

# ST. PATRICK'S CHURCH, LETHBRIDGE

## Historical Background

In 1886, when the founding pastor of St. Patrick's parish, Father Leonard van Tighem, O.M.I., paid his first visit to the fledgling town of Lethbridge, he estimated that there were about sixty practicing Catholics. Three years later, he proudly recorded in his journal that his flock had grown in number and included no less than fourteen nationalities, "a glorious proof," he wrote, "of our title 'Catholic.' *—Credo in Ecclesiam Catholicam* 'ō (I believe in the Catholic Church).

Father van Tighem, himself a Belgian, was a man of faith and courage. He built a strong foundation for the Catholic Church in Lethbridge, with the support of those early Catholic pioneers, most of them miners earning a mere pittance.

It has sometimes been remarked that the Catholic faith burns strongest in times of adversity and challenge. The story of our faith in Lethbridge is surely one of sacrifice. It took sacrifice and commitment in 1887 to build the original St. Patrick's Church.

When the population outgrew Father van Tighem's beloved little sandstone church, it took courage for the parish to embark on the construction of a new church in 1913. They got as far as pouring the basement of the church when the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 halted construction. The 16-inch thick slab of concrete that would become the floor of the future church became the roof of the basement that then served as St. Patrick's Church for nearly forty years, a record that we can be sure no other basement church can match in its service of the faithful!



St. Patrick's Basement Church (1913 to 1952)

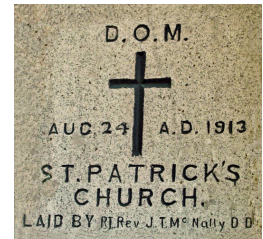


*Parishioners roofing St. Patrick's in their spare time, some still in their office attire!*

## The Modern Era

The end of the Second World War heralded an unprecedented influx of immigrants mostly from Europe. This led to the erection of St. Basil's Church (1950), the completion of the super-structure of St. Patrick's Church (1952) and the building of Our Lady of the Assumption Church (1957). Again it is a testimony to the sacrifice of the Catholics of Lethbridge that three churches sprang up within the space of ten years when money was scarce and many of the parishioners were only able to contribute sweat equity.

At the solemn blessing of the newly completed St. Patrick's Church, Bishop Francis P. Carroll O.M.I., Bishop of Calgary, congratulated the Pastor, Rev. Wilfred Malloy, O.M.I. and the faithful of St. Patrick's Parish. "All the zealous efforts and apostolic sacrifices of the years of growth and expansion are contained and symbolized in the magnificent edifice which is St. Patrick's Church of today, - truly a worthy tribute to a glorious past and to the Catholic goodwill and generosity of its present parishioners," stated Bishop Carroll. "May God bless all who have made possible this monument to His honor and provided Him with a House worthy of His sacred Presence."



*Foundation stone laid by Bishop J.T. McNally*

Very Rev. W.H. Malloy, O.M.I., Pastor of St. Patrick's Church noted that St. Patrick's "points its graceful spire into the heavens over a progressive, modern city, which, like itself, rose from humble and earthly beginnings. It is a thing of beauty and loveliness to all who behold it."

Describing the new structure in greater detail, Fr. Malloy noted, "The majestic lines of the exterior; the soft pastel grandeur of the interior; the colorful pageantry of its old-world stained glass, all blend into a harmonious masterpiece of architectural beauty rivaled by none in this western country and equaled by few in this land."

Bishop Carroll concluded his address at the blessing and opening of St. Patrick's Church with these inspiring sentiments:

"As long as God wills it, this lovely monument to your faith and devotion will be an earthly dwelling for the King of Kings; it will be a haven of peace and serenity away from the busy world for you and for many thousands to follow you. For all of you who have worked so hard and thrilled to the beauty and solemnity of this hour, and for all who will cross this sacred threshold in the years to come, may this be the antechamber of life everlasting. Indeed, the Lord is in this place. This is no other than the house of God and gate of heaven."

