

# St. Stevens celebrates dual anniversary

By DIANA J. SIMS  
Staff Writer

McCONNELLSBURG — Twenty years ago, Catholics had no home in Fulton County.

They had no church, no priest, no community.

Being a Catholic here meant having to travel over mountains to Chambersburg, Bedford, Mount Union or Hancock, Md., each Sunday to worship.

According to one Catholic in Fulton County, it also meant being misunderstood by many, mostly Protestant, neighbors.

This weekend Catholics in Fulton County will celebrate the 20th anniversary of St. Steven's Catholic Church, the first Catholic church in the county.

As part of that celebration, they will honor St. Stephen's one and only priest, the Rev. Benedict Wolf. Like the Catholic church built on McConnellsburg's main street near the center of town, he does not believe in keeping a low profile.

In the last two decades, Wolf has worked his way into a variety of service groups designed to help poor, sick, young and old. From the Fulton County Teen Center to the Fulton County Human Service Council to the non-profit group HOPE Inc., the 66-year-old Wolf is seen as a necessary cog to keep the wheel of social progress turning.

An outspoken Catholic, he has not hesitated to criticize parts of society he believes have gone wrong in a controversial weekly newspaper column he once wrote for The Fulton County News and The Fulton County Journal.

When Wolf came to Fulton County from Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1962, he was a member of the Glenmary Mission, a society determined to put a priest



Staff photo by Diana Sims

The Rev. Benedict Wolf

into each of the approximately 1,000 priestless counties in the country, Wolf said.

Coming here was almost like coming home for Wolf, who was raised on a farm in northcentral Ohio along with nine brothers and sisters.

Starting a parish here was no easy task. The first Mass was celebrated in the red brick building at the corner of Lincoln Way East and Third Street, today the church rectory. But at that time it was a structure in dire need of repair.

The Mass was conducted Oct. 1, the feast of St. Terese. "I wanted to have it that day because she was the patroness of missions," Wolf said. "And this was surely a mission."

Twenty-seven people attended that first service — 19 were countians, the rest were Wolf's friends who traveled from Ohio for the occasion.

After that, with the help of Glenmary brothers, Wolf and other Catholics began to canvass the county, looking for parishioners.

"We beat the bushes and found a lot of strays out in the woods," Wolf said.

Today, the parish has grown 10-fold. There are 190 members, he said.

It took 10 years for the parish to save enough money to build a church. Now, Wolf proudly shows visitors the carpeted sanctuary with its stained glass windows and 100-year-old carved black walnut pews.

Wolf said one of the biggest challenges the church has faced here is dispelling the misconceptions people hold about Catholicism.

"People believed the old canards," Wolf said.

He was disturbed by charges that Catholics worship idols because they pray before altar statues of the Virgin Mary and other saints. Having statues in

the sanctuary is much like having a picture of a loved one in your home, he said.

"I like to see somebody that belongs to my family," Wolf said. "Do you think I'm so stupid that I don't know the difference between a statue and God?"

But Wolf said he was familiar with non-Catholic's misconceptions. He remembers trying to convince a Protestant schoolboy that even though there was a canon in the mass — the Eucharistic prayer — Catholics were not going to use it to kill the Protestants.

Choosing the priesthood was not an unusual thing for Wolf to do. His brothers and sisters had set the example. All of his five sisters had become nuns. Two of his brothers were priests and another brother became a Benedictan monk.

Wolf's father may have been the motivator that sent his children into the church.

"He taught us our faith well and he taught us to live it," Wolf said. "He was a staunch and knowledgeable Catholic."

When Wolf came to McConnellsburg, he had one aim in mind.

"If there's one thing I wanted to do, it was to be a servant of the community," he said.

That he has become that is a point not easily denied.

He has served on various boards, including the Franklin/Fulton Mental Health/Mental Retardation and the Fulton Teen Center boards of directors. He worked with the Fulton County Community Action Agency and the Tri-County Community Action Agency.

In winters past, as Fulton County's Salvation Army representative, he has helped families who run out

of fuel by supplying them with \$25 fuel vouchers.

Until recently, he was the county's paid Green Thumb coordinator, helping elderly people find minimum wage jobs. Now, he coordinates the program here as volunteer.

He is probably best known for his work as executive director of HOPE Inc., (Homes on People's Energy) a non-profit, self-help organization that solicited thousands of dollars in contributions from churches and groups, then built homes for low-income families.

"We begged from all over," Wolf said.

Seven homes were built by HOPE volunteers. Most were built for minority families in the Ridge community, west of McConnellsburg.

"This gave those people some kind of dignity and they kept those homes nice," he said.

Wolf was not afraid to work himself. Several years ago he and his brother, Maurus Wolf, dug ditches and laid a pipe from a spring on the Ridge down closer to the homes so residents — most of whom hauled water from the spring — wouldn't have so far to walk.

The pipe has since broken, but HOPE is now trying to find a way to supply running water into the homes of Ridge residents.

After almost 42 years in the priesthood, Benedict Wolf has few regrets.

"The Lord put me exactly where I belong," he said. "I love being a priest. I don't regret one minute of it."

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