

# Catholic Church in Ohio County, KY

By Jerry Long  
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**The Roman Catholic Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky**  
**Paducah, KY, Turner Publishing Company, 1995:**

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST PARISH  
FORDSVILLE



St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, Fordsville, KY, erected in 1976

[page 138] – In August of 1893 Father Lawrence Ford [1858-1934] offered Mass for the first time in the newly completed mission church of St. John the Baptist in Ohio County. Father Ford will long be remembered for his generous work in Ohio County. Before him other priests had visited this area of Ohio County from St. Mary's in Whitesville, but no parish had been established as of yet. In 1896, Bishop McClosky visited the mission and administered the Sacrament of Confirmation to nine people. This parish is still in existence today although it is now moved to Fordsville.

In the 1940s a more consistent effort at evangelization began in this area. Visiting beyond the immediate area of St. John Church, Father Henry O'Bryan contacted some Catholics as far away as Rosine and Adaburg. Then Father Walter Hancock and after him Father William Hagman

began to offer Sunday Mass at St. John's. The Catholic congregation began to grow a little. But then the migration towards town slowly depleted the parish numbers once again.

In early 1965 Bishop Soenneker asked the Glenmary Home Missioners to accept St. John's as part of their mission territory, which would now cover the whole of Ohio County. The loyal Catholic families still present in the area began attending Mass on Sunday evenings at 6:00 pm.

In October of that year Father Joe O'Donnell was appointed pastor of the mission (while also taking care of Holy Redeemer in Beaver Dam and Holy Trinity in Morgantown.) It became evident to him and the parishioners that the future growth of St. John Parish would depend on the willingness of all to move this base parish to Fordsville. A mission team of Glenmary seminarians and other volunteers was sent to the Fordsville area where they discovered a few more Catholic families. (Among them was the future Father Tony Shonis, now a priest of the Diocese of Owensboro.)

The first Mass offered in Fordsville was in the lunchroom at the public school on the Feast of the Assumption 1966. Soon after that, a Protestant couple let the Catholics move a chapel trailer onto their property. This became the present site of St. John Church. Sunday Mass was offered weekly. Soon the mobile chapel was filled to overflowing each Sunday. The adjacent house and property were purchased by the diocese. The first floor was gutted out for a temporary church. (That house was later converted to a social hall, now known as Father Yunker Hall.) The congregation continued to grow in number and spirit.

In 1971 Father Louis P. Yunker, a retired priest of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, took up residence at St. John's in Fordsville. As he became more known in town he soon became a loved figure among all the Protestant community. Also among those who did significant church work in the area was Brother Jim Dorn (later a Glenmary priest). He was especially appreciated for his effective leadership with young people.

In 1976 the Glenmary Building Crew came to Fordsville and constructed the present church building. The church was dedicated by Bishop Soenneker on July 11, 1976. The congregation continued to grow. The appreciation for the Catholic Church as an accepted part of the community was more and more taken for granted. Father Yunker continued his priestly presence until serious disability forced him into complete retirement.

During this time a young woman, Beatrice Meany, who had done several years of lay mission work in Africa came to Fordsville as a missionary. She did a wonderful job of bringing this small community of Catholics together to make a vibrant witness-group throughout the area. Tony Shonis spent a year doing mission work at St. John's and gave instructions to the people who were interested in joining the Church. Among others who helped the parish of St. John's with sacramental ministry were Father Ed Gorny of Glenmary and Father Joe Mills a diocesan priest of Owensboro. Many others also helped.

When Father O'Donnell returned as pastor in 1981 he found it most difficult to give a meaningful witness in three parishes. There was a real need again for genuine Catholic leadership by someone who could live in town. On August 13, 1983 Sister Diane Marie Payne, an Ursuline sister, came to reside in the apartment attached to the church building. (She was the first sister of her community to go into pastoral ministry.) Due to the effective ministry of Sister Diane the congregation continued to grow. Converts came into the Church. On many Sundays the new church building was full. Sister Diane is now in her ninth year at St. John's and continues to be well-appreciated by the whole community of Fordsville.

With the shortage of priests, Father O'Donnell found it necessary to have Mass on Sunday evening at 6:00 pm at St. John's. Even though this difficult change has forced some people to go

to other churches for Liturgy, the parish core remains firm in its loyalty to St. John's. There is great hope for the future. Thanks be to God.

