

Shrine celebrates 50 years of the Cross



Record-Eagle/Melanie Bolthouse

The Holy Stairs lead up to the Crucifix, which sits in front of the outdoor church. The Cross was constructed in 1954.



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The new church was built in 1997, giving the shrine more room for people when Mass can't be celebrated outside. The cross can be seen through the windows in front.

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In 1954, hundreds of people watched as the dream of a young priest became a reality.

On the top of a grassy knoll in Indian River, a 55-foot cross made out of California redwood was lifted into place, becoming the largest cross in the world and the focal point of The Cross in the Woods shrine and parish. The cross fulfilled the vision of Father Charles Brophy, founder of the Indian River parish, to create something very special in the small northern Michigan town.

Fifty years later, the shrine is commemorating the anniversary of Brophy's dream with praise, prayers and thanksgiving.

"It's really a celebration of the last 50 years and giving thanks to God for all that he's given us," said Brother Thom Smith, a pastoral minister at Cross in the Woods.

The Cross was dedicated on Aug. 22, 1954 by Bishop Allen J. Babcock of Grand Rapids. During his speech, he said, "The Cross looks like an empty house without the figure of Christ upon it."

Five years later, the Corpus, designed by Marshall Fredericks, was added to complete the present crucifix, which attracts crowds of 200,000 to 300,000 per year.

"There are so many stories that people send — little kinds of stories that will probably never be published or never be advertised or televised or talked about," Smith said. "People talked about experiencing a change when they came here. People came upset, depressed, troubled and by just spending time with the Cross on the grounds, have

really felt spiritually refreshed."

In the last 50 years, the shrine, now under the leadership of the Franciscan Friars, has experienced a number of milestones including the opening of the I-75 Indian River exit and the building of the new church in 1997. The new building holds nearly 1,000 people and has large glass windows in front facing the Cross.

"Because we had so much snow here, people weren't able to go to the cross (in the winter)," Smith said. "People tried skiing and snowmobiling and everything else to the Cross and it just didn't work. By having a new church, they're able to see it all times of the year."

In the summer months, the shrine celebrates Mass outdoors on the weekends. During July, the shrine's busiest time, 1,200 to 1,500 people attend.

"Most of the visitors hope to do that because it's one of the very few sites where you're able to have Mass outside and in such a large place," Smith said.

A large part of the 50th anniversary celebration will take place outside near the Cross to celebrate the shrine's unique atmosphere. On Aug. 21, the shrine will host a reception followed by an all-faiths prayer service and a candle-light procession to the Cross.

"It's very moving and very meaningful to people," Smith said.

The following day, the shrine will hold its 50th anniversary liturgy followed by an outdoor reception.

The celebration will also include music by performers from Bay View near Petoskey and others who have performed at the

shrine before.

"We have a very talented music director, Joe Fortin, and he's able to make lots of contacts and bring them here," Smith said. "So we're able to offer musical opportunities for people of all faiths and all ages who use our facilities."

The highlight of the anniversary weekend will be the people, whether it's visitors or parish members, Smith said.

"The actual celebration is calling those who have a past here," he said. "We have people who are original members; we have the founder, who is alive. We've invited people who were instrumental in the development of the place and the path to move forward."

As the shrine readies to celebrate the past, it also is looking toward the future. Smith said one of the parish's goals in the next 50 years is to continue getting the word out to people about the shrine.

"(We want) to let people of all faiths know that they are welcome to come here, welcome to stop, whether it be for 15 minutes, whether it be for an hour," he said. "There are so many people in northern Michigan and the Midwest who don't know about the place."

Along with more visitors, the Cross in the Woods would also like to add to its parishioners. In the past, the church has been mostly comprised of retirees who would move to the area. Smith said now young couples with children are coming to Indian River from larger cities.

"It makes us gray-haired people feel pretty good to know there's a sign of growth," he said. "It's exciting and invigorating to see the parish growing."