**HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ROCKPORT, TEXAS**

**1519 – 2021**

As early as 1519, Spanish explorer, Alonzo Alvarez De Piñeda traveled through this area and by 1718 the area had been explored, mapped and settled by Spanish and French immigrants. In 1750 a Spanish fort was established at the northern end of Live Oak Point (near the bridge to Lamar), called Fort Aranzazu. The fort was named in honor of La Virgen de Aránzatzu in the Basque region of Spain (Aránzazu in the Spanish language).

By 1722 Mission Nuestra Señora del Espíritu Santo de Zúniga was established in nearby Goliad. By 1766 there were many ranches in this area. By 1833 the name of the area was shortened from the original Aranzazu to Aransas, and at one time Rockport was known as Aransas Pass, before being changed to Rockport.

The history of Sacred Heart Church, originally known as The Catholic Community in Rockport, begins shortly after the War for Texan Independence when in 1838 two Vincentian priests from Missouri, Fathers Timon and Leberia, visited Texas to investigate the future of the Church in this wilderness. In 1840 Father Timon was appointed Prefect Apostolic of all Texas. He remained only a short time in this area, but, when he left, delegated his authority to his companion, Father John Mary Odin, who in turn became Prefect Apostolic of Texas. Father Odin made a special effort to revive the few existing parishes and his work was so successful that in 1842 he was consecrated Titular Bishop of Claudiopolis, and appointed Vicar Apostolic of Texas.

One of the missionaries who came to Texas with Bishop Odin in 1840 was Father Eusebius Estany who began his career under conditions entirely foreign to those he had known in his French homeland. Traveling on horseback, he visited Catholics on the Coleto, as well as at La Bahia, Lamar, Live Oak Point (now Rockport), Rancho de Don Carlos, and Refugio. When as Pastor of Victoria, Father Estany’s home was robbed by the Comanche. They who took all he had: clothes, books, church vessels, ornaments and vestments. All the coastal area, including where Rockport now stands, was his mission. Father Estany was followed by Father James Fitzgerald who died of yellow fever in 1847. He was replaced by Father J. Giraudon in 1852. It was he who was present as James Powers, original Irish Empresario of the coastal area, lay dying in his home on Live Oak Point.

The first recorded church in Aransas County and reportedly the oldest building still in existence in the Diocese of Corpus Christi is Stella Maris Chapel. It is currently located next to the old Lamar Cemetery. The chapel was originally located on the Schoenstatt Shrine Center property in Lamar. Irish immigrant James W. Byrne, one of the original founders of Lamar (originally known as Lookout Point), first owned the property. He served in the Texas Revolution and was spared from the Goliad Massacre. It is noted he paid for the land with script earned by his service. Byrne's wife, Harriet, was a niece of Bishop Jean Marie Odin, the first Bishop of Texas. Byrne deeded two Lamar lots to the Catholic Church for the purpose of building a place of worship. Through the recommendation of the Bishop, the French architect D'Alsure was put in charge of supervising the construction of the chapel. Seth Ballou, recognized as the earliest settler of Lamar, spearheaded the construction with the help of his slave, Moses Ballou. Many Lamar settlers contributed to the building effort. The exterior of the chapel was made of shellcrete (a cement of burned shell ashes, sand, crushed shell and water). Although some believe the church was completed in 1858, there is some evidence it was finished as early as 1854.

Wilhelmina and Peter Johnson, early colonists of St. Joseph Island, reportedly had their marriage blessed at the chapel in 1856. Bishop Odin was noted as a frequent visitor and conducted Mass there. Twice during the Civil War, the Union Navy, from Aransas Bay, shelled Stella Maris. The chapel received little damage. Union forces had an encampment on St. Charles Bay in the location of the Byrne's residence. The economic climate of Lamar was severely affected by the Civil War. Due to the blockade, trade came to a standstill. The arrival of the railroad to Rockport (1870s) also sealed its fate. Thus, the town slowly deteriorated. By 1915 the post office had closed and the hurricane of 1919 had severely damaged Stella Maris. After learning about the hurricane damage, Tom O'Connor Sr. sent a foreman from his nearby ranch to close the roof holes and nail the windows shut. He later completed major repairs.