## HOLY REDEEMER PARISH BEAVER DAM

[page 105] – For almost 100 years the few Catholics in the northeastern part of Ohio County were served by St. John the Baptist Church, originally near Dundee and later, in 1960s, moved to Fordsville. Because of the large geographic area comprising Ohio County, this parish had practically no influence in the southwestern area of the county.

In 1950 Father Walter Hancock began visiting a few scattered Catholics in the southwestern half of Ohio County. He soon started to offer Mass once a month at the home of Edwin Sharp in Hartford. Then in 1954 he offered an occasional Mass at the southern edge of Beaver Dam in the home of William Pierce. (William was a former Methodist minister who joined the Catholic church in his later years.) On the first Sunday of Lent in 1958 Father Hancock started offering Mass every Sunday at Bill Pierce's home. In the Fall of that same year a house on Main Street in Beaver Dam was purchased by the diocese for the purpose of establishing some permanent Church residence. At this time Father Bill Hageman, newly stationed at St. Mary's Church in Whitesville, came to offer weekly Mass. In 1961 Bishop Soenneker asked the Glenmary Home Missioners if they would assume pastoral responsibility for the southern half of Ohio County as a mission of Holy Trinity Church in Morgantown.

At this time there were about ten practicing Catholics. Due to the booming coal industry in Ohio County during the 1960s, the number of Catholics began to increase. Father Carl Boehler was the first Glenmary Priest to serve here. The number of Catholics migrating from other areas (particularly from Daviess County) brought quite an increase in membership.

In 1963 Bishop Soenneker arranged for the purchase of property at the northern end of Beaver Dam to serve as a permanent location of Holy Redeemer Church. The construction of the present church on this property began in 1964. In 1965 Father Boehler was elected the treasurer of the Glenmary Missioners and moved to their headquarters in Cincinnati. In October of that year Father Joe O'Donnell arrived to be pastor. On September 11, 1966 Holy Redeemer Church was formally dedicated by Bishop Soenneker.

In the Spring of 1967 Brother Jerry Dorn arrived to begin a five-year assignment working with Father O'Donnell. He influenced greatly the youth, both Catholic and Protestant, of the whole area raising a positive Catholic image countywide.

September 22, 1967 the first Ecumenical Prayer Service was held at Holy Redeemer. The pastor of the Beaver Darn Baptist Church, Rev. Glenn Armstrong, preached the sermon. In 1970 Tony Shonis, later Father Shonis, was ordained a deacon at Holy Redeemer Church. (He had spent a year doing mission work in Ohio County from 1966-67.)

Until 1973 Glenmarians and other church volunteers lived in the church basement. A rectory was constructed by the Glenmary Building Crew in 1973. During the course of this parish's short existence there were many Glenmary priests, brothers, and sisters who came to do great mission work in this area. Also effective witness has been given in Ohio County by several diocesan priests and many Ursuline sisters.

In 1976 Father O'Donnell left the parish to do ecumenical work with the Southern Baptist Convention. Father Ed Gorny then became the pastor. In 1981 Father O'Donnell returned as pastor. He is, at present, still pastor and finds the experience both rewarding and stimulating.

In 1984 Sister Luisa Bickett, O.S.U. came to Holy Redeemer to do mission work, after spending many years in the missions of South America. With the cooperation of the people of Holy Redeemer parish she began to live in the Horse Branch area of the county and is still there giving a missionary witness where few Catholics live.

Over the years Holy Redeemer parish continues to grow slowly but surely. When Father O'Donnell began offering Mass in 1965 there were an average of about 30 people attending Sunday Mass. Now the Sunday worship usually has over 150 people present.

This parish has never had the experience of a Catholic school. However, it has been blessed over the years with many parishioners who have moved in with a fine background of Catholic education both on the grade, high school, and college level. The parish family has been very cooperative in parish life and has done much to make the Catholic Church acceptable to the other people of the county. One example of fine Catholic leadership was the establishment of the Parish Council in the Fall of 1967. For 25 years now this council has met regularly on a monthly basis.

With the members living in an area extended over so many square miles, one of the great challenges is religious education. Because of the cooperation of the parishioners there has been a strong effort and concern for handing on the faith. One of the special highlights of the Church Year is the annual two-week Summer School of Religious Education. Besides lay teachers this Summer School has been blessed over the years with the teaching of many religious sisters. Each year children receive their First Communion at the end of the Summer School. Every other year the Bishop comes for Confirmation around the same time.

