

# A HISTORY OF SACRED HEART PARISH

## 1887-2012

In the middle of the 1880's, Catholic Christians who had moved to Los Angeles and lived in Lincoln Heights were frequently visited by a priest from the old mission church at the plaza (today known as "La Placita") and celebrated mass in a small building near the corner of North Broadway and Avenue 24. This way the catholic community of Lincoln Heights was able to attend mass occasionally near their homes. Otherwise, they would have to travel two to three miles by foot or horse transportation to La Placita to attend mass, sometimes in hot or rainy weather.

In the winter of 1884-1885, heavy floods washed out the bridges over the Rio Porciuncula (today known as the Los Angeles River) which led to downtown Los Angeles. Flimsy bridges were the only means of traveling across the river that separated Lincoln Heights from downtown Los Angeles. But something good flourished from these adversities. With the help and encouragement of Father Peter Verdaguer (the priest who frequently visited Lincoln Heights) a committee was formed to help raise money for the building of a church in Lincoln Heights. On August 28, 1887, in a public school building on Hellman Street, North of Avenue 23, nine men met to begin collecting funds for the new church. These men were:

Mr. Joseph Mesmer, who presided over the meeting

Mr. J.F. Broscart

Mr. M. Biggy

Mr. James Hanley

Mr. J.E. Howe

Mr. Norman McDonald

Mr. Baron Rogniat

Mr. Robert Sharp

Mr. Louis Vignes

Each contributed \$100 to begin the fund and soon the fund grew to \$2150. Two lots were purchased at the corner of Sichel Street and Baldwin Avenue, measuring 56X120 feet. The construction began with a small temporary school room for teaching Sunday school costing \$315.

On February 10, 1889, the cornerstone of the new church, Sacred Heart of Jesus, was laid accompanied by a great celebration. Bishop Francisco Mora, Bishop of Monterey-Los Angeles, celebrated the mass assisted by Fathers O'Connell and O'Mahoney. The church was designed by architect H.A. Cole for \$125 and built

by Jeffrey Van Trees & Miller Construction Company. After the rectory was finished, construction began on the foundation. But due to a period of financial depression in the area of Los Angeles, work on the superstructure was delayed until 1892. Meanwhile, the parish of Sacred Heart, under the pastoral guidance of Father Patrick Harnett, celebrated mass in the basement of the church. In 1889 there were 180 families in the parish. Father Harnett remained pastor until August 1889. Father Michael McAuliffe then became pastor of a rapidly growing and ethnically mixed parish, comprising of 550 Irish, 400 Germans, 50 Bohemians, 200 Belgians, 75 French, 400 Italians and 800 other people born of "American" parents.

By this time the church tower and spire had been completed and the stained glass windows had been set. The main altar was decorated with ivory and gold and the communion table was set in the center with a relief of the Last Supper facing the congregation. Statues of saints were set at various places on the altar. The floor was covered with carpeting. Even a pipe organ was installed. The massive steps at the entrance of the church were laid down. All this was done under the pastorate of Father McAuliffe. The funds were raised by sums which were pledged by parishioners and paid in monthly installments of 10%. At the completion of their pledge, each parishioner was presented with a benefactor's certificate and a mass was celebrated for these benefactors on the first Monday of every month.

On November 23, 1907, Father McAuliffe entered into his eternal rest after having completed his work at Sacred Heart Church, having re-dedicated the church through Bishop Conaty in 1904. Conaty Hall was built at Daly Street and North Broadway and became a source of revenue for the parish. In 1907, Father Gerald Gay, a former army chaplain became the third pastor of Sacred Heart Church assisted by Father L.P. Donleavy from Kilkenny, Ireland.

On that same year the Dominican Sisters opened a girls' school named Sacred Heart Academy. The Los Angeles County tax assessor announce on June 21, 1913 that \$900 in back taxes on the land upon which the church had been built had not been paid since 1907 and the county would take the deed if this tax was not paid. The next pastor, Father George Donahoe, former pastor of Our Lady of Loreto, assisted by Father Leo Murphy, paid off the tax debt in 1918. In 1923, construction of a twelve room brick building and an auditorium begun to expand the parish school and a school for boys grades 6 to 10 was opened under the tutelage of Christian Brothers from Santa Cruz and given a one year budget of \$6,000 to run the school. After one year, the Christian Brothers left Sacred Heart and opened another school for boys named Cathedral High School. Father

Donahoe promoted the church's outreach to the community by helping organize parishioners' clubs and societies which held services at Juvenal hall, visited patients in hospitals and taught catechism to children who did not attend the parish schools.