## A Heritage Site

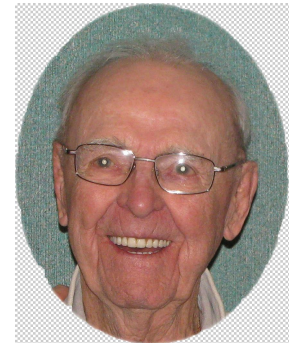
In March 2009, St. Patrick's Church was listed in the first Lethbridge Inventory of Historic Places. In describing the heritage value of the church, special mention was made of its link to early Catholic missionary activity in the area. Special note was also made of the Romanesque design influences and the integrity of the building and its design not being altered.

As The Diocese owns all church properties, the Church Heritage Site Committee had to ask Bishop F. Henry on July 24, 2009 for permission to apply for Provincial Historic Site designation for St. Patrick's Church. Permission was declined by Diocesan Moderator Very Rev. J.G. Schuster, V.G. who stated in part, "We do not see any advantage to the parish in having the church declared an historical building. There is little, if any, financial benefit." It certainly seems that more consideration was given to the "financial benefit" than the pride the people of Lethbridge have in their historic church.

### **100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration**

On August 25, 2013, a sell-out crowd of over 500 gathered for the Gala Dinner at the Lethbridge Lodge to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St. Patrick's Church. Then Mayor of Lethbridge, Rajko Dodic, Q.C., remarked, "Given the role that this church has played in our city during the past 100 years, it is fitting that you are making this a community celebration."

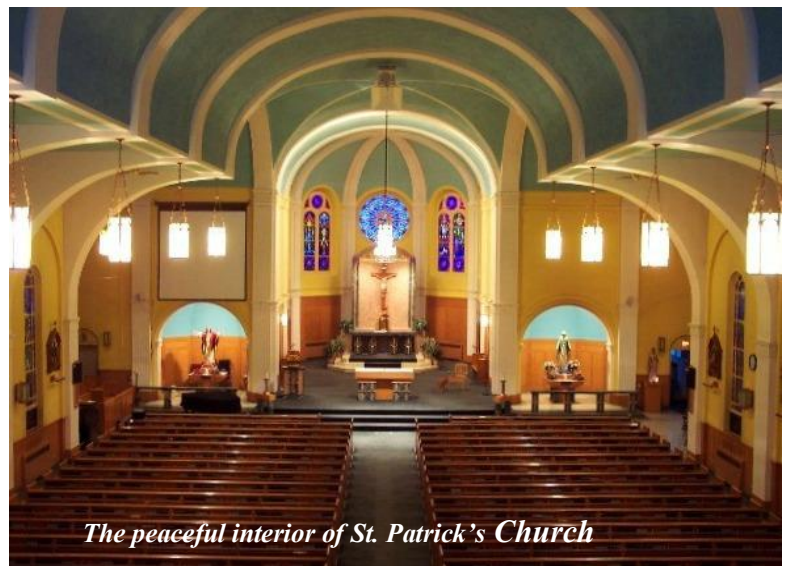
The occasion was graced by the presence of several long-time parishioners of the church including 100-year-old George Bruchet whose family is listed among the founders of St. Patrick's Church. George passed away barely six months after the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. His funeral Mass could not be celebrated at his beloved St. Patrick's Church as it was shuttered.



*George Bruchet  
(1913-2014)*

The closure of St. Patrick's Church by Bishop Henry on August 1, 2011, put pressure on the two smaller churches to accommodate the parishioners of East Lethbridge. The closure created or exacerbated problems such as the availability of halls, meeting rooms and parking places. Predictably, these were advanced as reasons to build a new church.

