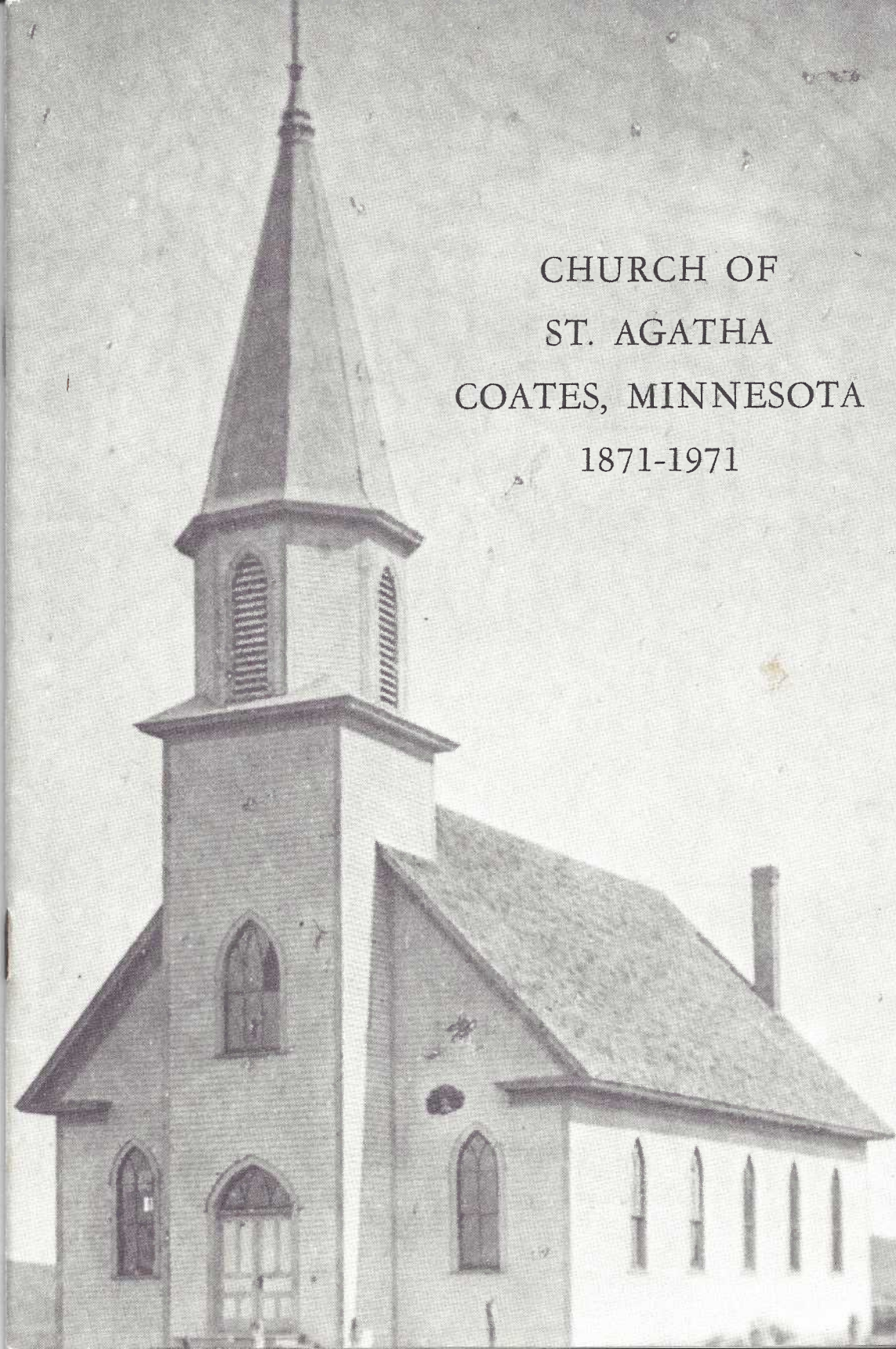


CHURCH OF  
ST. AGATHA  
COATES, MINNESOTA  
1871-1971



*COVER: The church of St. Agatha-Vermillion completed in 1898.*

ST. AGATHA — COATES, MINNESOTA

1871-1971

## Introduction

This modest publication is commemorative and not intended to be a definitive history of the Church of St. Agatha. Even the date of founding—1871—has been called into question but we have settled on that year according to the best references available to us.