From 1940 to 1945 reverend Timothy Galvin served as pastor and was replaced by Father John J. Curran, who became Monsignor in 1961, and led a parish of mostly Irish, Italians and Germans in his first years of service and later saw the parish population's ethnicity become mostly Mexican-Americans. During his 28 years of service, Sacred Heart High School replaced the Sacred Heart Academy in 1949 and a new elementary school was built. Monsignor Curran also served as judge on the matrimonial tribunal and chaplain for the Los Angeles County Hospital.

From 1973 to 1979, Monsignor Carl A. Gerken, assisted by Fathers Timothy Dyer and Pedro Ruiz, improved the CCD religious education for children in public school by forming catechist groups, initiated the Christian Family Movement and Marriage Encounter, began Spanish and English masses with their respective English and Spanish choirs, and conducted bible classes twice a week. To help the growing Hispanic community present their needs to the political leaders the parish became a member of the community organization which filled such needs; U.N.O.

In August 1979, Monsignor Louis A. Gutierrez became pastor of Sacred Heart. After 92 years, the church needed repairs. The steeple and bell had become earthquake hazards and had to be removed. The masonry of the ceiling began to come loose as well as the roof. The pews were in need of repair and the carpet in need of replacement. By 1982, all the repairs inside the church and the roof were completed and with great success the 95th anniversary celebration was held, led by Monsignor Gutierrez assisted by Father Greg King and Father Adalberto Blanco (known to most parishioners as "Father Beto").

Father Beto worked closely with the Guadalupe Society and Grupo Juventud. In 1984, Monsignor Gutierrez was transferred to another parish and in December of that year Monsignor Armando X. Ochoa became pastor of Sacred Heart Church for three years. When he left in 1987, after being ordained auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles, Fathers David E. Anderson, Arturo Velasco and Simon Jacinto Jimenez were the parish priests with Monsignor Paul T. Dotson in residence. That year Sacred Heart Church celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The next twenty five years of Sacred Heart Church's history are filled with uneventful years and challenging times as the living church continued to grow and fulfill its continuing mission of faith in the community of Lincoln Heights. Two strong earthquakes, the San

Fernando Valley earthquake of 1971 and the Imperial Valley earthquake of 1979 had shaken the building of the church but had caused no visible damage. However, the steeple and the bell were at risk of collapsing and were removed in 1980. Further concern for the earthquake safety of the church building and the availability of new technology to strengthen older buildings against the shaking of earthquakes led to the decision to invest in the strengthening of the church building using center core epoxy treatment.

This project, which was overseen by Fathers David Anderson and Arturo Velasco, would take four to five months and cost \$700,000. While the project was in progress, the masses were celebrated in the parish hall behind the church. Through a committed fund raising effort, the parishioners secured the funds needed and the project was completed in 1989.

In 1992, Father Gabriel Gonzalez became pastor, assisted by Father Michael Gutierrez and Father George Horan, who became resident. In 2001, a new church organ was installed in the loft above the front entrance to the church and a program of music celebrated its debut on May 5, 2001 at 6:15 p.m. Father Gabriel Gonzalez served as pastor from August 1992 to June 2003. During that time the church bell, which had been removed in 1980 and set at the side of the church, became of interest to Cardinal Roger Mahony.

The new cathedral, Our Lady of the Angels, which had begun being built in 1998, was close to completion and bells were being secured for installation. In a letter to Sacred Heart parish, Cardinal Mahony requested that the sacred heart bell (named "Mary Jane" in the 1890's) be donated to the new cathedral. A controversy ensued. Some parishioners were willing to donate the bell while others wanted to keep the cherished bell at Sacred Heart where it belonged. A steering committee was formed in an effort to raise funds to save the bell. Both the parishioners and the Lincoln Heights community became involved. Guided by the Committee to Restore Historic Sacred Heart Church, the efforts of the people of the church and the community were successful. The bell was rededicated on January 13, 2002. On January 21 it was reinstalled. And on February 3, 2002, the sound of the bell was heard in the Lincoln Heights community as it was rung once again after twenty two years of being silent.