In 1931, Bishop Emmanuel B. Ledvina, second Bishop of the Diocese of Corpus Christi, rebuilt the chapel and added a porch. The stained-glass windows were installed and cedar shingles replaced the original zinc slate roof. An apartment was added on the back of the structure for the diocese to use for recreation and as a retreat center. In the mid-1960s the Lamar Women's Club used the chapel as a nondenominational church. From the 1950s through the 1980s, the Schoenstatt Sisters were the caretakers of the chapel. In 1972, Dennis O'Connor, the son of Tom O'Connor Sr., donated funds to restore the interior, but it has remained basically the same since the 1931 renovation.

In 1986, the Aransas County Historical Society was formed to raise funds and secure the move from the Schoenstatt property. The Sisters needed the space to build a new chapel and dormitory building. The A.C Historical Society raised more than $70,000 and the chapel was moved to its present site. The property it sits on is privately owned and was leased for 99 years. The restoration funded by the Historical Society again followed the lines of the 1931 restoration. Since by this time it was no longer a Catholic Chapel, per se, it was used for ecumenical purposes and as a museum/historical site. By the early 1990s the Aransas County Historical Society could no longer fund the upkeep of the property, so it deeded the chapel to the Knights of Columbus Association of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Rockport. As custodians of the property the Knights obtained a grant to add central air conditioning and heating as well as make some additional repairs. In 2005, Bishop Edmund Carmody purchased the Stella Maris Chapel. It became the property of the Diocese of Corpus Christi and is currently in use for the Catholic community of Lamar.

In 1854 Refugio received its first resident pastor, Father Padey, formerly of Hallettsville,
Texas and in turn the small Churches of Rockport, Fulton, and Lamar were entrusted to the care of the Pastor of Refugio. “Priests of this day” says Father Oberste, “had to be robust and equal to the task of traveling in the heat and cold, through mud and flying sand. They went on horseback from ranch to ranch, but gradually a little improvement was made to ease the burden of travel. Small two-wheeled carriages called jumpers, drawn by one horse, came into vogue. The introduction of the jumper was a great boon to the missionary priests. They no longer had to carry all appurtenances for celebrating Mass in saddlebags on horseback.” It was during the incumbency of Father Badelon, 1869 to 1874, that the first Mass in Rockport is believed to have been celebrated, between 1868 and 1870, by a missionary priest in the home of Judge John Hynes, son of Peter Hynes, one of the first colonists to settle in the area.

During this time, the home was located on Austin Street. It was built of long leaf yellow pine originally shipped here from Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana to be used in building a Church. The Bishop of the area decided that there was not a large enough congregation to justify building at that time. Judge Hynes then purchased the lumber and used it to construct his home, a story and a half structure, with a high mansard roof. (The present second story was added later and the house is now located on South Church Street.) Mass was celebrated in the north room, parlor, at various times, by various priests, who came from different places in the area. Because there was no advance notice of arrival, Mrs. Hynes would send young children to notify Catholic families in the vicinity, thus giving them time to assemble for Worship. The congregation consisted of not more than ten families, among which were the Driscolls, the Woods, the Hynes and the Wilsons. The Altar was arranged, and the hosts were made by Mrs. Hynes and her two daughters, Clara and Frances Ellen. The hosts were made on smoothing irons, a method learned when Mrs. Hynes, as a young woman, had attended the Ursuline Convent in New Orleans, where she was schooled in all the cares of the Church and Sanctuary. Mass was celebrated in the Hynes family home for a number of years by the different priests that would come, nearly always from Refugio. They also performed baptisms, communions and marriages in the home. However, since there was no house for the priest (rectory), records of these events were carried back by the priests to the various towns of their home parish. Some records from those days have been found in San Patricio, Laredo, Refugio, Corpus Christi, and San Antonio. There are records of baptisms that took place here or at Lamar, signed by seven different priests who ministered to the spiritual needs of the community.

