

Benefitting from the Past

The first church on the site of the present St. Xavier's on Sycamore Street was built in 1819 at the corner of Liberty and Vine, where St. Francis Church now stands. In 1822 it was picked up and moved to Sycamore Street.

In 1819 Cincinnati was part of the diocese of Bardstown, Kentucky. There were only seven Catholic families in the area at the time, yet those hardy people determined to have a church of their own to draw their little community together and to provide a suitable place for the celebration of Mass and the sacraments. Their church was a wooden building, only 30 X 50 feet, built by William Riley, a carpenter of Alexandria, Kentucky, of timbers grown on his own land. It was called Christ Church, and Mass was celebrated in it for the first time on Easter Sunday, April 11, 1819.

In 1821, Cincinnati was itself made the seat of a new diocese, and Father Edward Fenwick, O.P. of the Dominican Priory of St. Rose, Kentucky, was consecrated its first bishop. Bishop Fenwick rented a home in what is now the Lytle Park area of Cincinnati, and almost at once bought on credit a lot on Sycamore Street. The little wooden church was moved from Liberty Street to Sycamore and was established as the cathedral under a new name — St. Peter's.

The little settlement on the Ohio grew by leaps and bounds, and the Catholic community in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky quickly outgrew its tiny church. Under Bishop Fenwick's leadership they bought adjacent property on Sycamore Street and built a handsome new cathedral of brick. It was dedicated on December 17, 1826. In 1831 Fenwick opened a seminary and college next to the cathedral under the patronage of St. Francis Xavier.

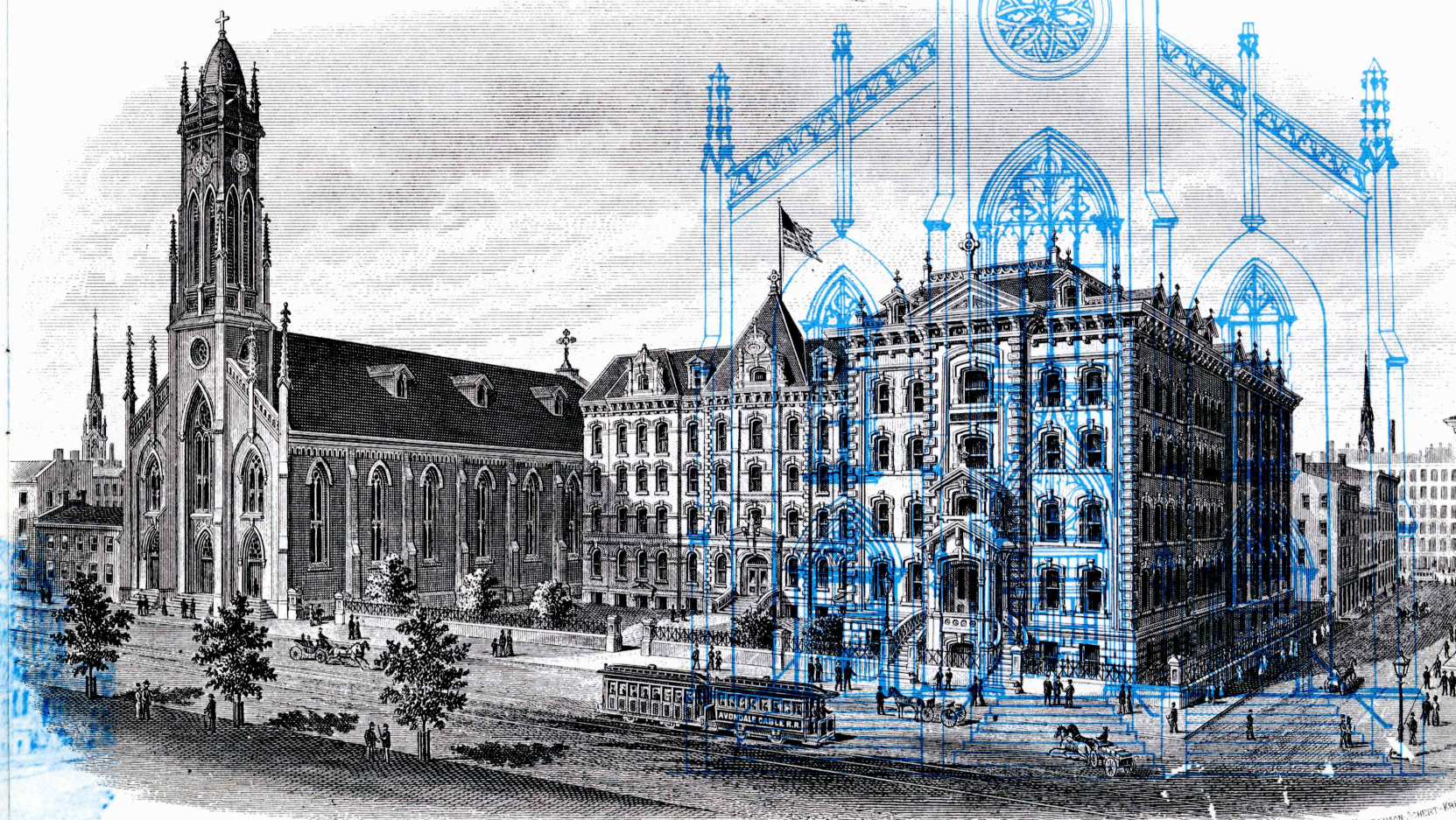
Bishop Fenwick died in 1832 and was succeeded by Bishop John B. Purcell. In 1840 Bishop Purcell brought in the Jesuits to run the seminary and college. Meanwhile, he purchased property at Eighth and Plum and began to build a new cathedral there. When it was consecrated in 1845, the title of St. Peter in Chains was transferred to it. The church on Sycamore Street was placed, along with the seminary and college, under the patronage of St. Francis Xavier. At the same time Father John Blox, S.J. became the first Jesuit pastor of St. Xavier Church.



