

A Brief History of the Catholic Church of Mary Help of Christians, Morphett Vale

by Fr Roman Palma - Parish Priest

The history of the Church of Mary Help of Christians, Morphett Vale, affectionately referred to as St Mary's, is an interesting weave of stories within stories. Obviously, part of the history of the Catholic church in South Australia, its history explains how a part of South Australia was settled. One of the surprising facts about the old church, as the original building came to be known, ostensibly to distinguish it from the new buildings, is that through a strange combination of circumstances, it was the very first Catholic church in South Australia, making little known Morphett Vale a trailblazer. Limitations with regard to the nurturing and spread of Catholicism resulting in the absence of a priestly presence in Adelaide, meant that ministering to the small number of Catholics was left very much in the hands of lay individuals. Leadership was undertaken by those whose economic means extended to owning a house which could accommodate a few people at a time and at certain times of the week could be used for prayer meetings. This, in a nutshell, was the story of the early church in Adelaide.

Settlement, which began in the late 1830's and increased in the 40's, attracted families of Irish-Catholic descent whose varying means extended to being able to afford to purchase small parcels of land, and those who could meet the needs of these aspiring farmers by offering their services as labourers. This was essentially how many areas in South Australia, particularly outside of the Adelaide area, came to be settled. The pioneering families with names such as O'Sullivan, Higgins, Kelly and Kenny, amongst others, are inextricably bound with the settlement of Morphett Vale. Their unswerving faith and tireless efforts to build a church, as was the philanthropy of a prominent member of the council and publican of a local hotel, is the stuff of legends. His offer to the Catholics of a section of his land was to make the first church in South Australia a reality. The determination of a group of people and their combined labours had everything to do with the founding of the first church when whatever stone needed was quarried by themselves from their own land and transported to the site with their horses and drays. The settlers laid the foundations of their new church in 1845 and by January 1846 the church was ready to be blessed. It was held up by the Bishop of the time as a model for other Catholic communities in other parts of Adelaide and the state. Essentially, the Catholics of Morphett Vale had a church, but they would have to wait a while for a pastor. Their efforts to procure one who would live amongst his flock dominated the history of the parish for the almost a century.

Catholic education also received the kiss of life with the church's establishment and with the need to bring knowledge and understanding of the sacraments to the many children of the area. The first school was set up under the guidance of the Josephite nuns. It was in this regard that Blessed Mary Mackillop (now St Mary of the Cross Mackillop) came to seek refuge within the bosom of this sacred precinct during the trying times of her brush with the Catholic leadership.

Morphett Vale's burgeoning Catholic population in the 1960s meant that the old church could no longer accommodate the congregation, necessitating the building of a new church within the existing grounds. With the urban sprawl in the 80's and 90's, other mass centres were deemed to be necessary. Parish schools also sprung up to meet the growing demands of children and their parents for a Catholic based education. The old church, which forms part of the historical legacy was also due for restoration, all of which a new set of benefactors was to make a reality.

To get a better understanding of the history of this part of South Australia, purchasing a copy of the book 'Spirit of the Vale, a history of the Church of Mary Help of Christians Morphett Vale, its pioneering past, its pastors and its people' is highly recommended. The book is available from the Parish Office, 3 Venning Street, Morphett Vale, South Australia, 5162.