

## 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of First Parish Mass of St. Stephen Catholic Church, Los Angeles

Dear celebrants of our 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Stephen's Parish,

With grateful hearts we have gathered here to give thanks to almighty God for nine decades of graces obtained through a line of devoted priests and several generations of faithful Catholics. Although the start was long ago, we still remember the years of hopeful preparations for, and the key organizers of, this Hungarian Church established thousands of miles from Hungary, the country of St. Stephen.

Both before and after our church became a reality, the efforts of the Hungarian Sisters of Social Service and the members of St. Stephen Society (founded in 1927, with its first president Béla Sarkady) were exemplary. Of course, the key person *was* the first pastor, Fr. Mathias Lani, born in the Banat region of historical Hungary, into a German-Hungarian family. He was 28, visiting in Connecticut when the invitation from the local bishop Cantwell, to become the pastor of our new Hungarian parish reached him. He arrived to Los Angeles on April 19, 1928 and said his first Mass on the 22<sup>nd</sup> with a Hungarian congregation in a welcoming Polish church. For, the lots where the rectory and our church stand were purchased only in 1929 and the first actual St. Stephen chapel, built on where the patio is now, was dedicated only on April 6, 1930. This chapel quickly turned out to be too small, so the banquet hall was converted to our new church in 1931.

Already in the late fall of 1929 a group of German-Hungarians from the Banat, Batschka and Srem had asked to be admitted in the parish. Fr. Lani graciously turned St. Stephen into a bilingual parish. In 1933 a Mexican group, then an English-speaking group joined. St. Stephen became a four-language parish, the only one west of the Mississippi, at times with 6 Sunday masses. The talented and indefatigable Fr. Lani was able to keep under his wing all the services his numerous duties demanded. He was also a music composer, named to lead the choir of St. Vibiana Cathedral. The various supporting Hungarian and German organizations sprang to life in his time. He became a supreme organizer of relief for Hungary after the tremendous losses suffered during WWII. Also, many families arriving from war-torn Europe received their first help from him (show of hands who knew him.)

God called this beloved priest from *this* life in 1954, shortly after the silver jubilee of St. Stephen. For 13 years, three non-Hungarian pastors followed him at St. Stephen, with 26 associate pastors, 14 of them Hungarian. Some were from religious orders, Piarist, Dominican, Jesuit, Norbertine, Verbita, etc. The Hungarian Scout Troop #8 was formed in 1959. Scout Troop #49 for girls split off from it in 1966.

During his near 9 years, pastor Arnold Biedermann led the renovation of the church, built the school (4 classrooms) and the patio. The year 1967 brought again a Hungarian pastor, Fr. Benedict Horvath from the St. Michael Abbey founded by 7 Norbertine refugee priests. His long tenure allowed him to make major improvements to the building of the church (earthquake retrofit, travertine face-work, wood-carved sanctuary, new pipe organ, air conditioning, rental property purchases, larger parking lot). Also, to the Hungarian cultural services St. Stephen's offered (library, musical and literary events, religious, professional and social programs, art shows, veterans' program). Fr. Horvath organized a Hungarian school for all ages. It started with 14 students and grew beyond 100. In 1974, we had a pastoral visit by Cardinal Mindszenty, the "dry martyr" as Cardinal Manning called him. That visit was very inspirational, very heart-warming.

We had a large number of parishioners in father Horvath's time. Attendance stayed strong during the long service of his beloved successor, Fr. Rettig, between 1990 and 2004, including our 75<sup>th</sup>

anniversary. He is celebrating with us today, as is Fr. Hefner, the one priest born of Danube-Swabian parents, members of St. Stephen parish.

Fortunately, the 1967 commitment of the Norbertine fathers to provide our parish with pastors and visiting priests did not immediately cease upon Fr. Rettig's leave. Then we had two years with our last Norbertine pastor, Fr. Raymond Perez. Fathers Hodges and Smith were his associates. Then St. Michael's abbey switched the commitment from St. Stephen's to another church, in Wilmington. In 2006, the archbishop appointed Fr. William Bonner S.V.D. as our new pastor. He was fluent in German and Spanish, and the Hungarian Mass continued to be celebrated by Fr. Theodore Smith, courtesy of Abbot Hayes. During Fr. Bonner's reign, we had a difficult period, a deep concern for the future of our parish. A major change occurred in 2010. The traditional English mass and the Spanish mass were discontinued, the parish became bilingual again. Also, it was twinned with the nearby St. Patrick parish, under pastor Francisco Ramirez. In 2011, Msgr. Timothy Dyer took over the twin parish.

We are happy with the many positive changes since the new arrangement. The parish has escaped the threat of financial disaster. A major portion of our financial obligations is now supported by rental income from the school and the totally refurbished houses originally acquired during Fr. Horvath's time. We have maintained the buildings, upgraded the hall lighting and the audio, the plumbing and the air conditioning, re-roofed the hall, painted the church. "Do not worry. God will provide." Recalling this exhortation of Fr. Lani, we now hope for the future of our beloved parish, filled with so many reminders of generations' love, prayer and sweat. We pray that the next 10 years will help increase the number of parishioners.

Thank you for your patience.

Attila Toth

Los Angeles, April 15, 2018