More seriously, many parishioners have protested the closure by attending services at other area Catholic churches, becoming non-active Catholics or, in some cases, joining churches of other denominations. The proposal to sell three fully viable, financially stable, and much-loved neighbourhood churches with thriving parishes has created division and tensions among parishioners. There is a great need for a solution that restores peace and harmony in All Saints parish, a solution arrived at in consultation with the parishioners, not imposed on them by the hierarchy or a chosen few.



### **Decree Relegating St. Patrick's Church to Secular Use**

On October 1, 2016, shortly before his retirement, Bishop Frederick Henry issued a Decree relegating St. Patrick's Church to profane but not sordid use as of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. This Decree threatens the very existence of St. Patrick's Church. An appeal was sent to the Congregation for the Clergy that has confirmed that the matter will be investigated. However desirable a new church in East Lethbridge may be, if it is built at the cost of what many parishioners consider to be their spiritual home, the fallout from carrying out the Decree will be far-reaching and will undoubtedly affect the very future of All Saints parish. All local and diocesan authorities would do well to consider the likely repercussions before any irrevocable decisions are made on the future of the three churches in All Saints parish.

## Why Was St. Patrick's Church "temporarily closed"?

In February 2007, when Bishop Henry announced that all three churches in East Lethbridge would be sold and replaced by a 1,200 seat edifice, he unleashed a storm of protests, including scores of letters and at least three petitions, each with hundreds of names. The rationale for the proposal was given by the Bishop and rebutted on several occasions. Then, in June 2009, Bishop Henry proposed a plan to save St. Patrick's Church: The basement would be converted to a columbarium that would supposedly generate enough money to pay for the upkeep of St. Patrick's Church in the future. It was noted, however, that as there would be no gathering space, St. Patrick's would cease to be an active parish and the church would be used as a mission church with services only on special occasions. Many parishioners believed there was a hidden agenda: take St. Patrick's out of the equation and it would soon be evident that the remaining two smaller churches would not be able to cope with the needs of the parish. As long as St. Patrick's remained an active parish, the need for a new \$20 million church would be questioned. Whatever the case, the proposal to convert the basement was rejected. Bishop Henry ordered St. Patrick's to be "temporarily closed" as of August 1, 2011, an action that was widely perceived as punitive.

The Save Our Churches Association (SOCA) was formed on June 25, 2011 to plead the case for retaining our neighbourhood churches to the Bishop. Bishop Henry was adamant: the *status quo* was unacceptable and he would entertain no discussion on that issue. On December 23, 2015, an appeal was sent to the Congregation for the Clergy to declare the closure of St. Patrick's Church invalid according to the norms of Canon Law. The Congregation informed the parish that their decision would be announced on October 28, 2016. The Bishop preempted the decision by announcing his Decree on October 1, 2016. An appeal was immediately launched and the Congregation has consented to examine whether the reasons given for Bishop Henry's Decree are valid according to the norms of Canon Law.

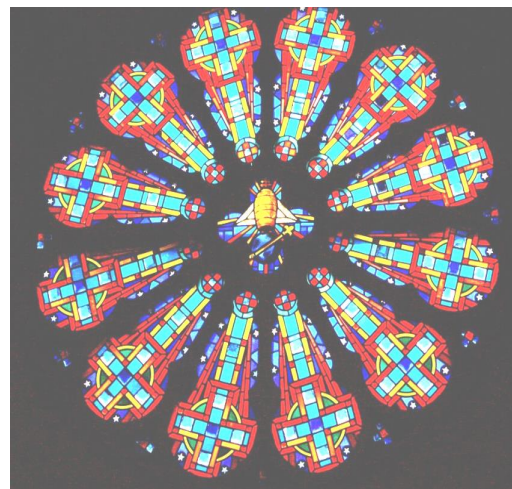
## Why Is It Important That No Harm Comes to St. Patrick's Church?

This brochure has been produced by the Save Our Churches Association (SOCA). It is important to note, however, that it is not only members of SOCA who feel that St. Patrick's Church occupies a special place in the spiritual, cultural and social life of the city. Below are views expressed by a cross-section of citizens from different walks of life in the city of Lethbridge.

