



Key Moments in St. Peter's History

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

Father Eugene Nickol

A rocking chair, a VCR and a TV. Those were gifts that friends of Fr. Eugene Nickol gave him upon his assignment as pastor of St. Peter's in 1985, along with good-natured ribbing that his move to Libertytown was akin to semi-retirement in the countryside. After all, what could there be for this city boy to do, way out there? In reality, Fr. Gene doesn't think he ever had time to use that rocker or the video cassette recorder.



Figure 1 Fr. Gene Nickol

Born in Baltimore April 25, 1947, he was the middle of the three children of Andrew and Marian Nickol. He attended the city's Shrine of the Little Flower School, the elementary school affiliated with his home parish of the same name. Father Gene says his priestly discernment began in the eighth grade. He was one of 108 ninth graders enrolled in St. Charles College High School and its six-year seminarian studies program...108 young men thinking about the priesthood. To this day, Fr. Gene stays in touch with dozens of those classmates. Besides holding a virtual 55th class reunion during the pandemic, 40 to 50 of them from around the world gather on Zoom weekly. Fr. Gene completed his priestly formation in 1973 after six years at Mount St. Mary's Seminary, earning a bachelor's degree in philosophy and a masters in theology, so he really was no stranger to Frederick County.

After being ordained by Lawrence Cardinal Sheehan fifty years ago in May 1973, Fr. Gene served as an associate at St. Joseph, Fullerton from 1973 – 1977. His next assignment was as an associate at St. Agnes, Catonsville from 1977-1985. It was in this timeframe that he led Search Retreats, which were retreats for young people held at locations such as the Sparks CYO Retreat House. The Archdiocese honored him with the title of "Padre of Youth" in 1985.

In April 1985, an unusual month for a transfer, Fr. Gene came to St. Peter the Apostle in Libertytown. He remembers specifically that departing pastor Fr Iaia celebrated the Easter Masses and Fr. Gene celebrated the following Sunday, and then departed for a planned two-week vacation to the Holy Land. The trip had long been planned and Archbishop William Borders, who had assigned him to St. Peter's, strongly encouraged Fr. Gene to proceed with his planned trip. He, his classmate Fr. (now Msgr.) Dick Murphy and about 50 other people made the pilgrimage. A moving moment for Fr. Gene came when he concelebrated Mass on the Sea of Galilee, at an outdoor chapel dedicated to St. Peter at the site where Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, and Peter replied that the Lord knew that he did. This, to Fr. Gene, was a wonderful place to be just after becoming pastor of our church named for the first pontiff. Since his days at St. Agnes, Fr. Gene has continued to be an avid traveler, often leading groups of parishioners and friends abroad and on cruises. Free tickets, earned by booking enough fellow travelers, would be raffled off for St. Peter's fundraisers during his time here.

Fr. Gene was officially installed as our pastor on June 9, 1985. His pastorate was a period of tremendous growth for St. Peter's with the number of registered families more than tripling from 320 to 1,050. With a century-old church, there were repairs to be made such as the steeple restoration shortly after his arrival. With a burgeoning congregation, there was also need for new space. After exploring the possible purchase of another building in the neighborhood, the decision was made to build a new parish center. Who would help him lead this major project? Amazingly, it was while he was on vacation on St. John's in the Virgin Islands that Fr. Gene noticed an ad on a placemat when he went out for a meal. "*Homes of Distinction – Dan Sullivan*" had an area code (301) 898 number. Fr. Gene knew that had to be someone close to home and a subsequent phone call secured the parishioner architect who would serve as head of the building committee for the Parish Center. Due to Dan's untimely passing just before the dedication of the center, its largest room is named Sullivan Hall in his memory. Fr. Gene also continues to be grateful to John and Cindy Pfaff who built the pavilion for our parish, noting how generous many parishioners have been. He chuckles when he remembers that before the pavilion was built, he looked out with concern when he saw cows in the field where his first parish picnic was to take place that day. Fr. Gene fondly remembers Thelma Baltzell, the parish secretary, who he said was a true blessing as he began his first pastorate. He is also grateful for the welcome he received from Fr. William Hirt who was a weekend helper, and Director of Religious Education Martha Langdon.

In 1993, Fr. Gene was appointed pastor of Holy Trinity in Glen Burnie. Before leaving Libertytown, he told the Catholic Review that he would miss being able to "sit on the front porch and see hills and cows." It was while at Holy Trinity, in August 1994 that he and the receptionist were abducted at knifepoint after Mass by a man who forced Fr. Gene to drive a distance before locking him in the car's trunk. Lying in that dark, hot space, Fr. Gene began praying the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, a devotion that he had helped institute at St. Peter's. Soon, Fr. Gene says he heard a voice telling him "Get out of this trunk!" He recalls gaining a sense of calm and the knowledge that God was with him. He found a release wire for the trunk lid and slowly pulled it. The trunk opened slightly, so he held the lid closed and waited for an opportunity. Minutes later, as the car stopped at a red traffic light, Fr. Gene popped the trunk open and climbed out. The receptionist realized what was happening and scrambled out of the front seat. The two were quickly surrounded by onlookers, one of whom helped call an ambulance. The startled assailant fled and was arrested a few days later after committing another crime.



Figure 2 Fr. Gene Nickol saying Mass as he celebrates 50 years since his ordination as a priest, May 21, 2023 at Our Lady Queen of Peace, Middle River, MD.

Fr. Gene would later serve as pastor of Our Lady of the Fields in Millersville from Jan. 2003 to 2011, and then serve at St. Rita's in Dundalk and St. Marks in Catonsville, before retiring in 2018 after serving as senior priest at St. John's Church in Columbia. He currently resides at the rectory of Queen of Peace Church in Middle River, MD. and continues to celebrate Mass, hear confessions, anoint the sick, and lead retreats while also enjoying travel, reading and catching up with his fellow priests.