The parish always has had a deep appreciation for the concern and enthusiastic support of the bishops of Owensboro. The people of this parish have had Glenmary provide the priestly ministry. As a matter of fact, Glenmary for the past five years has had the first year of its training program for candidates to priesthood and brotherhood at a center established in Hartford.

There are a few members still in the parish who lived here when it was first established. They alone with many others are a testimony to the vital faith of Catholics who moved into an area where the Church is very much in a mission situation. The future for Holy Redeemer parish continues to look promising.



Holy Redeemer Catholic Church, 107 W. 13th St., Beaver Dam, KY



**75 years of the diocese of Owensboro Kentucky, Sarah L. Patterson,  
Owensboro, KY, Diocese of Owensboro, 2012, p.116:**

**ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST CATHOLIC CHURCH  
Fordsville – current church erected in 2006**

In August of 1893, Father Lawrence Ford offered the first Mass in the newly completed mission church of St. John the Baptist in Ohio County, Ky. In 1896, Bishop McClosky of Louisville visited the church and administered the sacrament of Confirmation to nine people. It remained small until the 1940s when Father Henry O'Bryan began to offer Sunday Mass at the church.

In early 1965, Father Joseph O'Donnell of the Glenmary Home Missioners became pastor of the mission and the parish was relocated from Dundee to Fordsville. In 1976 a new church was constructed with the help of the Catholic Extension Society.

Ursuline Sisters of Mount St. Joseph came in 1983 and continue to help in the daily operations of the parish. Under Father Richard Powers and his successor, Father Patrick Bittel, discussion became serious about building a new church. The present church was dedicated August 27, 2006 and is at capacity to overflowing on some Sundays.

The people of St John the Baptist Parish are a humble people with a great love for God, His church and the community. As we build to the honor and glory of God, St. John the Baptist and St. Joseph the Worker, our hope is to have a simple yet peaceful place to gather to worship God where we have room for others to join us, for our good and salvation and that of the people of Fordsville.



St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, 66 Smith St., Fordsville, KY, erected in 2006



Holy Redeemer Catholic Church, 107 W. 13th St., Beaver Dam, KY



**Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 4 January 1882, p.2:**

SULPHUR SPRINGS SPICE

Dec. 31 – Father Kyran King, representing the Catholic Church from Whitesville, lectured at Mt. Vernon Church, near this place, a week or two ago.

Some talk of erecting a Catholic Church at this place. I don't advocate the Catholic faith very strongly, but if that church is calculated to do more good than harm, and people can escape eternal punishment under their rule of faith, why let's have the church. We are certain there is room for reformation yet.



**Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 21 October 1891, p.3:**

Catholic Preaching.

Bishop McClosky and Pastor – Dunn, of the Cathedral at Louisville, will be at Sulphur Springs the first Sunday in November and remain three days. They will hold services at the hotel at 3 o'clock Sunday evening and also at night.



**Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, Friday, 1 July 1892, p.4:**

SULPHUR SPRINGS

A fine Catholic Church is under contract to be built in 100 days by James Magan. It is located on the Hardinsburg road about two miles South of Barretts Ferry.



**Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, Friday, 3 March 1893, p.3:**

A new Catholic Church is just about completed in the New Baymus neighborhood. So far as we are informed it is the first and only church of that denomination ever in the county.



**Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, Friday, 3 March 1893, p.4:**

SULPHUR SPRINGS

Feb. 25. – The new Catholic Church, two miles east or this place, is nearing completion. It is a model of beauty and neatness. J. F. Magan is the builder. Henry L. Thomas, who was the principal instigator in having it built, wants to sell his farm and move away as he says it is too close to him.



**Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, Friday, 10 March 1893, p.2:**

SULPHUR SPRINGS

Mar. 8, – I notice in your last issue that one "Pro Bono Publico" says that Henry L. Thomas, the principal instigator of the Catholic Church near this place, wanted to sell out and move away as the church was too close to him. The falsity of his statement begins with characterizing me as the principal instigator. While I aided in the building of the church, the distinction of instigator, if it be a distinction, belongs entirely to my son. I hat I have at any time expressed myself as desiring to leave the community of the church is absolutely and unqualifiedly false, and was written for the purpose of ridicule.