One of the first features that visitors to St. Patrick's Church notice immediately and remark on are the twenty one multi-coloured stained glass windows of a variety of shapes and sizes that depict different aspects of our faith and beliefs. The windows were designed by the famed Rault Brothers of Rennes, France. The 22,000 pieces used in the windows are in the true French medieval tradition of stained glass, the colour being actually in the glass. Parishioner Ralph Himsl had this to say of them in 1976:

"I find them not at their best during the day time when they fairly blaze in the Alberta sun; but at night they create a different mood. Then the blues and reds glow with greater discretion; then St. Patrick's Church seems a holy place indeed; then a visitor to the Church feels the long traditions of the church: its constancy and its adaptations surround the twentieth century traveler."

There is a proposal that items from the three churches such as the high altar and the windows of St. Patrick's will be salvaged and used in the new church when the old churches are sold. Many parishioners find this proposal offensive as they would like these items to remain exactly where they now are - in St. Patrick's, St. Basil's and Our Lady of the Assumption churches.



## Our Mother Church

- Bishop Henry then went on to speak about St. Patrick's Church. He spoke about its beauty of the stained glass windows and the marble. He spoke about its place as our Mother Church and its role in our history. He has been listening to our concerns about losing St. Patrick's. (Very Rev. Tim Boyle, Pastor, in an undated September 2009 bulletin insert reporting on a meeting Bishop Henry had with the All Saints parish Pastoral Council on June 13, 2009).
- The very experience of walking into this space is transforming. It does something to the person, which space and buildings are supposed to do. This one accomplishes it in very deep and profound ways. It's the effect of being in this living sculpture, I think, that does something to your soul. (Very Rev. Tim Boyle, Pastor, 2001-2012, pp. 13-14, Sage Magazine, Summer 2011).
- St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church is a prominent building in Lethbridge's downtown and an extremely valuable asset to the downtown revitalization efforts and the community as a whole, and it would be a shame to potentially lose the entire building or its character. The Historic Places Advisory Committee unequivocally supports the ongoing work to preserve St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church building. (Jason Baranec, Chairman, Historic Places Advisory Committee, City of Lethbridge).
- I am writing to express my concern in respect of the closure of St. Patrick's Church. I am not a Roman Catholic but am a Christian and a member of St. Augustine's Anglican Parish. I am now 80 and served as a judge in the Provincial Court of Manitoba, the Provincial Court of Alberta and as a Deputy Judge of the Northwest Territorial Court. The closure of St. Patrick's Church has alarmed many of the parishioners who are known to me. The parishioners were and continue to be devout Christians and strive to keep their eyes on Jesus. As a result of the closure it has become very difficult for many and to say that they are disheartened is an understatement. (Fred Coward, retired Judge, resident of Lethbridge).
- The closure (of St. Patrick's) is not just about a building. It is about the loss of a Catholic community, recognized by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. St. Patrick's stood as that community's proud symbol. Now its silent steeple represents the sharp point that fractured and dispersed a vibrant, benevolent community. (Tammy Perlich, Lethbridge lawyer).
- On behalf of Lethbridge and Alberta history, on behalf of our citizens (past, present and future), on behalf of all of us who appreciate that in a world where so much tears us apart that we need to hold on tightly to those things that strengthen our community, on behalf of our environment, I ask that you do all within your power to protect St. Patrick's and St. Basil's Churches. (Belinda Crowson, Lethbridge Historian, Past President, Historical Society of Alberta).
- One can find many justifications as to why a church should be closed in favour of a new one but those justifications pale in the face of the raw emotion that parishioners feel for the church of their youth; the church they got married in; the Church their children got baptized and confirmed in; and the Church that they said their farewell to their loved ones. Surely the folks that have demonstrated their faith and support for all these years should be allowed to worship where they feel most comfortable and at peace. I would ask that a decision be made that sees the proud history of St. Patrick's, St. Basil's and Assumption Church continue into the future for the benefit of generations to come. (Rajko Dodic, Q.C. Mayor of Lethbridge, 2010-2013).



