

## The History of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church



1800s

The parish history of the Catholic Community of St. John the Baptist Church is a dramatic story of survival and growth despite great adversity. Benedictine Fathers, of St. Leo Abbey in Brooksville, sponsored the first Catholic Church in Dunnellon. They had been ministering to area Catholics with occasional visits since 1903. Many of the people associated with phosphate mining were Catholic, and by 1905, monthly lectures were held by Father Aloysius Delabar, O.S.B., at either City Hall or the Presbyterian Church. In 1908, the William F. Barrett family welcomed a Benedictine priest into their home for a monthly celebration of the mass. The community was growing and in 1912, on land donated by J. A. Grumbles, the building of Dunnellon's first St. John the Baptist Catholic Church was begun. Architect, George E. Ledvina, supervised and the ornate structure was dedicated on January 4, 1914, by Father Charles Mohr, O.S.B., first abbot of St. Leo.



World War I ended much of the Dunnellon phosphate mining. European ports were closed and there was no market for our hard-rock phosphate. By 1920, the majority of the Catholics had left the area and in 1921 the Church building was leased to Marion county. It was used as a school for two years until the Dunnellon Women's club purchased it in 1923. The altar and statues were taken to St. Leo's Abbey, while Blessed Trinity in Ocala received the altar furnishings and vestments. During the intervening years between 1920 and the 1960's, the Dunnellon area's few remaining Catholics had to travel almost fifty miles to attend mass in Ocala. The recession of the 1930's and the hard years following slowed our community's development. Not until the buildup of Rainbow Lakes Estates encouraged local growth in the 1960's, were there sufficient Catholics to warrant reestablishment of a mission in the Dunnellon area, which by this time belonged to the Diocese of St. Augustine and Blessed Trinity Parish, Ocala. Two residents of Rainbow Lakes Estates, Earl Gratton and Joseph Fraser, approached the Pastor of Blessed Trinity, Father William Corry. He agreed to celebrate mass on a regular basis in the Estates if a minimum of thirty-five Catholics could be found in the Dunnellon area. Mass was celebrated in May 1963 in the Community Clubhouse of Rainbow Lakes Estates. Thus was born the Dunnellon Mission. The number of Catholics in the area was continuing to grow and soon the search began for land on which to build a real church. By July 31, 1963, Archbishop Joseph Hurley, Bishop of St. Augustine had purchased a ten acre tract of land about two miles north of Rainbow Lakes Estates, on the west side of highway 41 at the intersection of Buck Pond Road.

In August of 1965, Father Corry was transferred to Orlando. Father Hochheim became the new Pastor of Blessed Trinity Parish and, therefore, our pastor. However, on February 6, 1966, parish boundaries were realigned and we became a mission to the newly formed parish of St. Theresa's in Belleview. Father Jose Oti, a young Spanish priest, was assigned to the Belleview parish and its new mission. At this time, serious discussion and planning began for the construction of a church on the parish property in Dunnellon. In January 1968, ground breaking ceremonies were held and construction began immediately. St. John the Baptist Mission became a reality in October of that year with the celebration of its first mass.



Fr. Donald Mainardi

In the spring of 1969, Father Oti returned to Spain and the parish came under the direction of Father Paul Woodyard. He served as the pastor until his retirement in June of 1970. At this time, Father John J. Mitzi became the new pastor. He immediately began to institute massive renovation in St. John's - a new granite altar was obtained and new pews replaced metal folding chairs. By November 1970, he had helped to implement the organization of a Parish Council. Father Mitzi was assisted at St. John's Mission by several Benedictine Priests: Father Rock, Father Joe Hackett, Father Tracey, and Father Brauner.

The Mission attained parish status in June, 1976, when Father Philip Stegeman was appointed Pastor by Bishop Thomas Grady of the Diocese of Orlando. Later, the facilities were expanded with volunteer parishioner skills. The construction project greatly united the parish. On May 20, 1981, a disastrous fire totally destroyed the church, the attached structure and virtually all the contents. Father Stegeman was miraculously saved after being awakened by two persons who had taken the wrong road in the middle of the night!

Within hours, the pastor and congregation of the nearby United Methodist Church offered to share their facilities with a grateful St. John's priest and parish. Since further growth was occurring in the area, enhanced by the development of Rainbow Springs, a more centrally located site was purchased by Bishop Grady and the Diocese of Orlando. Located on the East side of Highway 41 near the intersection of State Road 40, the first phase of the new complex was completed by Advent of 1982. Nicholas Mansito served as architect for the meeting hall, the office and the classroom buildings.

Planning of the second phase, the Church, began immediately. However, increased costs in construction as well as the realization that future growth needed to be addressed, slowed the process. An architect, Paul Zelones, was selected to design the church and a building fund campaign was begun. A crescent shape was chosen to allow for future expansion by an addition to each side of the Church. Beautifully faceted stained glass windows were created by the J. Piercey Studios of Orlando.

Father Stegeman transferred to Leesburg and Father Robert Fuchek, an ordained Benedictine Father from St. Leo Abbey, became our pastor February 1983. November 1985, the long held dream of constructing our church became a reality. An ecumenical service of Thanksgiving was held in the new sanctuary. Pastors and members of the Rainbow Lakes Estates Methodist Church as well as Father Stegeman and Father Fuchek all joined in the celebration. To this day, the Methodist Church and the Catholic Community of John the Baptist Church continued the ecumenical service every Thanksgiving Eve.

On June 24, 1986, Bishop Thomas Grady celebrated a joyful mass formally dedicating the Catholic Community of St. John the Baptist Church.



Fr. Joseph Pinchock



Fr. Jean Desir



Fr. Emmanuel Akalue

In early 2000, Father Donald Mainardi became our pastor. In August 2001, Father Mainardi transferred to another parish and was replaced by Father Joseph Pinchock. Under Father Joe's leadership, many meaningful projects have been initiated. Among these are the Knights of Columbus' memorial garden for unborn children (now the St. Francis garden), the expansion of a standing pavilion, the complete renovation of the parish kitchen, an outdoor shrine honoring Our Lady of Lourdes and the placement of St. John the Baptist in front of the church. Father Joseph Pinchock was pastor for 7 years before he was transferred to Port Orange in June 2008.

In July 2008 we welcomed Father Emmanuel Akalue. Fr. Emmanuel began the Alive in Christ campaigns in corporation with Bishop Wenski and the Diocese of Orlando. Renovating the church was the main goal of the campaign.

Fr. Jean H. Desir became our pastor in August of 2012 when Fr. Emmanuel was transferred to Palm Bay, Florida.

Under Fr. Jean's leadership the church was renovated, the Walk with the Lord Prayer Path and Memorial Garden were completed. Our Mission Statement, United as one body in Christ, we show passion for our faith through compassion for our neighbors was developed under Fr. Jean's leadership.

With the transfer of Fr. Jean to St. Rose of Lima in November of 2023, Fr. Ramon Bolatete became our new pastor.

Welcome to our parish! Come follow the Lord!  
I in water . . . He in Spirit.