What seems to be important is that a century has passed since a small band of devout people first met to worship God and to spread their faith to their children.

There are some who say that tradition is passé and to cling to it is a sign of weakness. Yet to ignore one's traditions and those who have gone before seems naive and ungrateful. Each of us is the beneficiary of the devotion and honest labor of others and if we take pride in the Church of St. Agatha in 1971 it is only because of what was begun here in 1871.

Centenary Mass: August 29, 1971

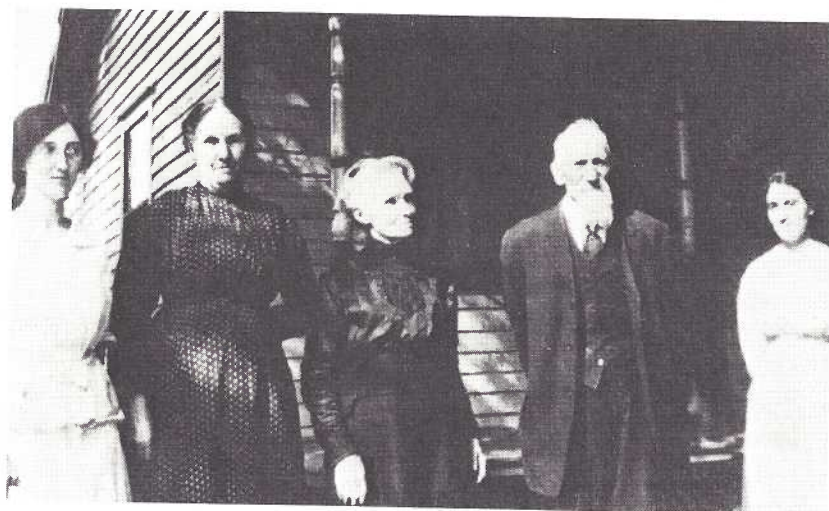
Celebrant: Reverend James W. Whalen, administrator

Homilist: Reverend Monsignor Lawrence A. Ryan, a priest of the parish

Centenary Committee:

Henry Fox (chairman); David Lewis; James Neisen;  
Barbara Bohn; Geraldine Dotzler; Rosemary Marthaler

One hundred years ago, Bishop Thomas Langdon Grace gave the Irish Catholics of the Vermillion area permission to form their own congregation and appointed the Reverend James Halton to serve the needs of the people. Two years earlier, Father Halton celebrated the first Mass ever held in Vermillion. In 1871, Father Halton was the pastor of St. Patrick's of Inver Grove and while the term "mission" does not appear in reference to St. Agatha at Vermillion until 1879, it must be assumed that the parish was indeed in mission status, i.e., without a resident pastor.



*Early parishioners of St. Agatha's are left to right: Agnes O'Leary Couture, Mrs. Thomas O'Leary, Maria and William Ryan (parents of Msgr. Lawrence A. Ryan) and Jennie O'Leary Callahan.*

The first congregation of St. Agatha met in District 36 school house located opposite the church property and the present cemetery at St. Agatha. Within a year the people determined to build their own church and contracted with James Sutliff to erect a frame structure of 24 x 56 feet for \$2,800 on a site two miles south of the present church, i.e., the location mentioned above. The parishioners contributed \$2,000 and raised the remainder at a picnic in July, 1873. The church was dedicated on February 5, 1874 and placed under the patronage of St. Agatha and was known as St. Agatha of Vermillion.



*The 1908 marriage party of Helen Callahan and Thomas Feeley.*

From its beginning in 1871 until 1914, St. Agatha was served by priests from Inver Grove and Mendota. In 1915 St. Agatha at Coates briefly became the parish with Inver Grove the mission, but reverted to its mission status in the next year. The only resident pastor of Coates was the Rev. Michael Ryan, who lived briefly at Coates in 1919 when his church at Inver Grove burned.\*

By 1898, the St. Agatha congregation had outgrown its first church and a larger edifice was erected on the same site under the direction of Father William McGolrick who had assumed responsibility for the direction of the parish in 1891.

