



## SERVING CHRIST WHERE COAL WAS KING

Bishop Edward Slattery enjoyed a recent morning with the youth of Talihina, Oklahoma, along with retired pastor Fr. Thomas Metton (left) and current pastor Fr. Richard Cristler.

Sandblasting a rusty fence under the Oklahoma sun probably didn't come to mind when Father Richard Cristler prayed about being a missionary. Yet, when he came to Wilburton in 2004, that's exactly what this sandy-haired native of Spring Valley, California, did.

Calling on help from parishioners and volunteers who drove in 123 miles from Tulsa, Father Cristler painted the wrought-iron fence and beautified the grounds at Sacred Heart Cemetery.

People of all faiths could appreciate this gift from Father to his new home town. To see why the priest put high priority on this project is to understand Wilburton's heritage...

### "EXPLOSION IN LUTIE FIVE!"

*Shouts ring through Wilburton on Saturday, November 29, 1930. Men are trapped at Lutie Mine! Loved ones race towards the shaft at the town's edge.*

*Wives and children shiver in the rain, embracing 38 workers who emerge. Fifteen*

*miners are found lifeless. One 49-year-old dies with his 20-year-old son. Another leaves a wife and eight children.*

Their graves are in Sacred Heart Cemetery, which Father Cristler says contains "masses" of mining victims. In 1906, more coal was mined in Wilburton than in any other Coal Belt town. Yet the first three decades of the 1900's were deadly at the Hailey-Ola Coal Company mines. A blast in 1910 killed six. Another in the 1920's killed more than 90.

Mines are closed now, but their legacy runs like a thick vein through this region. Coal miners cluster on the branches of many a family tree here.

When Father Cristler came to town with the help of a Catholic Extension stipend, he saw how many fallen miners and their loved ones were buried at Sacred Heart Cemetery. He realized its importance to the community and put high priority on its renovation.

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## MISSIONARY VOICES

When Father Richard Cristler was a boy in Spring Valley, Calif., he asked to be an altar server at an unusually young age.

“I was so small I held the book on my head so the priest could see the prayers.”

This oldest of four siblings sensed that “God was happy I was up at the altar so close to Jesus.”

Today, the 35-year-old spreads his love for God over a vast area in Oklahoma.

“I got exactly what I prayed for – three struggling parishes,” he says. He serves Sacred Heart Church in Wilburton and its missions in Talihina and Clayton, both nearly 40 miles away.

### Were you close to God as a child?

I used to go out and climb the avocado, lemon and orange trees to get a little closer to heaven. Up there I'd pray and sing to God. I wanted more than anything to be in heaven with all the saints.

### What led you to the priesthood?

The nuns at my Catholic school in Spring Valley brought us to chapel, taught us

songs...taught us about God, the Church, the sacraments. I saw their love for each other, their community and God, and how they shared their love for Jesus.



Fr. Richard Cristler

Photo courtesy of Eastern Oklahoma Catholic

### Was your calling encouraged at home?

When I was very little, my poor Mom used to sit through my home “Mass.” I put a cloth on her desk, squished up wonder bread for hosts and played priest. She told me I'd be the best priest in the world, and I really believed that!

### What brought you from St. John's Seminary in Boston to Oklahoma?

I shared with my spiritual director my heartfelt desire to serve a smaller rural diocese. He helped me think, discuss and pray about the decision. I felt I could truly be an instrument of God's peace if I opened my heart to His grace.

## Faithful 92-year-old Keeps Historic Church Shining

Nearly 93 years old, Mae Askew remembers when Wilburton, Okla., was a busy coal town. Her father mined and her husband followed his Dad underground.

“That's what people did,” she recalls. Her husband later became Sheriff, then a local politician. Mae kept busy homemaking and being a good neighbor.

“In those days, you helped one another in the territory,” she says.

This life-long resident was baptized in the light of Sacred Heart Church's stained glass windows. Today, with its old high altar, it's one of the diocese's most lovely churches.

Mae keeps it that way. She has volunteered daily for more than 40 years, cleaning the church from choir loft to altar. She oversees the sacristy, waters plants, replenishes candles, dusts, vacuums and “keeps things looking like a million bucks,” says Father Richard Cristler, pastor.