In 1856 the number of people attending St. Xavier Church was straining the facilities of the church building, and a new one was planned. The new building, basically the church as we know it today, was begun in 1858 under the leadership of Father Charles Driscoll, S.J., pastor from 1848 to 1885 — longest pastorate in the history of the church. Our St. Joseph altar is a memorial to Father Driscoll. Three years later, in 1861, Bishop Purcell celebrated the first Mass in the great new church.

The people of that generation looked with justifiable pride on their majestic church, the fruit of their zealous sacrifice, the focal point of much fervent Catholic life. Then, in 1882, came the tragic fire. It was April 7, the night between Holy Thursday and Good Friday. No one is certain how the fire started, but it seems likely that somehow one of the candles burning all night at the repository fell over and ignited the drapery adorning the altar. In any case, the whole interior of the church was ruined and the roof was destroyed.

To this day there are great wooden beams high in the tower heavily charred by the fire, and stains on the stonework outside the trefoil windows of the tower are reminders of those raging flames. But by 1883 the dauntless people of St. Xavier had rebuilt the church. We use it lovingly and gratefully to this day.



Growing with the Present

At various points in its history any vigorously alive institution is called upon to affirm the times in which it exists. It must take stock of where it is, and where it should be in relation to the diverse groups of persons it serves. It should respond creatively to the needs of its day and its locality.

Only a few years after Bishop Fenwick's establishment of the site on Sycamore Street one such point in the history of St. Xavier Church came. It was 1840, and the Jesuits responded affirmatively to the request of Bishop Purcell that they undertake the direction of the seminary and college/high school on Sycamore Street.

Another significant point in its history came in 1845 when the Jesuits took up the pastorate of St. Xavier Church in addition to the operation of the college and seminary, and yet another when the seminarians moved away in 1848 — the first of several moves for the "Athenaeum," as the seminary was called — and the Jesuits were left with church and college.

