

A Most Pleasant and Healthful Place

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Our Lady of Victory Parish at One Hundred

In the language of geology, the Potomac River Basin is a "fall zone" where piedmont meets central plain. This particular fall zone runs all the way from Macon, Georgia, to New York and is a notable natural feature of the eastern United States.

Sailing up the Potomac in the summer of 1632, however, a London-born trader named Henry Fleet wasn't thinking of geology but beaver skins, from which he hoped to make a tidy profit. Fleet dropped anchor "two leagues short of" the river's Great Falls—five or six miles downstream, that is—and waited for Indians to come and trade skins for his axes and trinkets.

As it happened, the Indians knew perfectly well that their beaver skins were worth a lot more than anything offered by Fleet, who seems to have been a bit of a rogue, and finally the would-be trader had to sail away empty-handed. Before leaving, he penned in his journal a sketch of the region he'd visited:

This place without all question is the most pleasant and healthful place in all this country, and most convenient for habitation, the air temperate in summer and not violent in winter. It aboundeth in all manner of fish. The Indians in one night commonly will catch thirty sturgeons in a place where the river is not above twelve fathoms broad. And as for deer, buffaloes, bears, turkeys, the woods do swarm with them, and the soil is exceedingly fertile.¹

Perhaps this wasn't the earliest written description of the Potomac Palisades where Our Lady of Victory Parish now stands, but it is surely one of the most delightful.

Georgetown and points west

Many things happened hereabouts in the 277 years between Henry Fleet's unsuccessful trading expedition and the founding of Our Lady of Victory.

The capital city of the new United States of America, the District of Columbia, was established in 1790 by act of Congress, with land from the estates of sixteen Maryland landowners, six of them Catholics. George Washington appointed Catholic Daniel Carroll of Rock Creek one of the three commissioners of the city-to-be.

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By then, Georgetown already was a bustling port with a notable Catholic presence. In 1787, land was set aside for "a Chapple or house of divine worship," and Holy Trinity Church opened on the site in 1793. In 1789, John Carroll, first Catholic bishop in the United States, acquired property for a school—the future Georgetown University, which began operations in 1792. In 1798, Poor Clare nuns began a school in Georgetown; they were followed by the Sisters of the Visitation, and in time the school became known the Georgetown Visitation Academy.

Things had begun to stir out along the Palisades, too. The manor house of Whitehaven Plantation, located on what now is Reservoir Road, was built in 1754. In later years, Thomas Jefferson was a frequent guest of the owner of that era, a prominent horticulturist named Thomas Main. (The handsome old house was restored by an Our Lady of Victory family, the Lyddanes, in the mid-twentieth century.²) Today's Palisades neighborhood also includes some former farmhouses from the Federal Period.

In 1829, President John Quincy Adams inaugurated the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. Although it was a commercial failure, rendered obsolete even before its completion by the rise of the railroad, the canal was destined to become a national treasure as a historical landmark and recreational facility. Even earlier, another canal, the Potowmack Company Canal, was built here by George Washington. One of its locks can still be seen near Fletcher's Boat House on the C & O Canal.

In these years, too, stockyards and slaughterhouses were prominent features of the area. Today's Our Lady of Victory Church and School stand on a site once occupied by an establishment called The Drovers Inn, a home away from home for the men who drove their cattle in from the countryside to be turned into steaks and chops for hungry Washingtonians.

During the Civil War, a Union officer named Captain Kemble commanded a battery of cannon—two Parrott Rifles and a 100-pounder—located on high ground overlooking a route that the Confederates were thought likely to take when and if they attacked the city. The Confederates never came, but the Captain and his guns are commemorated in the name of today's Battery Kemble Park.³

The park and the parish both front on the street known since World War II as MacArthur Boulevard, in honor of Gen. Douglas MacArthur; it opened in 1863 as Conduit Road. This was a reference to the aqueduct

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starting several miles up the Potomac that had lately been built by the Army Corps of Engineers to carry water from the river to the city.

Stockyards, slaughterhouses, and cannons eventually vanished from the neighborhood, replaced by houses of well-off city dwellers who built summer homes here to escape the heat of downtown Washington. The name "Potomac Palisades" dates back to an 1870s building boom, and more construction soon followed. By the turn of the last century, an electric railroad was carrying commuters and visitors through this popular section all the way to Glen Echo.

Enter Our Lady of Victory

It is amidst this growth spurt that Our Lady of Victory Parish makes its first, modest appearance in the pages of history. On October 7, 1906, a group of Catholics from the vicinity gathered at the home of Nicholas Lochboeler for the celebration of Mass. The house was located where an Exxon station now stands, just across Conduit Road from today's parish church.

The celebrant of that first Mass was Father Malachy F. Yingling, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Newport, Maryland. Sunday Masses continued to be offered in the home of the accommodating Lochboeler to oblige people who otherwise had to travel for Mass to Holy Trinity in Georgetown or St. Ann's in Tenleytown (founded during the Civil War). After two months, Father Yingling was named first pastor of the still-nameless new parish.