Although a room was always maintained in the Hynes family home for the missionary Fathers, Mass and other church celebrations were later celebrated in Judge Hynes office which stood at the northeast corner of the same block. This office was converted to a small chapel and was maintained for years by the family. As early as 1871, the present property on Church St. was deeded to the Roman Catholic Church by Major Wood during the tenure of Bishop DuBois, second Bishop of Galveston (at this time this region was under that diocese). However, it was not until 1889 that the first building was constructed on the land with funds provided by the Wood and Driscoll Land and Cattle Company. This was due to the growth brought about by the railroad and the establishment of an early Italian colony near Rockport.

The original church that was built stood on the same spot where the present church is located (209 Church St.). It was built of wood and collapsed during a storm in 1889. It was rebuilt facing south in 1891. It was in use until 1954 when the current Church was built and dedicated. Father Goebbels supervised the building of that first Church and he remained here for many years before being transferred to Corpus Christi where he met his tragic death in a fire. Residents at the time remember the days when he would come on horseback before the Church was built. Boys swimming in the bay would be summoned by a school bell to come and say their catechism.

In 1954 a new church was built as a modern version of earlier Spanish Mission architecture at a cost of approximately $90,000. Roman brick, stucco, cast stone and redwood were used over a steel frame for the exterior. Inside, the floors were of terrazzo, plaster walls and behind the altar a wall of natural brick rises in severely plain but beautiful fashion. Cabinets were made of unselected birch and separation walls within the church of redwood. The church had a seating capacity of 350. In 1988, under Msgr. Gregory Deane, a major renovation and expansion was completed. In addition to the interior renovations, two transepts were built giving an additional 200 seating capacity.

The first Catholic school was a small, one room affair, organized by Father Grueber about 1923, and used for a number of years. Later that building was moved and attached to the old rectory and the school building was erected about 1930 by Father Joseph Sullivan. Classes were taught by the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament Sisters of Corpus Christi. In 1962 a new school was built, it had four classrooms and a student capacity of 100. During the same year, land was acquired across the street from the school, and a convent was constructed for the use of the Schoenstatt Sisters, who were then teaching at the school. Shortly thereafter, however, the Sisters were no longer available and there was not enough funding to pay lay teachers and the school was closed. The school building was then used for CCD classes throughout the year. In 1962 a parish hall was built at the rear of the school, facing Pearl Street. In 1981, in response to a group of parents, Sacred Heart School was reopened with Kindergarten and the
First Grade, using lay teachers. Two years later, the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament from Houston, began administration of the school. They added one grade each year until 1986 when the Sixth Grade was started. In 1985 the parents purchased books for a library and with a $100,000 grant from the Kenedy Foundation, a library was constructed. Also, in 1985 ground was broken for a new wing and it was dedicated in 1986.

Father James Kelly, pastor from 1936 to 1948, became Diocesan Superintendent of Catholic Schools and Director of the Corpus Christi District in the Diocese. Father Kelly was an active member of many community affairs also. He was president of the Rockport Chamber of Commerce at one time. Msgr. Harold Palmer, pastor from 1971 to 1980, was also a Diocesan Superintendent of Schools, a Diocesan Consultor and Pre-Synodal Judge. Education of the children has been a prime factor in the goals of this parish and school facilities are given to insure the best for the students.

In 1983 the Picton Lumber Yard, consisting of a city block, was purchased. The lumber office was purchased by the Knights of Columbus from the Church and completely remodeled for use as their meeting hall. The Knights transferred ownership back to the Church and it is now Sacred Heart Parish Hall. Prior to Hurricane Harvey, The Society of St. Vincent de Paul was located in the middle area of the hall, complete with large food pantry, freezer room and client services room. Post Harvey, it is now located across the Parish Hall on Wharf St. in a building owned by the Picton Family. Another building, Gregory Hall, was assigned to a group of ladies who named it in honor of Father Gregory Deane, pastor in the late 1980’s. They are known as the Gregory Ladies and form the Catholic contingent of an ecumenical community organization known as “Castaways” which operates a thrift shop. The monies generated from the sales there are dedicated to Sacred Heart School. Another of the buildings was remodeled for use as the Youth Building. A large metal building, named after Msgr. Louis Kihneman (see below) has been in use as a gym for the school and for other parish activities.

