

# St. Remy Church observes 150th anniversary year

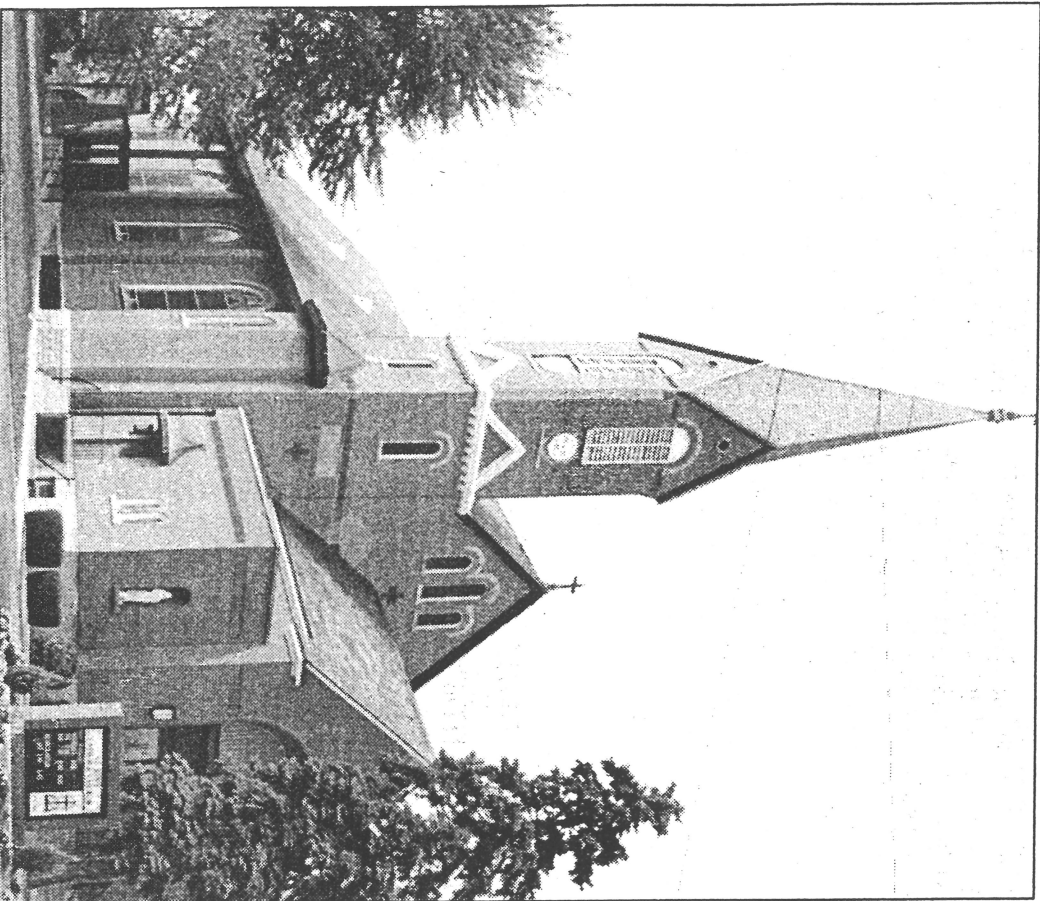
## Parishioners prepare for jubilee celebration in community of Russia

By LENORE CHRISTOPHER

ARCHDIOCESE — Parishioners at St. Remy Church in Russia spent much of the 150th anniversary year in 1996 in preparation — painting the interior of the church and having eye-catching stenciling designs added around windows and throughout the ceiling. A new outdoor welcome sign was constructed, and the former convent which links the church and rectory is receiving a facelift as a parish center.

Now it's time to celebrate, and parishioners will do just that with Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk at a 4:30 p.m. Mass in the grotto Saturday, Aug. 30, followed by a dinner for invited guests. The Mass will mark the opening of the two-day homecoming celebration which is expected to draw 1,000 people, including former pastors and religious and others who call St. Remy home. The celebration includes commemorative cups, magnets and coverlets created by the Catholic Ladies of Columbia.

Much has happened since the first chapel was built in 1846 and the first church was dedicated in 1852, but one thing remains unchanged: St. Remy is the spiritual and community nucleus of Russia (pronounced Roo-she), repre-



St. Remy Church, Russia

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senting some 380 families which, pastor Father Gene Vonderhaar said, is about 99 percent of community's population.

