy, he came to Colorado on a wagon train in 1865 at the age of 18 with members of his family. At the age of 20 he left to study for the priesthood at St. Thomas Seminary in Bardstown, Kentucky and then at the Sulpician seminary, Issy-sur-Seine, France, the Grand Semi-

nary in Paris and the University of Würzburg in Bavaria. He was ordained for the Diocese of Denver on June 11, 1876, by Cardinal Joseph H. Guibert, Archbishop of Paris and returned to Colorado to begin a 36-year parochial career as a pioneer missionary, pastor and builder of several churches around the state.

In 1913, while serving at St. John's in Loveland, a friend of Howlett's who had been the chaplain to the Sisters of Loretto at their motherhouse in Kentucky died. Howlett was sent to Kentucky for what initially was to be a three-year assignment to step in for the late priest.

A little more than a year later, the bishop of Denver called Howlett back to Colorado to establish a parish in Estes Park. A \$500 pledge had been made to the Catholic Church Extension Society in Chicago for the construction of a chapel in Estes Park and Howlett traveled to the Windy City to collect the funds, but no one at the Extension Society could recall anything about the money and the missionary priest left empty handed.

In route home to Colorado, Howlett stopped in Davenport,



PUBLIC DOMAIN

Rev. William J. Howlett.

Iowa to visit Monsignor J. P. Ryan of St. Mary's Catholic Church and Patrick and Catherine Walsh. Howlett had met the Walsh family during their summer vacations in Estes Park as they often offered their summer home as a location for the celebration of Mass for Catholics visiting the mountains. A wealthy industrialist, Patrick

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Walsh had established the Walsh Construction Company. His firm had contracts for road construction projects with many Midwest cities, he built many large churches and he contracted with several railroad companies to build bridges and train stations.

A few years earlier, the couple's 20-year-old son, Walter, died after contracting tuberculosis. In Walter's memory, Patrick gave Howlett a \$500 donation for the construction of the chapel, and then Catherine gave an additional \$250 donation.

Howlett arrived back in Estes Park on June 29. He paid F. O. Stanley \$150 for a lot off MacGregor Avenue and Devils Gulch Road near the town's first post office. George Cook of Chicago, who was vacationing with his family in Estes Park, gave a donation of \$750, and other donations followed.

Construction of the little chapel began on July 20 and the first Mass was celebrated in the not-quite-finished chapel on Aug. 29. Two weeks later the chapel, which cost \$2,000 to build, was finished, painted and debt free.

At the end of September, Howlett left Colorado and returned to Kentucky where he served as the chaplain to the Sisters of Loretto until his death in 1936.

During his years in Kentucky, Howlett wrote several biographies about missionary priests and histories about the Catholic Church in America. Author Willa Cather drew on Howlett's 1908 book, "The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf," for her 1927 novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

The little wooden chapel which could seat about 150 people served the Catholic community for three decades, but as the popula-

tion of the town expanded and the number of Catholic families in the Estes Valley grew, there was a need for a larger church.

Plans for a new church building began in the summer of 1941 with the purchase of three acres from the Stanley estate along Big Thompson Highway. A few months later Pearl Harbor was attacked, and the nation was pulled into war in the Pacific and Europe. With materials scarce due to the war effort, construction was put on hold. Ground was eventually broken in 1946, building began in the fall of 1947 and work was completed in 1949.

The church was designed by John K. Monroe, the principal architect for the Catholic Archdiocese of Denver for many years, and built by Justus Roehling, a German carpenter-contractor from Kirtledge, at a cost of more than \$100,000. Materials chosen for the construction of the 350-seat church included native granite, peeled logs, and moss rock.

Over the next several months as Our Lady of the Mountains Catholic Church prepares to mark its 75th anniversary on June 30, 2024, parishioners will share stories of their faith in a series of articles called Living Faith.



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St. Walter Catholic Church.