

Touching souls in Northridge

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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THE FACES OF GOD: OUR LADY OF LOURDES CHURCH



Our Lady of Lourdes School second graders display Nativity scenes they have made for their parents for Christmas.



Fr. David Loftus, administrator, joins Msgr. Peter Moran, pastor emeritus, after Mass.

teachers, returning for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Two signers interpreted for the hearing impaired and before the final blessing, wedding anniversary couples for the month were called to the sanctuary where they were congratulated and blessed by the assembly. After Mass many parishioners stayed for coffee and donuts in the parish hall.

"It's all good here," says OLL School principal Patricia Hager. "It is so welcoming. The Catholicity, the identity — it is here. No matter what, whenever you come here, there is always something going on in the parish. And the priests support the school 100 percent. I am proud that the children write letters to those in RCIA. I am proud that the children participate in 'Locks of Love' and they donate their hair for St. Baldrick's Foundation and Stand Up to Cancer. I am so proud of what these children do here, and all grades participate."

Parishioners also are conscious that they can never become complacent. Members of the Parish Council often ask themselves, "Is there anything we still need to do to be more hospitable?" Welcome packets are given to those new to the parish. On the second Sunday of the month anniversary couples are recognized with a blessing and a red rose. Every ministry group within the parish takes its turn hosting a Donut Sunday. "The people try to make hospitality real here," says Father Loftus, whose welcoming blanket is tangible proof. "Hospitality is felt in the parish outreach programs and in projects for others in the parish."

In turn, Father Loftus — like Msgr. Moran before him — supports his parishioners in their faith-filled activities and ministries, including liturgical music. "We are blessed with three different choirs," notes Janus, who also directs the Sunday evening choir "Harmonia."

"We pray together and we sing," she continues. "I want the choir to know that their first responsibility is to be a member of the whole gathered community and the importance of their role as music ministers who support the sung prayer. They are not there to perform."

During the summer, the parish offers "Harmonia Under the Stars." Parishioners come with picnic baskets and are invited to be part of a community-performing event. Janus initially arranged seating for 50; the event has since grown to 800 in attendance as a mini-Hollywood Bowl.

"This parish is so appreciative," says Janus, "which is why I love it so. The parish community supports us. From the rich traditions of classical sung prayer to that of today's contemporary Catholic artists, music continues to grow and crescendo, and it can only continue with the love and support of our parish."

With a smile she adds, "Father David has told the choir, 'Music has a way of touching the soul like nothing else can, so in a way you are all soul-touchers.'" **TD**



The renovated Our Lady of Lourdes Church was rededicated in 1995 after the 1994 Northridge earthquake.

Established: September 1, 1958
Location: 18405 Superior Street, Northridge
San Fernando Region: Deanery 5

young Father Timothy Manning), Father Stroup served at St. Vibiana Cathedral as master of ceremonies and was also the first director of Our Lady Chapel-Catholic Information Center.

During his 25 years in Northridge, he completed the entire parish plant, saw to it that the debt was paid off by 1974, and inaugurated its outstanding liturgical music program. He also steered the parish through the first of two major earthquakes, the 6.6 Sylmar quake of Feb. 9, 1971, from which the parish sustained no major damage.

Although two other parishes in the archdiocese (East L.A. and Tujunga) are named for the Blessed Mother under the title of Our Lady of Lourdes, this one in Northridge bears the distinction of being founded exactly 100 years after the miraculous event in France in 1858.

It was in the muddy grotto of Massabielle in Lourdes, on Thursday, Feb. 11, that 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous experienced the first of 18 visions of the Blessed Mother and described her as a woman dressed in white with a blue belt around her waist.

When Bernadette asked her name, the Lady said: "I am the Immaculate Conception." (Pope Pius IX had promulgated the dogma just four years earlier, but the term was unknown to the peasant girl.) In another apparition, the Blessed Mother told Bernadette to "pray and do penance for the conversion of the world."

The visions continued until July 16 of that year until church authorities verified their authenticity and devotions to the site increased. Since then, some 57 miracles have been medically verified and Lourdes water continues to flow. The shrine is now one of the most visited sites in the world. The feast day for Our Lady of Lourdes is Feb. 11.