The Catholic population was heavily concentrated in certain areas of Ohio, one of which was in the area now known as Darke, Mercer, Shelby, Miami, Auglaize and Allen counties. There were few priests to serve the area.

Settlers of Darke, Shelby and Miami counties chose a central site for the location of a small log chapel, built in 1839 under the guidance of Father Louis Navarron. St. Valbert was dedicated on Dec. 4, 1840.

Because of distance, weather conditions and wolves, settlers had difficulty attending Mass at St. Valbert, which stood on the edge of a forest between the Russia and Versailles area. So they built a log chapel on the farm of Jean Jacques DeBrosse in 1846 with hand-hewn benches, plain windows, a few needed fixtures required for services and possibly an altar. It is believed the chapel was considered a station or mission, according to Lois Ann Baker, who compiled the history of St. Remy Parish.

In 1850, the parish was formally established when the diocese set up the boundary line to divide St. Valbert Parish into Holy Family and St. Remy parishes. Legend has it there was a race to see which of the two parishes, Holy Family or St. Remy, could construct a church first, Baker wrote, but there is no verifi-

# ST. REMY PARISH

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cation of which group won.

In 1850, residents in the Russia area constructed a church on land acquired from Henry and Mary Jane DeLaet. The typical frontier structure was a small rectangular building with gabled ends, a tall spire, a cross and several Gothic windows on either side. "It was probably made of logs since timber was plentiful," said Baker.

"Spaces between logs were filled with pieces whittled from the heart of the timber and tightly wedged with chinking or daubing plastered over the cracks. A roof was made of poles laid from gable to gable, then covered with clapboards. Stacked stones, chinked to form chimney and fireplace, windows of greased or waxed paper and wooden floors secured by leather hasps completed the building," she said. It was dedicated to St. Remy Aug. 17, 1852. Father Leon Meyer visited the parish once or twice a month.

Father August Joseph Rollinet answered the residents' request of 1853 for a teacher and priest and accepted their offer of 80 acres near the church. He was later joined by his brother, Charles, and another priest who served parishes in the area.

The first Communion and first confirmation of children at St. Remy Parish was June 15, 1854. In November of the same year, the first bells were blessed, and the inauguration of the statue of the Holy Virgin was held.

By 1868, the pioneer church, no longer able to hold the congregation, was expanded by building a new church around the old and, when completed, the walls of the first church were dismantled. Such a custom also assured that services were not interrupted, Baker explained.

However, design problems with this church prompted parishioners to build the present church in 1890. Made of red brick in Roman style, it faces Main Street, formerly known as the Russia Pike. Its original cost was not to exceed \$8,500.

The cornerstone for the church was laid and blessed in the summer of 1890 by Father Henry Drees, provincial for the Congregation of the Most Precious Blood. On Dec. 17, 1890, the church was complete except for plastering and "it was probably dedicated in 1891," said Baker. Originally there were two entrances — for the men on the west and the women on the east.

In 1904, the church was remodeled, artistically adorned with a statuary and

way of the cross, and an organ was purchased. In 1909, the chalice was gilded. In 1911, stained-glass transoms were installed, followed, in 1914, with stained-glass windows. Fresco was added to the church in 1916; in 1923, a marble holy water font was donated; and in 1927, a new in-the-wall double confessional was installed.

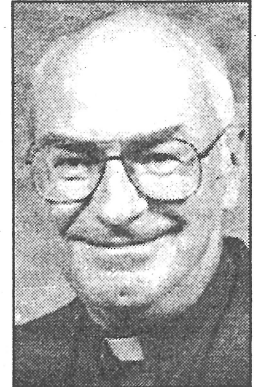
Today, vocations of the congregation include not only farming but manufacturing and agribusiness, yet the parish remains strongly aligned with family

development, Father Vonderhaar said. "That's what is so beautiful about this place." It continues to be "family and neighborhood oriented."

The parish is taking part in the "Follow Me! Disciples for the 21st Century" millennium process, has recently organized its high school religious education program and expects to widen its ministry to include more social action activities.

"The mission of St. Remy Parish is to have a more prayerful and involved Christian community involved in loving service to God and to one another," said Father Vonderhaar, who also serves as

the dean for the Sidney Deanery. The parish's recent pictorial directory, for example, is one way parishioners are getting to know one another so they can then "reach out in loving service to the surrounding communities," he said. ■



Father Gene Vonderhaar