

June 20, 2008

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LEWIS RICHARD | FC

Msgr. Raymond Mullins places a crucifix on the wall of the new family life center named for him during its dedication June 8. Msgr. Mullins served as pastor of St. Mary Parish from 1992-1999. At right is the current pastor, Msgr. Michael Cherup.

**EXPLORING PARISH CHURCHES**

## St. Mary Catholic Church, Fort Walton Beach

One in an occasional series detailing the history of parishes in the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee.

AMY FERRARA SMITH | FLORIDA CATHOLIC STAFF

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**FORT WALTON BEACH** | Before the establishment of St. Mary Catholic Church here, the local Catholic community proved its dedication to the faith once a month with a six-hour boat ride to St. Joseph Church in Pensacola.

It took a priest on vacation to what was then known as Camp Walton to finally organize a Mass for residents of the area within their own town limits. In 1914, Father Phillip Gruethoff, a friend of the Gerlach family and pastor of St. Mary Parish in Crown Point, Ind., acted as a temporary pastor to the Catholic community. Within that short period of time, Father Gruethoff visited Bishop Edward Patrick Allen of Mobile, Ala., and gained permission to erect a church at Camp Walton. The Gerlach family donated \$500 and the bishop matched his gift.

The result was a white-framed building on the corner of First and Shell streets that could hold about 50 people. Because St. Mary Parish in Crown Point helped to furnish the small Camp Walton church, the new building took its name.

When Father Gruethoff returned home to Indiana, St. Michael the Archangel in Pensacola looked after St. Mary farther down the coast. In 1916, however, the Catholic community in Camp Walton had finally grown large enough for Bishop Allen to appoint a pastor, Father August Beyne. Although Father Beyne never intended to stay long, he settled in Camp Walton for 20 years.

A local newspaper noted the determination of Father Beyne to reach not only Catholics at St. Mary Parish, but also at the rural mission parishes. "Twenty years of constant travel under adverse conditions, over muddy roads, over sandy roads, or where there was hardly any road at all took their toll."

In 1936, Father Harold Sherman, pastor, oversaw the construction of a new church. In 1970, construction began on yet another building. Msgr. Patrick Cunningham welcomed parishioners into the present-day St. Mary Church on Holy Thursday of 1972. The parish is also home to St. Mary Catholic School for students in pre-K4 through eighth grades.

Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ dedicated the brand-new 35,000-square-foot Msgr. Mullins Family Life Center for the growing parish June 8. Named for Msgr. Raymond Mullins, who was pastor of the parish from 1992 to 1999, the center will provide access to a gymnasium,

**INFO**

St. Mary Parish

110 St. Mary Ave., S.W.

Fort Walton Beach, FL 3254

**850-243-3742**

Schedule of Masses: Saturday vigil Mass at 5:30 p.m.; Sunday Masses at 7:30 a.m., 9:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.; weekday Masses, Monday through Friday, at 6:30 a.m. and 8:15 a.m.; and Saturday at 8:15 a.m.

St. Michael the Archangel  
Blessed Sacrament  
St. Patrick Parish

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youth area, fitness center and four meeting rooms. St. Mary Catholic School will also have its new cafeteria in the building.

St. John The Evangelist  
St. Dominic Church  
St. Joseph Church  
Cathedral of the Sacred Heart

Today Msgr. Michael Cherup serves as pastor of this congregation of 1,400 registered families and Father Nicholas Schumm serves as parochial vicar.

*Information was obtained from the St. Mary Parish Web site, [www.saintmarychurchfwb.org](http://www.saintmarychurchfwb.org), and from a 1977 history published by the parish.*

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