In February of 2002 Father Robert Victoria joined Father Gabriel and Father George as associate pastor. Together, they served the parish until Father Gabriel was assigned to another parish and Father Alberto Villalobos came to Sacred Heart as administrator. The church had no access to the disabled in the form of a ramp

for wheel chairs. A ramp being built was suggested over the years, but no action was taken. Father Alberto Villalobos and Father Robert Victoria thought this project was worth pursuing and with the help of an architect friend of Father Robert plans were made as to how the ramp could be built. And so the movement to build the ramp was begun. There were some delays in the process of obtaining building and safety approval of the plans and the permits required. There were even rumors that the plans had been rejected.

In June of 2004, Father Alberto Villalobos' temporary assignment as administrator was completed and on July of that year Father Mario Torres became pastor of Sacred Heart joining Father Reynaldo Matunog, who had arrived at Sacred Heart in June 2004 and Father Robert Victoria who had stayed after Father Alberto Villalobos had moved to his new assignment. Soon, Father Mario learned about the ramp project from Father Robert and proceeded to inquire about the delay which had halted the project. He found that the plans had been approved and proceeded to lead the congregation to raise the funds necessary to build the ramp. The outpouring of the parishioner's generosity was so great that not only was the ramp built, but the whole area between the church and the rectory was renewed into a patio area with a fountain and new clean restrooms. Now the parishioners in wheel chairs could be easily brought to mass.

During the years Father Mario Torres served as pastor of Sacred Heart, a lot at the corner of North Broadway and Thomas Street, which had previously been occupied by the Rose Eye Clinic became a source of community concern. A project by private entrepreneurs was announced. A commercial business was to be established called "Las Villas". It would house a restaurant and arcades where alcoholic beverage would be sold. The sale of alcoholic beverages violated the city ordinance that any establishment selling such drinks must be at 500 or more feet distance from any school. Both Abraham Lincoln High School and Gates Street Elementary School were located across the street. Parishioners joined the community protest. Father Mario led a rosary on the empty lot one evening. The television news media reported on the protests and interviewed some of the citizens of the community. Eventually, enough pressure was brought to bear that project "Las Villas" was abandoned.

A disturbing event took place during this time. There was an attempt to set on fire the front doors of the church. Only a small portion at the bottom where the two doors meet was scorched. Fearing another attempt, some of the parishioners volunteered to keep a watch in front of the church during the night. Eventually, a

security system consisting of cameras located throughout the church property was installed.

In July of 2008, Father Mario completed his time of service at Sacred Heart and Father Tesfaldet Asghedom began his service at Sacred Heart. To make his name easier to pronounce he told parishioners to call him Father Tes and so he became known as Father Tes. Father Tes came from Halai, Eritrea, a relatively new country in East Africa located north of Ethiopia. Father Tes brought a new spiritual enthusiasm to the parishioners. The "amen" s were no longer "Amen" but rather "AMEN!!!". On July 1, 2011, Father Tes was officially made pastor of Sacred Heart Church. He was installed pastor at an afternoon mass by Bishop Gabino Zavala. Assisted by Father George Horan and Father Reynaldo Matunog, Father Tes has given helpful and caring service to his parishioners in their times of need and speaking fluently in both Spanish and English has become accessible to all the parishioners. On October of 2011, Father Tes introduced a new bi-lingual program of evangelization called "Why Catholics?". This four years program is based on four themes; prayer, the creed, the sacraments and Christian life. So far more than 200 persons get together every week to reflect on the word of God and share their faith. It has already given tangible results. Besides, Father Tes, with the help of some engineers and architects is studying the possibility of rebuilding the steeple of the church.

During the years 2008 to 2012, parishioners active in the community, became involved once again in curtailing the spread of alcoholic beverages in the community. This time, a convenience store, part of a national chain of such stores called Seven-Eleven (7-Eleven) located in a shopping area at the corner of North Broadway and Eastlake Avenue, applied for a liquor license when the limit of such licenses for the community had already been reached. They were trying to circumvent this obstacle by using a license from another part of the Los Angeles area. As of the writing of this document, the license has not been granted even though 7-Eleven persists on getting it so they can sell their own brand of alcoholic beverages.

On June 24, 2012, Sacred Heart Church celebrates its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The history of Sacred Heart Church has come to a pause. But the story of this church and its continuing mission of faith, to bring people closer to God's Kingdom, will go on indefinitely. Many books could be written telling in more fullness and detail the history of Sacred Heart Church, so the account you have read is but a collection of highlights in this church's history. Not all the names and events that have made the history of this church have been included, but hopefully what has been written

will give the reader a feel for what this church has been through in the past 125 years.