

In 1985 the Diocese of Metuchen, only a few years after its own creation, purchased 14 acres in rural Monroe Township with the long term plan of establishing a new parish. It was clear that the Township was becoming a center for retirement communities. Rossmoor, Clearbrook, and Concordia were already established and Monroe and Cranbury were poised for rapid growth. Seven years later Bishop Edward Hughes asked Fr. Stephen Congdon, then pastor of Our Lady of Mercy Church in South Bound Brook, to lead the efforts to create Nativity of Our Lord Parish.

Starting with nothing more than a potato field and a list of potential parishioners from St James Church in Jamesburg, Father Steve soon obtained permission from the Monroe Board of Education to use Applegarth School for weekend Masses. The parish was officially established on July 7, 1992 and the first Mass was held on Saturday, July 11 in the school with about 30 parishioners in attendance. It has been reported the school auditorium was extremely hot in the summer. In the fall office space was obtained in the Concordia Shopping Center. This became the Parish Center and a chapel for weekday Masses. Almost everything was donated or borrowed including two portable confessionals from Queenship of Mary Church in Plainsboro. The makeshift facilities and borrowed spaces did not deter the rapid and enthusiastic growth of the parish. A choir was established and an Altar Rosary Society and a Holy Name Society were formed. A craft group was formed and a Church Bazaar was held in the Parish Center in October of 1993. Often special church services such as weddings and funerals were held at other parishes. A CCD program was quickly established and the first classes received First Communion in May of 1993 in Applegarth School and Confirmation in December of 1993 at Queenship of Mary.

In July of 1993, a year after the first Mass in the Applegarth School, a building campaign was kicked off with remarkable results. By September of that year nearly \$900,000 of the \$950,000 minimum goal had already been pledged including some funds from the non Catholic community. By the time of the ground breaking more than \$1.3 million in had been pledged. The official ground breaking for the church was July 7, 1995 only three years after the founding of the parish.

The original hope had been to have the church ready for Easter of 1996 but that was not quite achieved and the new church, the first Catholic church in Monroe Township, was dedicated by Bishop Hughes on November 21, 1996 before a standing room only congregation. At the dedication Bishop Hughes stated, "In the four years since this parish was founded, you have accomplished so much, and the church stands as a testimony to your zeal, dedication, sacrifice, generosity, and passion to dwell in the house of the Lord."

Over the next six years the parish blossomed and grew along with the area with significant increases in membership, baptisms, first communions and confirmations. In 2002 the parish was shocked by the sudden death of Fr. Steve on March 20 at the age of 66. This marked the end of an era in the history of the parish. Fr. Congdon had been involved in every aspect of the parish's history even serving on the Diocesan Long Range Planning Committee which oversaw the original purchase of land in Monroe Township.

Monsignor William Haughney, who had been in residence in the parish, briefly served as parish administrator after Fr. Steve's death. He was soon followed by Fr. Edward Flanagan from St. Bernadette Parish in Parlin. Fr. Ed was appointed administrator and then, became Nativity's second pastor.

As the parish had hoped and prayed, the arrival of Fr. Ed brought a new energy and a sense of renewed spirituality to the already thriving parish. The parish was strengthened further by the arrival of Sr. Donna Brady in the spring of 2004 to serve as parish associate. Sr. Donna has had a strong influence on all aspects of parish life partially due to the fact that she was one of Fr. Ed's teachers at St Nicholas School in Jersey City.

Over the past five years the parish has experienced explosive growth with even more expected in the future. This growth is reflected not only in the number of parishioners but more importantly in the growth of activities, ministries, and social outreach programs. These include the Rice Bowl Program during Lent, the Giving Tree at Christmas, the Fair Trade coffee activity and many others. Sr. Donna has also been active in leading parish teenagers in missionary work among the poor in West Virginia. The church building has not been neglected during this time with the addition of the crucifix behind the main altar in 2004 and beautiful paintings of the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi installed in time for Easter this year.

After 15 years of impressive growth, the parish is still expanding along with the Township of Monroe and the Village of Cranbury. The church and its facilities that were dedicated only eleven years ago are becoming too small for the congregation. Father Ed has announced plans for a new church and a larger parking lot. The town has given the initial approval to the plans and granted the required variances. Another new era in the short history of Nativity of Our Lord Parish is just beginning.