

History of St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church

Catholic Diocese of Memphis in Tennessee



St. Paul Parish had its birth in November 1944, when Whitehaven became a mission of St. Thomas Parish in South Memphis. Msgr. Paul Clunan began to organize the Catholic families in the area. Ten acres, located east of Highway 51 South on the south side of Shelby Drive, were purchased from the Edwards Estate to be used for this new parish.

History will tell you that *the first Mass celebrated in Memphis* took place in 1839 at the residence of Eugene Magevney, known nowadays as the Magevney Home. What you may not know is *the second Mass in a residence in Memphis* was celebrated some 105 years later, 1944, in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Roy Gillia on Highway 51 as the formation of St. Paul Parish began. Msgr. Paul Clunan, for whom the parish is named, said the first Mass in the Gillia Home. An average of sixty people attended Mass there every Sunday for several months. On April 16, 1945, the first of many building projects began. The crypt was the first completed project and the first Mass was offered there in August 1945. By December 1946, the upper church was completed with the first Mass offered there on Christmas Day. The church was dedicated by Bishop William Adrian in September of 1947. Groundbreaking for the present church building began on March 1963 with dedication of this beautiful church on in 1964.

St. Paul Parish has served the community of Whitehaven now for over 70 years. Its Grammar School, which began in 1949 with four classrooms and three Sisters of Mercy, is still teaching and guiding our youth today. In 1965, the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia Convent in Nashville took the reins and remain at the helm today. The school now includes Pre-K Classes and Kindergarten through Sixth Grades. Many students received their education in academics, religion, and life here at St. Paul School and the mission continues today.

St. Paul Church community has had ten pastors in these 70 years: Fr. Angelo Lenzi, Fr. Edward Cleary, Msgr. Walter Bush, Msgr. Theron J. Walker, Fr. J. Leonard Oglesby, Msgr. John B. McArthur, Fr. Rick Gantert, Fr. Michael Werkhoven, Fr. James Pugh, and presently, Fr. Johnnie B. Smith. As varied as the personalities of these 10 men might have been, each brought a spark, and the guidance needed at the time of their service. As a change in leadership brought certain adjustments, some things still remain the same as when the parish began. Organizations formed so many years ago continue today: Altar Society, Legion of Mary, Choir, and Knights of Columbus. Through the years new ministries have been born: Right to Life, Ministry to the Sick, Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist, Lectors, Mother Cabrini Circle, Bereavement Committee, and Hispanic Ministry. The work of the Catholic Church in Whitehaven continues.

At one time St. Paul Parish had more than 1,000 registered families. The demographics have change over the years. Today there are approximately 400 registered families and encompassed in that group is a rich diversity of age, race, and culture. There are many members, some who have been here at St. Paul since its inception. They are the foundation on which this church stands. Newer members have brought with them gifts and talents that keep the vibrancy and renewed spirit alive. There are new members from South and Central America and Africa. There are babies, toddlers, and octogenarians. This faith community exemplifies the far-reaching, all-inclusive love of God.

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