The Northridge parish — located just east of Reseda Boulevard — began Sept. 1, 1958, a few blocks from the campus of newly-opened San Fernando Valley State College (known today as Cal State University, Northridge). It was one of six parishes founded that year under Cardinal James Francis McIntyre, four of them with titles for the Blessed Mother. The parish's first Mass was celebrated Oct. 12 in the gymnasium of Rancho San Antonio in Chatsworth for 725 families.

The following year the Immaculate Heart Sisters opened the new school, and in 1960 Cardinal McIntyre blessed the new church for 1,500 families. In the next ten years the rectory was completed, a new convent built and multiple parish groups formed.

At the helm was the founding pastor, Father Paul Stroup from Fort Wayne, Ind., who had just finished two years as founding pastor of Guardian Angel Church in Pacoima. Ordained in 1942 (where the subdeacon at his first Mass was a

Honored by Pope Paul VI as a domestic prelate (monsignor) in 1967, Msgr. Stroup died in June 1983 at age 66; the principal celebrant was Cardinal Manning. The parish hall opened in 1986 is named for Msgr. Stroup.

By the time Our Lady of Lourdes celebrated its silver jubilee in October 1983, a new pastor was in place: Father Peter Moran, a native of County Galway, Ireland, the youngest of 14 children (two of whom were also priests, Msgr. Michael Moran, pastor of St. Mary, Palmdale, and Father Francis Moran, who served in Santa Ana).

Father Peter, ordained in 1965, served at five parishes before beginning his pastorate at Our Lady of Lourdes, whose faith community continued to grow. In 1992 the pastor was named a prelate of his holiness (monsignor) as plans to remodel the church were in progress.

Those plans took on new shape, and urgency, after Jan. 17, 1994, when the 6.7 Northridge quake struck, resulting in 57 deaths and 1,500 injured. Msgr. Moran and the parish community were among the first to offer help and spiritual comfort.

Eventually, the renovation efforts resumed and in July 1995 Our Lady of Lourdes' community celebrated the finished product. "It has been a team effort," Msgr. Moran noted, "and with God's help we will continue to work as a team, and strengthen our spiritual bonds." After 28 years, Msgr. Moran retired in 2011 as pastor emeritus.

The current administrator of the 2,500-family parish, Father David Loftus, is a native of County Mayo, Ireland, ordained in 1994. He has a master's degree in theology from Boston College and for ten years was the adult education coordinator for the archdiocesan Office of Religious Education.

At the upcoming Religious Education Congress in February, his workshop, "Walk the Way: Enter the Mystery," will center on the unfolding of God's providence on the pilgrim way of our own lives — a topic that St. Bernadette Soubirous would certainly understand. **TD**



Members of "Forever Young" show gifts they have wrapped to distribute to families through MEND.



Mary Janus (right) directs the family choir of parents and children at the 9 a.m. Family Mass.



Members of the 10:30 a.m. Sunday choir, led by music director Sterling Branton, prepare for Mass.



One Sunday a month parishioners with wedding anniversaries are recognized at the 9 a.m. Mass.



Sister Frances Kennedy, parish DRE, and religious education instructors and aides meet before classes.



In early 2011, before it was announced who would succeed Msgr. Peter Moran as the leader of Our Lady of Lourdes Church, the longtime pastor asked parishioners to pray for their new shepherd.

Known as a welcoming community, they responded with kindness and generosity. And when Father David Loftus was named administrator, the parish's knitting group members, who pray while they sew and knit, presented the County Mayo native with a wool blanket with a Celtic stitch.

But in so many ways, this West Valley parish reaches out whenever and wherever there is a need. "The sense of spirituality is very alive here," says Father Loftus, now midway through his second year at the Northridge parish. "Eucharistic spirituality is the strength of this parish community and Sunday is the most important day of the week for our people. As a Eucharistic community, hospitality is important and everyone is welcome here."

Father Loftus has not forgotten his first visit to the parish. "It felt alive," he says, and that sense permeates parish liturgy, activities and ministries. At a recent 9 a.m. Sunday Family Mass, parishioners dropped off Christmas gifts by their "Giving Tree" for those in need. The "Forever Young" senior group later wrapped the toys and gifts.

At the same Family Mass many children sat with their parents and formed the choir directed by Mary Janus. Small children celebrated their own Liturgy of the Word with their



The assembly prays at Mass.