“You should have seen her the other day,” adds Father. “She was cleaning brass plant stands and her hands were all black!”

“She's so active and has such a love for the church,” marvels the priest. “Her witness and holiness of life is an inspiration to me.”



# OKLAHOMA DIOCESE OF TULSA

## How is it overseeing three parishes?

This assignment fits me hand-in-glove. Priests are few here, and there's high morale and a strong fraternal community among them. We're happy and love the people we serve. And people truly appreciate having a priest.

## What challenges do you face?

There are many non-Catholics here and some hostility. It can be tiring having people ask questions like, "Why do Catholics worship Mary?" I get these questions over and over again.



Students from Bishop Kelley High School in Tulsa traveled to Wilburton for various activities, including a cemetery clean-up with local youth.

## What do you enjoy about your work?

The spirit in all three parishes is wonderful. Families have reached out to me with open hearts. When things get overwhelming, I visit a family and get my mind off things. I go for dinners at people's homes, and get to know people on a personal level.

## ESTABLISHED

*February 7, 1973*

## BISHOP

*Most Reverend Edward J. Slattery*

## AREA

*26,417 square miles*

## GEOGRAPHY

*This eastern Oklahoma region is forested and mountainous, dotted with scenic lakes.*

## TOTAL CATHOLIC POPULATION

*56,150*

## NUMBER OF ACTIVE PRIESTS

*73*

## NUMBER OF SISTERS

*85*

## NUMBER OF PARISHES

*78*

## NUMBER OF PARISHES WITHOUT A RESIDENT PASTOR

*32*

## MISSION AID

*Has requested \$100,000 from Catholic Extension for Fiscal Year 2006*

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### **Brick and mortar**

The 35-year-old priest has also spackled, painted, and tackled repairs at his nearly 100-year-old Victorian-style rectory and Sacred Heart Church, and its distant missions in Talihina and Clayton.

“I worry about ‘brick and mortar’ because it’s a reflection of our response to God and how our forefathers sacrificed,” he says.

“It’s most important that we’re sound spiritually,” says Father Cristler. When Protestants go to Wednesday “church night,” he gathers Catholics for religious education. But the Church must also present a good appearance in the Bible Belt, where it’s misunderstood.

“People think Catholics do voodoo or witchcraft,” says one local.

Although many ethnic groups settled between the San Bois and Winding Stair Mountain Ranges to mine, farm and ranch, Catholics are scarce. Wilburton alone has 44 non-Catholic churches for around 3,000 residents.

It’s no wonder Gerry Koslow from Holy Trinity Church in Clayton calls her pastor a “breath of fresh air.”

This New Jersey native relocated in 1967 after her brother wed an Oklahoman. She tells how Clayton Catholics met for Mass in homes until a former one-room school

and Masonic Lodge came on market mid-1970s.

Catholics bought the turn-of-the-century stone building, and their bishop consecrated it as a church.

Today, Koslow enjoys how Father Cristler unites Catholics from all three missions. In the Bible Belt, socializing with a roomful of Catholics doesn’t happen every day, Koslow explains. At fellowship meals, for example, “it’s nice seeing everyone make the sign of the cross and knowing we all believe the same things.”

### **Financial struggle**

The people give ‘til it hurts to maintain their churches and pastor, but many struggle. Retirees are on fixed incomes and others work on ranches, farms, small businesses or at Eastern Oklahoma State College.

Local industry offers some jobs, but most young people leave for cities to earn a living wage, because the average median income here is \$20,878, around half the national average.

Mission Partners help make his presence possible, says Father Cristler. Just as coal mining has indelibly stamped the region, he wants the Catholic Church to remain solidly rooted here as well.

He thanks Mission Partners for their vital support and has a message for friends of Catholic Extension: “Tell them I offer Masses for their intentions often!”

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Dear Friend,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you again for participating in this worthy Mission Partner program. Your support helps to provide salary subsidies to more than 400 missionaries throughout America. May you know the joy that comes from being part of such a generous, dedicated service of the people striving to know and follow Jesus.



Most Reverend William R. Houck, President



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