(Monsignor Lawrence A. Ryan recalls that at the first Mass of his brother, John, in 1898, a wall of the church was taken out and a special canvassed platform built to handle the overflow crowd.)

In 1913, lightning struck the church, burning it to the ground. John Callahan, father of Frank Callahan, donated approximately two acres of land two miles north of the parish as the site of a new church. Father Patrick McCabe, who assumed responsibility for the parish in 1912, directed the building of the new church on its present location in Coates village. Construction was completed on the exterior in 1913.

\*See chronology in rear.



*Confirmation Class, July 20, 1939: First Row: Lois Meier, Lucille Fox, Thomas Fahey; Second Row: Lawrence Niesen, Lonis Blackwell, Lois Callahan, Henry Fox; Third Row: Laura Schmitz, Mavis Meier, Michael Cross, Rose Marie Gergen, Luella Kallas, Mary Moynihan, Eugene Meier.*



*Children of St. Agatha pictured at a catechetical class held in Rosemount. First Row: Anna Priebe, Mary Priebe, Rosella Niesen, Emily Gores, Dorothy Nepper, Lorraine Fahey; Second Row: Sara Pilcher, Agnes Priebe, Eileen Schiltgen, Dolores Birk, Mary Margaret Schiltgen; Third Row: Eugene Furlong, Melvin Gores, Lawrence Pilcher, Lauren Furlong, Elmer Callahan; Fourth Row: John Pilcher, Jerome Gores, Leonard Niesen, Joseph Gillespie, John Birk, Joseph Rice.*

Almost 34 years exactly elapsed from the first baptism in St. Agatha-Vermillion in 1880 to that in St. Agatha-Coates in 1914. The first marriage of record at St. Agatha-Vermillion was that of Thomas J. Feely and Helen Callahan on October 14, 1908; on June 9, 1914, Frank P. Brown and Mary M. Noonan were married in the new church at Coates. Rose Fahey and Jennie Callahan recall the bitter cold on January 1, 1914, when Mary Gillespie's funeral, the first at Coates, was held. The heating system was not yet installed and bare rafters were visible in the unfinished interior.

From 1871 until 1925, the Church of St. Agatha was loyally served by priests from neighboring parishes as was indicated earlier. Then in 1925, St. Agatha's was assigned to the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul and has been served by only three priests since then.



*Father Gillen with the First Communion Class of 1935. Left to right: Gilbert Warner, Grace Brown, Cecil Warner, Lois Callahan, Mary Agness Fitzgerald, Rose Marie Gergen, Donald Warner.*



*Monsignor Mathias Gillen pictured with Archbishop William O. Brady in 1957 on the occasion of Father Gillen being named a monsignor.*

Father Thomas Ryan of the College served St. Agatha from 1925 to July 26, 1931 when Father Mathias Gillen was appointed administrator. (While each priest at St. Agatha is, in fact, a pastor, his official title is administrator because he is not a resident pastor.) Fr. Gillen was a professor of foreign languages at St. Thomas and his tenure at Coates from 1931 until his death in 1960, was one of gentle and kind attention to his parishioners. For years, Fr. Gillen rose early on Sundays to ride a streetcar to the St. Paul depot where he took a train first to Coates and later, when train service to Coates was discontinued, to Hastings where parishioners provided transportation to the parish. When ill health dictated that he discontinue his pastoral work, parishioners established a program of driving to the St. Thomas College each Sunday to pick him up. In 1957, Fr. Gillen was named a domestic prelate by Pope Pius XII and was feted on the occasion by the people of St. Agatha. Msgr. Gillen died on November 27, 1960 and was succeeded by the Reverend James Whalen, chairman of journalism at the College of St. Thomas.

Fr. Whalen became administrator at Coates at a time when the first movements of Vatican Council II were being felt. At the direction of the late Archbishop William O. Brady, the parish acquired 12 acres of land to the east and south and contiguous to the church property. When the liturgical directives of Vatican II established Mass facing the people, the sanctuary was renovated, the old altar removed and replaced with a teakwood altar donated by the Frank Callahan family and built by Leonard Werner and Gerald Frandrup. Enclosed confessionals were also built by Mr. Werner with the help of Joseph Birk of the parish.