As in all communities, members of the Catholic Church were business, governmental and educational leaders. The first postmaster of the county, Viktor Bracht, left a legacy of several generations of business leaders. Mercantile, grocery, hardware, automobile parts and garages, and furniture stores have all been owned and operated in the community at various periods by the Brachts. The Casterline family led in shrimping, fishing and the oyster industry. The Curry family participated in law enforcement and small business. Various members of the Johnson family were leaders in the shipping, building and banking businesses of the area. The Picton family led in the building and construction fields and the Roquettes competed with the Casterlines in the seafood industries. The Hynes family has been actively involved in the parish and local community since the first Mass was celebrated in Rockport. Scores of other family member’s names listed as Sacred Heart parishioners have been in the educational field, small business owners, governmental jobs and elected officials in Rockport, Fulton and Aransas County. The Roman Catholic Church and Sacred Heart, in particular, have been a prime factor in the development of the area. The work ethic, moral and social leadership provided by priests and parishioners have set the standard for the community.

Msgr. Louis F. Kihneman was Pastor from 1993 to January 16, 2011. In 1996-97 under his leadership a new wing to Sacred Heart School was built. He also had constructed a new Rectory (priest residence) in 2002. In 2009 Msgr. Kihneman became the Vicar General of the Diocese of Corpus Christi (2nd to the Bishop) and then on December 16, 2016, he was appointed the 4th Bishop of Biloxi, Mississippi by Pope Francis. He was consecrated and installed on April 28, 2017.

On January 17, 2011, Fr. Raynaldo Yrlas, Jr. (Fr. Ray) became Pastor of Sacred Heart. In 2013, under his guidance and with the assistance of the Gateway Into Worship Committee, the interior of the church underwent a complete renovation over a period of six months. The Sanctuary was widened, new tile floors were placed, new pews and church furniture were purchased. The Crucifix was placed over the Altar and the Tabernacle (a gift from the Picton Family in the 1950s) was placed in the Sanctuary center upon a new marble pedestal flanked by a marble reredos. The statues of Mary and Joseph were placed in new niches in the Sanctuary. The Altar received a new marble base with a holy relic (unknown of whom) inlaid in the center. A new marble Ambo was added for the proclamation of Scripture and Preaching. The balcony was redone and reinforced for two new A/C air handlers to be placed. A Dedication Ceremony was celebrated by Bishop Michael W. Mulvey, D.D. on November 3, 2013.

On August 25, 2017, Rockport was devastated by Hurricane Harvey. Sacred Heart campus was severely damaged. The Church proper, the Rectory and the Adult Religious Formation Office suffered minor damages compared to the other buildings on campus. The Church Office, the Parish Hall and S.H. School were totally losses. The Youth Building also suffered much and is being used as storage. As of this writing, (2021) Sacred Heart School is located in 7 temporary modular buildings utilizing the Msgr. Kihneman Activity Center as the main building for morning gathering, a cafeteria and gym. A new fence and concrete sidewalks were added for safety and better mobility between buildings. A new playground with equipment was also added for the students.

In 2018, an addition to the north side of the church, the Narthex, was completed and serves as the Main Entrance and as a fellowship/reception area. The three stained-glass windows depict the Miracles of Jesus: Turning water into wine at Cana, The Resurrection and the Feeding of the 5000. It also has an additional Robe/Bridal Room. The stained-glass in this room depict the Unity of Rings of Marriage, King David playing his Lute and St. Cecilia, both patrons of music. What was the main entrance was transformed to become the new Baptistery surrounded by three beautiful stained-glassed windows depicting The Holy Spirit, The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan and the Baptism of the Eunuch by Philip. The 2 wood main doors with the original glass inlay were moved to the Narthex and placed between the Narthex and the Sacred Heart & Our Lady of Guadalupe Shrine. This Shrine is where the Faithful can light devotional candles and offer prayers. Attached to the Narthex is a drive thru car port for drop off of elderly and handicap and during inclement weather. A new church sign was purchased, and new landscaping was laid in place.

As of 2021 Very Rev. Raynaldo Yrlas, Jr. still serves as Pastor. The Sacred Heart community is awaiting word from the Diocesan Construction Department regarding the restructure of its campus.