



Key Moments in St. Peter's History

A series of historical highlights from the first 200 years of St. Peter – Libertytown.

St. Peter's Fire – blessings in the midst of tragedy

Where were you, when you learned that the Church was on fire? If you were a parishioner of St. Peter's in Libertytown on Thursday, June 3 2004, you can probably reply without hesitation.

It was lunchtime. The roofers were eating their lunch in the cemetery adjoining the Church. They had been putting the finishing touches on the metal roof before the scaffolding would be removed. A passerby saw the flames, fanned by a gentle breeze, and stopped at the Parish office to alert them that their church was on fire. When units from the Libertytown Fire Company arrived, they immediately saw heavy fire conditions in the Church, which drew 26 fire companies and more than 100 firefighters from 3 counties (and Fort Dietrick), to this 5 alarm fire.

Fr. John Dietzenbach, soon to be transferred to a new parish, was in the rectory. Thursday was his day off – to relax! Receiving a call from Priscilla Spielman in the Parish office, Fr. rushed to the sacristy. He was able to recover the Eucharist, but firefighters would block Fr. in his attempts before much more could be retrieved. Unfortunately, one of Fr.'s favorites paintings, Mary as a young girl, was directly under where the fire started. It was not possible to safely reach that artwork.

Word spread at lightening speed. Sheila Thompson, Parish Council member, learned of the fire from her daughter. Her daughter, learned from a friend in Seattle, Washington. A little closer to home, Barbara Kyle was a teacher at St. John Regional Catholic School and another member of the Parish Council. She was at the school, standing on the curb at dismissal. One of the mothers - Mrs. Hutchinson, said "Mrs. Kyle, our church has totally burned down!" Barbara's first thought was 'Oh dear Lord, we are losing our Pastor and now our Church – how much more can we take?' Parishioners crowded to the Church, walking the final distance from where they had to leave their cars; some crying, some hugging and all in disbelief. "I know it's only a building, so why do I feel so bad?" one woman asked.

The steeple, where the fire started, quickly collapsed and with it the bell, the gold cross and finally the roof. Tragically, all but 2 of the early exquisite German made stained glass windows were smashed in an effort to save the Church. Most of the stations of the cross, were water damaged and soot covered. Our 133 year old church was a shell of its former magnificence.



Figure 1 Steeple engulfed in flames before collapsing June 3, 2004

The new steeple and replacement roof had been under renovation, and the gold cross at the top, had only just been blessed at a ceremony in April. The rectory, also damaged in the fire, had not been under renovation, but its roof had been replaced very recently.



Figure 2 Crucifixion painting survives the flames c. June 2004

Nancy Pollack, then parishioner and art conservator, called it a miracle that fire did not destroy the over 100 year old, 8 by 12 foot painting of the Crucifixion which hung in the sanctuary behind the altar. The wood frame was wet, but not the painting; it could (and would) be restored. One of many blessings, on a day which felt anything but blessed. Vestments not used in the current liturgical season were stored above the sacristy, only accessible by a drop down stair case. Catechists Carolyn Nolan and Anne Mason were planning to move some of the vestments into that storage area earlier that Thursday, but Anne had worn sandals to work and didn't want to climb the staircase in sandals. So some vestments were spared because they were easily retrieved in the early moments of the fire. After the fire was under control, firefighters helped June Shabdach, Parish council member and head of the altar server ministry, retrieve the robes worn by the servers during Mass. They were smoke filled, so June took them home, washed them and laid them out on her lawn to dry. They would serve their purpose until new ones could be purchased.

In the face of all that was happening that Thursday afternoon, Fr., the Parish staff and the Council turned their attention to the needs of the parishioners – even while the flames were still being doused with water.

Since 1992, when the Parish Center was built, additional Masses had been regularly held in the Parish Hall, so we already had a 'spare' worship space, no small blessing. Two days from now, a couple was scheduled to say their wedding vows in the now destroyed church. A call to St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Eldersburg and the wedding was moved there, another blessing. Since the rectory was also damaged, Fr. needed a place to live. Angel Hill, which had been purchased and renovated within the past 2 years, was available. For Fr. to be able to remain on campus over the ensuing years was no small blessing. The Parish Center was large enough to meet the worship space needed, but our Saturday evening Vigil Mass would conflict with events which had been previously booked for the Parish Center on Saturday evenings. Life in Christ, an Episcopal community just down the road from St. Peter's, invited us to use their church on those dates. This invitation allowed us to honor all of our commitments; yet another blessing.

The next morning, Mike Riley and Mike Horrigan, Parish Council President and Vice-President, arrived at the Parish. Fr. John, the staff and Fr. Jason Worley (who had only recently been named Fr. John's successor) were already gathered in Sullivan Hall at the Parish Center. Mike Riley recalled how impressive the scene was – everyone working as a team and directing all energies towards what needed to be done – looking towards the future. The dedication and cooperation on display that day, was followed by incredible support from the Archdiocese, Parish Council, Planning Committee and St. Peter's 1900 families. It is no small wonder then, that 4 short years later, we received the greatest blessing of all - to be celebrating Mass in our 'new' Church.