In 1966, a combination parish hall and catechetical center was built as a west annex to the church. The annex's essential function is to provide adequate teaching space for a catechetical program for the grade school children of the parish conducted each Sunday of the normal school year and two weeks of the summer by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. With the assistance of young women of the parish, the Sisters have taught continuously at St. Agatha since 1965.

A kitchen was added to the annex in 1969 and the sacristy renovated in 1970. And on the centenary of the parish a new organ was installed.



*Father James Whalen pictured at the marriage of a student from the College of St. Thomas.*

*Parish Chronology:* (The following has been compiled from several sources. On occasion, we found a conflict concerning a name or date and resolved it to the best of our ability from the *Catholic Directory* and other historical records.)

1871: Church of St. Agatha-Vermillion founded by the Reverend James Halton.

1871-1880: Father Halton serves the parish from Inver Grove.

1874: The first church is dedicated.

1880: The Reverend Jean (John) Andre serves the parish from Inver Grove.

1881: The Reverend Joseph Hermon serves the parish from Inver Grove.

1882-1890: The Reverend Edward Duffy serves the parish from Inver Grove.

1891-1903: The Reverend William McGolrick serves the parish from Inver Grove.

1898: A new church is erected on the original site. The Reverend John A. Ryan, a native of the parish, celebrates his first Mass.

1903-1908: The Reverend P. J. O'Connor serves the parish from Inver Grove.

1909-1911: The Reverend Matthew Sampson serves the parish from Inver Grove.

1912-1915: The Reverend Patrick McCabe serves the parish from Inver Grove.

1913: Lightning destroys the church of St. Agatha-Vermillion. A new church is erected in the village of Coates.

1915: St. Agatha is named a parish with Inver Grove as its mission.

1916: St. Agatha of Coates reverts to a mission of Inver Grove.

1915-1921: The Reverend Michael Ryan serves the parish from Inver Grove, residing at Coates in 1919 when the Inver Grove church burns.

1921-1925: The Reverend Lawrence Carey serves the parish from Rosemount.

1925-1931: The Reverend Thomas Ryan serves the parish from the College of St. Thomas.

1931-1960: Monsignor Mathias Gillen serves the parish from the College of St. Thomas.

1960-—: The Reverend James Whalen serves the parish from the College of St. Thomas.

(In addition, parish records indicate that P. F. Glennon, and C. Arthur occasionally served the Church of St. Agatha.)

Of the seven known religious vocations from the Church of St. Agatha, four are of the William and Maria Ryan family: Monsignor John A. Ryan and Monsignor Lawrence A. Ryan as priests and Sister Constance and Sister Mary John, both members of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. The others are Sister Helen Austin Gillespie, CSJ, Sister Katherine Hubert Ryan, CSJ and Sister Blaise Schaffer, OSB.

It is of note that two of the most distinguished priests of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis came from the St. Agatha parish. Monsignor John A. Ryan was an international authority on social and labor problems and taught for many years at the Catholic University of America.

His brother, Lawrence, the homilist at the centenary Mass, was ordained in 1910 and pursues an active "retirement" at the College of St. Thomas. Appointed early in his priesthood by Archbishop Ireland as the Rector of the St. Paul Cathedral, Monsignor Ryan is the singular force behind the design and decorating of the St. Paul Cathedral called by Pope Pius XII his favorite cathedral outside of St. Peter's in Rome. Msgr. Ryan served three archbishops — Ireland, Dowling and Murray — as rector of the Cathedral and the work begun by him is still being completed with taste and refinement.



