

50 years on, St. Pius X celebrates community

By FATHER MIKE KNIPE

In 1955, inside a barn on the Moeller family farm that had been converted into a church, the first Mass was celebrated at St. Pius X Church. Fifty years later, the church community has grown into a vibrant parish and school.

St. Pius X Church was canonically established on June 6, 1955, and St. Pius X, canonized in 1954, was selected as its patron. Father Gerald Phee was the first pastor, and Father Thomas Biller the first assistant.

In the beginning, 145 Catholic families were thought to be within the parish boundaries. The rectory, along with many homes of the parishioners, was constructed in what would be called Moeller Heights.

Catholic education was a priority. Parishioners helped construct the first school building, completed in 1957. The school was initially staffed by the Sisters of the Divine Providence, and the growing number of families and their children who were filling the neighborhood homes also filled the school.

By 1963, 600 Catholic families broke ground for a new, permanent church that would accommodate at least 800 people at a Sunday Mass and 80 for daily Masses.

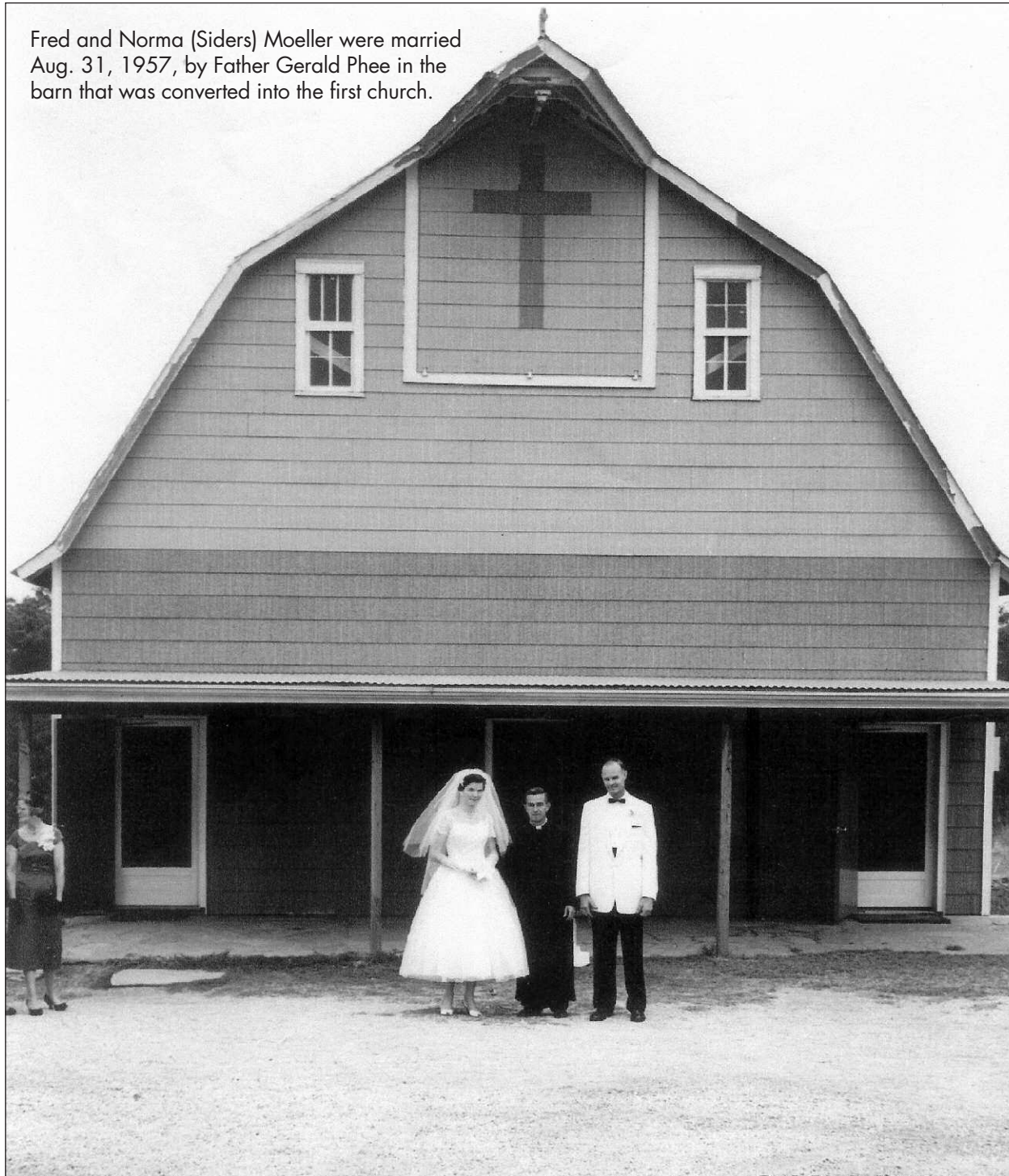
Father Phee conceived the round church design with the altar in the exact center of the structure so that no parishioner would be more than 50 feet from the altar, and there would be no obstructed views of the Mass.

In 1967, Father William Swift became the second pastor of St. Pius X, which was the largest Catholic parish in Oklahoma at the time. When Father Swift was transferred in 1975, Father Harry Bartnik was named the third pastor.

