

Deep roots and dedicated faithful: St. James Parish celebrates 175 years

The small, rural parish is continually strengthened by their pastoral community



COOPERSTOWN, WI —A framed cross stitch banner was placed at the foot of the ambo in St. James Parish, Cooperstown, on Sunday, July 27. The piece, created by parish member Paula Haske, featured the words from Psalm 126:3: “The Lord has done great things for us, and we

are filled with joy.” The Bible verse served as the theme for the parish’s 175-year anniversary celebration.

Bishop David Ricken was the principal celebrant for the anniversary Mass. Concelebrants were Bishop Frank Dewane of the Diocese of Venice, Florida, a priest son of the parish; Fr. Brian Belongia, pastor at St. James; Fr. William O’Brien, a priest son of the parish; Fr. Dennis Ryan, administrator at St. James from 2018 to 2019; and Fr. Santiago Turiano, administrator at the parish from 2019 to 2024.

Five priests, all with different connections from over the years to St. James Parish, concelebrated the 175th anniversary Mass. Deacon Dan Gray, who has served the parish as a deacon since his ordination in 2020, was the deacon at Mass. Sr. Helen Plum, a School Sister of Notre Dame, who served as parish leader at St. James for six months in 2019, attended the Mass.

Bishop Ricken opened the liturgy with a welcome message. He then spoke about the history of the Cooperstown community and the parish, sharing how its roots trace back to Irish, German, Bohemian and Polish families. Holy Family Parish began in Cooperstown in 1850 when residents built a log church. In 1871, a new 50-by-100-foot church with a 44-foot steeple was completed. The new church was dedicated to St. James the Apostle. The log church was remodeled as the first St. James School in 1882.

Bishop Ricken pointed out how the faith of the people allowed them to overcome “natural disasters,” including a lightning strike in 1892 that damaged the steeple and a tornado less than a year later that destroyed the roof and the church interior. On May 9, 1914, the church was destroyed by fire. The Blessed Sacrament and a few vestments were saved, Bishop Ricken said. The day after the fire, plans were made to build a new brick church and school.

“If something was needed, (the people) didn’t wait to be asked,” said Bishop Ricken about the dedication of the faithful of St. James Parish. He also noted the beauty of the stained glass windows in the church and how measures were taken over the years to “maintain the original look of the glass.”

Bishop Dewane, who was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Green Bay in 1988, was the homilist. He spoke about growing up as a member of the parish and being a part of the last graduating class at St. James School in 1964. “I hope it wasn’t my fault,” he said in reference to the school closing after his last year, which drew a laugh from the congregation. The school building was torn down in 1988.

Historic displays were featured in the parish hall showcasing significant moments in the long history of St. James Parish.

Bishop Dewane said that his visits to St. James Parish in the Diocese of Venice, where he became a bishop in 2007, bring back memories of home. “When I’m there, my prayers are for all of you,” he said.



He also said that many “large parishes” are being built in his diocese, but there is something special about a small parish like St. James Parish in Cooperstown. “It keeps everything very pastoral,” he said. “Always be a parish that places God first,” Bishop Dewane said.

Glenn Steinhorst, a lifelong parish member whose involvement has included serving on the parish council, was a childhood friend and classmate of Bishop Dewane. “When we were going to school, there was no busing, so our parents would switch off each day, providing rides,” he said. “We grew up together, rode bikes (and) played ball.”

He echoed Bishop Dewane's belief in the benefits of a small parish. "You know all the people here, especially when you were in school," Steinhorst said. "You knew when somebody was missing at Mass on Sunday."

Jane Hertel, a lifelong parishioner who sings in the choir and has served as a trustee, and Joyce Cisler, whose ministries include serving as a catechist for 40 years, choir member and pro-life leader for the parish and Vicariate VI, facilitated firsthand accounts from the people of St. James Parish about what makes the faith community special. They conducted nearly 40 video interviews.

"One of the ongoing themes from the interviews has been welcoming," Hertel said. "They feel like they are invited. People feel like they are part of what's going on."

"We are filled with joy to be together as a community," Cisler said. "In our interviews, people said that they just feel the warmth here, the warmth in the community. They talked about their faith journeys and what's so good about St. James."

Deacon Gray, who was ordained to the permanent diaconate in 2020, said that he felt the warmth of the people when pursuing his vocation as a deacon. "When I was discerning privately, I could feel something here," said Deacon Gray, a member of the parish for 39 years. "Talking to people, I could feel the support during the entire process of formation. Since ordination, I continue to receive that support. People will tell me, 'I like your homilies.' Just those little things mean so much."



Peter and Michelle Wallerius ran the photo booth-area (with Pope Leo) and were also gift bearers at the anniversary Mass with Sr. Helen Plum.

Jean Schleis spearheaded the anniversary planning committee. She served as office manager at the parish for more than 30 years, taught religious education and "served on about every committee." Schleis said that the parish sought something special to mark the milestone anniversary. "The idea was prayer, to get people to write prayers," she said.

"We were aiming for 175 (prayer entries). We received a grant from the Catholic Foundation (of the Diocese of Green Bay) for publishing." The

prayer booklet, “Voices of Faith, Inspired by St. James Parish Community, Cooperstown, Wisconsin, 1850-2025,” was distributed at the anniversary celebration. Schleis said that she hopes the prayer collections will be passed down to generations. “Being rural, farms are passed down to children in this area, so it’s a generational community,” she said.

Monica Winnekens, worship coordinator, sacristan, coordinator of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion and lector at St. James Parish, said that the planning committee wanted activities for all ages as part of the celebration that followed Mass. food, refreshments, music, games, raffles, a cemetery scavenger hunt, a performance by the Irish heritage dancers, a bounce house and a photo booth were among the offerings.

“Paula Haske also did a lot of work on the history,” Winnekens said. “We have historical displays in the parish hall along with the video interviews.”

St. James Parish was once linked with All Saints, Denmark; Holy Trinity Mission, New Denmark; St. Joseph, Kellnersville; and St. Mary, Glenmore/Stark. Today, the parish is linked with St. Joseph, Kellnersville.

The church was built in 1850 as a log church and renovated and dedicated to St. James the Apostle in 1871. The church and community has survived lightning strikes, tornados and a fire.

Fr. Belongia, who marked one year as pastor on July 1, said that the anniversary celebration, which coincided with the feast of St. James on July 25, is a time to remember. “I like to focus on the legacy, the ancestors, the people who came before us,” he said. “We’re here now because of their faith. We are now charged with keeping their legacy going and passing it on to others. We’re only sharing in the parish. We are not the parish. “It really is an iconic church when you look at the history,” Fr. Belongia said. “You can see (the steeple) from miles around. This is one of the most beautiful churches in the diocese.”

For more information about St. James Parish or to view past interviews with parishioners, visit stjamesandstjoseph.org.