*This triplet window portrays Our Lady of Lourdes in the centre panel, with the side panels depicting her beauty and purity in their symbols of rose and lily.*

- I note a sad irony in that the closing of St. Patrick's runs contrary to a centuries-long Catholic tradition of establishing churches in the heart of communities. For a hundred years Saint Patrick's has had a dignified, vibrant presence in the heart of Lethbridge. As mayor of the City of Lethbridge, I was reminded of its presence every time I looked out the front windows of City Hall. I am pleased to add my voice to those in Lethbridge calling for the re-opening of the beautiful St. Patrick's Church in the heart of Lethbridge and a recommitment to the principle that churches should be where people are. (Robert (Bob) Tarleck, Mayor of Lethbridge 2001-2010).
- During my time at St. Patrick's Church, the parishioners supported the church in a very generous financial way. There were no money problems. We were able to reach out to others by supporting a sister parish in a very poor area of Peru. In my time, we were able to sponsor and settle 72 refugees and these works continued to allow the parish to grow in a very spiritual and evangelical manner. As an Oblate, I feel very honoured to have pastored and followed so many great people who worked at building a structure and Christ-filled community. My prayers and support are with you and The Save Our Churches Association. God be with you. (Rev. W.J. (Bill) MacDonald, OMI, Pastor of St. Patrick's Church 1980-1986).
- The closing of St. Patrick's Church in 2011 (and the Decree relegating it to secular use on January 1, 2017, we might add now) demonstrate how religious institutions fail to understand, or ignore, the important role they play in their communities. An observation was recently made by an authority from All Saints Parish that St. Patrick's Church is "just a building". If that is so, then Notre Dame de Paris and St. Peter's in Rome are "just buildings" and the Statue of Liberty is "just a statue". In truth, St. Patrick's Church serves the same purpose as these more notable examples. It fulfils a spiritual need. It also serves to demonstrate that St. Patrick's takes its role as a community partner seriously and that it is an important part of the community at large. And finally, perhaps most importantly, with its strategic downtown location, St. Patrick's serves as a symbol that Lethbridge is a Christian community. It remains only for the diocesan authority to demonstrate that it recognizes these attributes and then to reopen this remarkable church. (Felix Michna, Planning Director (retired), City of Lethbridge).
- My family has worshipped at St. Patrick's Church for five generations. St. Patrick's has played a central role in the life story of my family as we have celebrated baptisms, weddings, funerals and all the sacraments in this beautiful church. If not for the unnecessary closure, my family's proud faith tradition would now have been 105 years old and I know several other families whose connection goes beyond that to the first St. Patrick's Church. Instead of continuing with its proud record of service to our community, St. Patrick's now stands shuttered in the centre of our city, a silent testimony to a hierarchy unwilling to enter into dialogue with the community that built the church and has maintained it faithfully for a hundred years. I hope and pray that the Congregation for the Clergy will rule that St. Patrick's Church should be repaired, renovated and reopened in accordance with the compassionate direction advocated by our esteemed Pope Francis. (Rose Niedermier, long-time parishioner of St. Patrick's Church).

### THANK YOU

The Save our Churches Association (SOCA) wishes to thank the hundreds of people who have been supporting the cause of the welfare of St. Patrick's Church, St. Basil's Church and Our Lady of the Assumption Church with their prayers, letters, donations and other much-appreciated expressions of support. We thank the media for their fair and unbiased coverage of what is seen as a matter of significant importance not only to Catholics but the City of Lethbridge community as a whole. We pray that our new Bishop of Calgary, Most Reverend William McGrattan will seek ways in which to resolve this matter that has fractured All Saints parish and caused division in our community.

### SAVE OUR CHURCHES ASSOCIATION

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