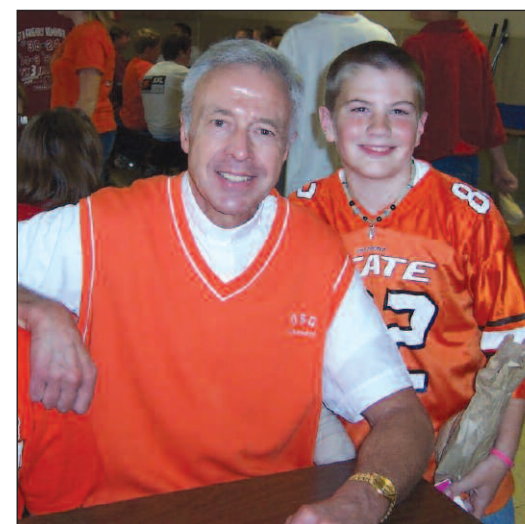
Through stewardship and careful financial planning, the parish family celebrated the "burning of the mortgage" on Oct. 8, 1978. The church added an activity center and gym in 1982.

In 1983, Father Dennis C. Dorney returned to become the parish's fourth pastor. He had been an associate pastor from 1973-77. For Father - later Monsignor - Dorney, Catholic education was an absolute priority, and St. Pius X School flourished. A state-of-the-art math and computer lab was completed and blessed in 1995, and a pre-school opened.

"I spent a total of 17 years at St. Pius. It's a marvelous parish and always has been," Msgr. Dorney said. "The parishioners and staff were delightful to work with. My experiences there



Fred and Norma (Siders) Moeller were married Aug. 31, 1957, by Father Gerald Phee in the barn that was converted into the first church.



Father Tom Hildebrand with Joe Proszek in 2004.

At left, Father Mike Knipe and Father Jovita Okonkwo with parishioners Larry and Linda Wewers, Tony and Jodi McLain and Jennifer Buttram.

have really enriched my life."

The parish even featured plays for a number of years, with parishioners themselves building the sets, starring in the roles and directing the action.

Msgr. Dorney was transferred to the Church of St. Mary in 1995, and Father Thomas Hildebrand returned to St. Pius X as the second associate pastor to be named pastor.

Father Hildebrand, too, saw the parish school as a first-tier priority. With Holly Goodwin as principal, St. Pius X School was honored nationally as a School of Excellence and feted in Washington, D.C. Parents transformed part of the ball field into a modern playground.

On May 24, 1996, Father Matt Gerlach became the first St. Pius X parishioner and school alumnus to be ordained to the priesthood. He celebrated his first Mass in St. Pius X Church.

Father Hildebrand suffered a fatal heart attack in the rectory on Nov. 3, 2004. His death stunned the parish and school and led to an extended time of grief and mourning. Father Hildebrand often had told friends how happy he was to be the pastor of St. Pius X and that he wanted to serve there until he died.

Father Michael Knipe became the sixth pastor of St. Pius X in January 2005. A convert to the Catholic faith, Father Knipe had grown up in the neighborhood and celebrated his first Mass here in May 1988.

So, in 2005, St. Pius X Church and School is 50 years young. It has itself given birth to two parishes from its boundaries, the Church of the Resurrection and St. Thomas More, yet it remains a vital, family-oriented parish committed to Catholic education and the community.

Many contemporary students of St. Pius X School are children of the first generation of students. The parents who built the buildings are now grandparents seated next to their grandchildren at the Friday morning school Masses.

St. Pius X Church has continued to evolve and adapt to the needs of its surrounding community. Beginning in 2005, the parish began offering Sunday Mass in Spanish. This effort to reach out once more to all those who live near the Church in the Round would make Father Phee and the charter parishioners proud.

Upcoming anniversary events

May 27
10th anniversary of ordination Mass in honor of Father Matt Gerlach

July 6
Ordination to the Diaconate of Leonardo Medina

Aug. 19-20
St. Pius X Feast Day Celebration



Jenny Wrinkle and Lisa Ziegler visit with Father Harry Bartnik at the church's 25th anniversary celebration in 1980.



Former nuns from St. Pius X were honored during the church's anniversary celebration. Pictured from left are Sister Marcella Marie Frazier, Sister Lucille Ann Fritsch, Sister Theresa Gossen, Sister Frances Lorene Lange, Sister Jane Marie Gleitz, Sister Redempta Bradley, Sister Betty Leon, Sister Rachel Dietz, Sister Agnes Mary Klar and Sister Joanne Yankauskis. Joining them are former parish secretary Irene Bohn, Msgr. Dennis Dorney, Father Mike Knipe and former school principal Holly Goodwin.

At left, Gene and RoseMarie Gerlach celebrate with their son, Father Matt Gerlach, and Father Mike Knipe after Father Gerlach received the St. Pius X School Distinguished Alumni award in February.



Anne Emery poses with Father William Swift at her first Communion in 1971.



Joan Marie Joyce was the first baby baptized at St. Pius X Church on July 17, 1955. She is pictured here with Father Phee, her parents, Joseph and Lois, and her godparents, Hubert and Mary Follock.



Dianne Schooley, Janet Miller and Beth Schooley pose in front of the bus in January 1971.