In 1858 the decision to build the great new church represented a historical point of affirmation.

The determination to rebuild the church in the same grand style was made in 1882 after the fire — certainly a tremendous renewal of commitment.

In 1911 St. Xavier College acquired property in Avondale and began in several stages to move away from the downtown site. But church and high school remained.

Then another crucial point of affirmation came in 1960. St. Xavier High School moved to the northern hills. But under the pastorate of Father Michael English, S.J., the studied decision was made that the church should remain in the service of the people on its original historic site.

Service has been the hallmark of the Jesuits of St. Xavier Church, both before that time and after. The memories of the other Jesuits quickly rise up — men like Father James McCummiskey, pastor until his death in 1978; Father Francis Bungart, known as the "angel of the bottoms" for his many years of priestly ministering to downtown families; Father Francis J. Finn, famous author of many boys' books. There were confessors like Father Alphonse Fisher and the blind Father Edward P. Anderson. Father Ladislaus Majerowski, "The Major," was known to many in both high school and parish, as was Father Eugene Daly — short, but lovably tough. Brother Louis Walsh exercised a quiet influence on many in the parish during his many years as sacristan.

These Jesuits and many more besides lived their lives over the decades serving the people of St. Xavier Church.

Now another pivotal point in history is upon us.

The toll of time on the sixty-year-old former day-nursery building has accentuated a twofold problem: the building is being used as a rectory and an office, but it was designed for neither purpose.

Providing efficient service to the faithful who frequent St. Xavier Church while maintaining proper Jesuit community life poses problems that cry out for immediate solution.

Behind the bars at the entrance to the rectory, there is little privacy and little efficiency for either visitor or resident priest. There is only one office and a small parlor to use for counseling and interviewing. Often priests have no recourse but to use their own bedrooms or the face-to-face confessional in the church.



Living arrangements for the priests leave much to be desired. Parish offices intrude into the first and second floors. The dining room, next to the small secretarial and bookkeeping office, is often pressed into service for office tasks, or for use as a meeting room.

Much of the furniture transferred from the Jesuit high school quarters was old even in 1960.

The Jesuit community room is in the cellar. What would pass for the living room or family room in a home has no windows, no natural flow of air, and no natural light. Traffic to the kitchen storeroom must pass through it to get supplies. One corner of the community room is partitioned off for the employees' lavatory.

The priests have little privacy except in their own bedrooms. The rectory does not encourage community life under present conditions.

The solution to the problems of living quarters and office space seemed fairly obvious: separate the two functions physically. The decision to move the offices and counseling rooms to the spacious church undercroft seemed perfectly logical.

Today, perhaps more than ever, St. Xavier Church is involved in serving the people of Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. And it is growing.

St. Xavier Church is not only a territorial parish. The apostolate of the Jesuits does not stop at the city limits or at the shoreline of the Ohio River. People from almost every zip code area in Cincinnati and in Northern Kentucky come regularly to the church.

Sizable numbers of old and new parishioners are in the suburbs. But they are only minutes away from the church via the expressways.

Men and women from all walks of life who have sought the educational benefits of the Jesuits over the years through St. Xavier High School or Xavier University feel free to "come home" to "St. X Church."

The bonds between St. Xavier Church and Northern Kentucky traditionally have been very strong. In the 1850's Jesuits from St. Xavier regularly served Kentucky parishes, notably St. Mary's in Covington. The Jesuits from St. Xavier established Corpus Christi parish in Newport. The first bishop of Covington, George Aloysius Carrell, S.J., was a Jesuit who had been a pastor of St. Xavier Church.

The present service to Northern Kentuckians is but the continuation of a long standing tradition. Many families on either side of the river have formed a continuing bond of loyalty to St. Xavier and the Jesuits. Jesuits have been a persuasive and pervasive influence in the lives of parents and children through several generations.