*Monsignor John A. Ryan*



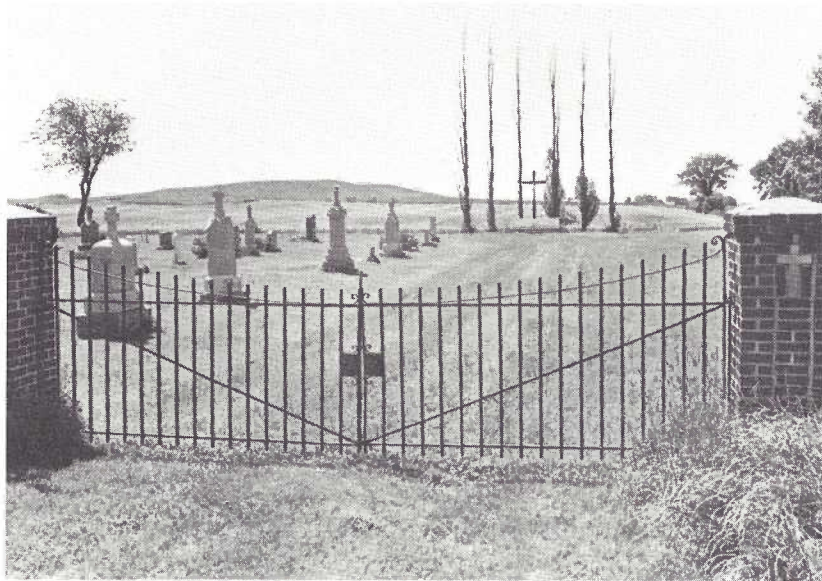
*Monsignor Lawrence A. Ryan*



*Catechetical center built as a church annex.*



*The church interior and renovated sanctuary.*



*The original St. Agatha cemetery still used by the parish.*



*A portion of the completed kitchen and teaching area of the church annex currently in use.*

Families of record as of January 1, 1971 are as follows:

John Banaszewski	Lawrence McCarthy
Phillip Becker	Mrs. Norbert Mogen
Edward Bohn	David Morris
Thomas Brantner	Leo Nicolai
Alfred Dale	James Neisen
Ralph DeDominices	Mrs. John Niesen
Henry Dotzler	Lawrence Niesen
Tony Duclos	Fred Olson
Mrs. Rose Fahey	Francis Pilcher
Thomas Fahey	John Pilcher
Vernon Fahey	Lawrence Pilcher
William Fennell	Judy Prokop
Henry Fox	Robert Prokop
Richard Fox	Edward Revolinski
Gerald Frandrup	Joseph Ries
Anthony Goebel	Albert Schaffer
J. N. Gores	Thomas Schaffer
Gordon Hanson	Emily Schmitz
William Horsch	William Sieben
Paul Hurt	Henry Sperl
Clarence Karnick	Lawrence Stoffel
Irvin Karnick	Mrs. Harvey Swoboda
David Lewis	Richard Tix
Lawrence Malecha	Lawrence Weatherly
George Marthaler	John Welsh
Joseph Marthaler	Leonard Werner
Thomas Fitzgerald	



*St. Agatha's church at Coates — 1971.*

Prior to 1965, women of the parish undertook special instruction of children, particularly in preparation for the reception of First Communion. Anita Fennell and Geraldine Schaffer undertook this task until 1965 when Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondolet volunteered to conduct catechetics each Sunday during the school year and to hold two-week sessions in early summer. Assisting the sisters over the years are Mrs. Joseph Marthaler, Paulette Gobel, Debbie Marthaler and Helen Frandrup.

Teaching Sisters since 1965:

Sister Alice Veronica  
Sister Helen Catherine  
Sister St. Edmund  
Sister Eugenia  
Sister Rose Carmel  
Sister St. Lawrence  
Sister Margaret Brown  
Sister Clarine  
Sister Marilyn  
Sister Ann William  
Sister Merona

### *Conclusion*

While St. Agatha of Coates is located in a rural area, it is only a short drive from St. Paul on a fast one-way highway. In a sense, it is somewhere between being urban and rural. However, from its farming roots in 1871 to the sight of massive industry visible to the north in 1971, the people of Coates have retained their solid devotion to their faith, their Church and to each other. They have given up two young men in wars: John Dordan in World War I and Melvin Gores in World War II. They have watched and accepted major changes in their Church and in their parish. The parish cemetery bearing the names of Raway, Clark, Dunlavy, King, Condon, Moore, Knaresboro, Bennett, Wayman, Dordan, Murphy, O'Leary, Callahan, Gillespie, Murnane, Jagoe and Ryan, is testimony to the ethnic roots of the parish. What the names cannot tell is the personal contribution each made to the Catholic faith in Dakota county.