Resp’y,  
H. L. Thomas



**Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, Friday, 19 May 1893, p.4:**

SULPHUR SPRINGS

May 10. – St. Johns Church, (Catholic) will be dedicated by Bishop McClosky, of Louisville, some time in June.

Reuben



**Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 29 January 1896, p.3:**

Prospect for a Catholic Church in Hartford.

The Rev. Drury, Catholic Missionary, gave a four-nights lecture at the court house here last week, made quite an impression upon the people here. He had good audiences every night and the strict attention paid the learned man, showed his lecture were enjoyed. Rev. Drury is born Kentuckian and comes from one of the best families of the State. He was well known by some of our best townspeople and to these he promised to come again some time in the near future and deliver more of his lectures. There are only a few Catholics in Hartford, but if there were a church here they would come from all quarters.

ONE WHO HEARD HIM.



**Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 22 April 1896, p.3:**



Rev. Father Drury, of the Catholic Church, delivered series of interesting lectures at the court house in Hartford last week. An effort is being made to organize a church here and several hundred dollars have been subscribed toward the building of a church edifice.



**Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, Friday, 2 October 1896, p.2:**

Bishop McClosky, of Louisville, gave confirmation to a number of candidates at St. John the Baptist's Church on Wednesday of last week, after which Rev. Father O'Sullivan, of Whitesville, celebrated high mass with the response sung by the Whitesville choir. Miss Agnes Bray, the organist, is gifted with a voice scarcely less rich and mellow than the Queens of the orchestra who have sung to Kings and Princess in the imperial palaces of the Old World. The other members of the choir have been carefully trained for their position, and while their voices blended with the low deep notes of the instrument in Magman's Mass we wondered if we were listening to the echo of songs sung centuries ago in the great old cathedrals of Europe or music stolen fresh from Heaven . We should be glad to welcome the choir at our church again. J. H. T.



**Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, Friday, 22 November 1901, p.3:**

Revs. Hugh O'Sullivan and J. B. Monaghan gave an interesting mission at St. John the Baptist's Catholic church near Sulphur Springs last week.



**Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 18 March 1908, p.3:**



I am a reader of "The Record", and note with pride the great activity of the Catholics all over the State wherever there is a church. It makes scattered Catholics feel like outcasts.

Probably the rest of the State does not know how these parts are situated in regard to church conveniences. For your information I will state that there is but one church in Ohio county. It is situated in the eastern part of the county, about two and one-half miles from Sulphur Springs, in a

rough country place, and I do not know whether they have services now or not. Father O’Sullivan, of Whitesville, is the priest that attends there.

I do not know how many Catholics there are in Hartford, Beaver Dam and McHenry, and the surrounding country, but there are some, and I am taking this means to find out.

What I want is this: By getting the proper authorization, I would be in favor of building a church in Hartford, although I live twelve miles away; and I will donate 100 to start it.

Hartford is the County Seat, well surrounded, and growing fast, with a new railroad building. It would be an advantage to the county. Catholics would emigrate to this county instead of moving away, and it seems to me to be as much financial advantage here as anywhere I have been. Suppose we go in abreast and see what we can do.

Yours, E. W. Jackson,  
Beaver Dam Ky.

[Note: Elijah Walker Jackson (1874-1966), was born in Butler County, KY and died at Hartford, KY. He was a farmer and was a member of the Beaver Dam Catholic Church in Ohio County, KY. He and his wife, Verna Porter Jackson (1890-1980) are buried at the Sunnyside Cemetery in Beaver Dam, KY.]



**Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, Friday, 23 April 1909, p.1:**

[Abstract] – Carson C. Park & Miss Corinne Thomas were married at St. John’s Catholic Church on 19 April 1909 by Rev. O’Sullivan, Miss Thomas is the daughter of John H. Thomas, at present the postmaster at Narrows and formerly editor of newspaper, Hartford Republican.]



**Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 14 February 1912, p.1:**

BARRETT’S FERRY

Feb. 12. – Mr. Henry Thomas has sold his farm, near the Catholic church, to Mr. Clyde Magan and Mr. Thomas and his daughter, Mrs. Berkley, will move to Narrows.



**Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, Friday, 30 November 1917, p.5:**

The pastor of the Knottsville church gave a mission at St. John the Baptist's Catholic church, near Sulphur Springs, last week.