At the start, it numbered just a dozen families. Land for a church was purchased from a family named Shugrue on a promontory with a splendid view of the Virginia shore. A hall was built on the site of today's Hess-Honda Auditorium, and Mass was celebrated there for the first time at Christmas, 1906. Earlier, on November 19, the first baptism was performed: the new member of the parish was named George Bogginger. The first wedding, of Mark Sherier and Nellie Vaughn, took place on April 20, 1907. By November of that year, a small shrine had been constructed just east of the hall, and daily Mass was being offered there.

Between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I, the population of the city of Washington grew from 170,000 to 400,000. Many of the new Washingtonians were Catholics, and the infrastructure of the local church grew to serve them, with sixteen new parishes created during that half-century. The years 1909 to 1916 brought one of several building booms, with six new parishes established.⁴ Our Lady of Victory was the first.

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In those days, the parish stretched along Conduit Road from the Georgetown Reservoir to Glen Echo. In October, 1906, a mission chapel had been established at Glen Echo with the name Little Flower. It was to remain a pastoral responsibility of the priests of Our Lady of Victory until 1948, when Little Flower became a parish in its own right.

On September 19, 1909, the legendary Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore laid the cornerstone for a proper church for what was now known as Our Lady of Victory Parish (Washington was part of the Archdiocese of Baltimore at that time). The church was located on property that people soon took to calling Mount Victory. For reasons presumably related to the date of its patronal feast—Our Lady of the Rosary—October 7 has been accepted as the date of the parish's formal founding.

Father Yingling, who appears to have had a talent for marketing, sold shares of "common stock" to pay for materials to build the church. A typical "stock" certificate declared the holder to be "owner of ten (10) yards of stone" and entitled to "the enrollment of one name on the \$25.00 memorial slab." After two years, the completed structure was dedicated by Cardinal Gibbons. Among the features of the compact church were a bell tower to the east and a main entrance built of stones from an old railroad station at 6th and B Streets through whose doors President James A. Garfield had walked on July 2, 1881 shortly before being assassinated by a disappointed office seeker.

Where the name came from

A digression is in order here on the subject of the parish's name. It recalls one of the most significant military encounters in Western history.

In the fall of 1571, a powerful Ottoman Turkish fleet was preparing to sail, with the conquest of Venice and a foothold in Western Europe its objectives. Deeply alarmed, Pope St. Pius V took steps to repel the grave threat, rallying a Christian fleet composed of ships of Spain, Venice, other Italian city-states, and the Sovereign Order of Malta. Its commander was Don Juan of Austria, half-brother of King Philip II of Spain. The Pope called upon all Christendom to pray the Rosary for a happy outcome.

With the Christian ships flying blue banners in honor of the Virgin, the fleets clashed at 11 a.m. on Sunday, October 7, 1571 near Lepanto (Naupaktos) in the Gulf of Patras connecting the Gulf of Corinth with the Ionian Sea, territory occupied at that time by the Turks. Although the Christians were heavily outnumbered in ships and men, they enjoyed the

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advantages of favorable winds and innovative tactics, and in five hours of fierce fighting delivered a crushing defeat to the foe. Among other achievements, the battle won freedom for ten thousand Christian galleys slaves who had been forced to serve in the Turkish ships. One of those taking part in the fighting was the twenty-four-year-old Miguel Cervantes, future author of Don Quixote, who suffered a wound that cost him his left arm.

As the battle raged, Pius V broke away from a meeting in distant Rome and stood at a window staring in the direction of the fighting. "Let us no longer occupy ourselves with business," he told his companions at last, "but let us go and thank the Lord. The Christian fleet has obtained victory."⁵

The following year, the Pope established the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary—Our Lady of Victory—in commemoration of these events. More than four centuries later, G.K. Chesterton commemorated them in his own way in a stirring poem called "Lepanto." It reads in part:

*Don John laughing in the brave beard curled,
Spurning of his stirrups like the thrones of all the world,
Holding his head up for a flag of all the free.
Love-light of Spain—hurrah!
Don John of Austria
Is riding to the sea....*

A disastrous fire, a brave recovery

Although the young parish on the Palisades didn't have to cope with assault by a marauding fleet, it did suffer a grievous blow in its early years.

On the night of October 24, 1922, sometime after services earlier in the evening, burning coals from a censer that apparently had been tipped over unnoticed ignited a carpet. The blaze spread rapidly. At 10:40 p.m. a passerby observed that the church was on fire and called for help.

Fire crews fought hard to save the parish hall from the blaze, and Father Yingling found the Blessed Sacrament safe from fire, smoke, and water when he opened the tabernacle. But the interior of the church had been reduced to charred ruins. The loss was estimated at \$75,000—a huge sum at that time.

Reconstruction began almost at once, with parishioners contributing funds and working as volunteers. Seven years later Father Yingling was able to tell his people, "Thanks to the generosity of my friends, the church has been

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rebuilt, better and prettier than before the fire." The parish's outstanding debt was exactly four dollars.

Father Yingling, the founding pastor, retired in 1931. He was succeeded by Father Andrew H. Mihm, who held the post from 1931 to 1933 and was succeeded in turn by Father William Humphries. In 1934 Father Louis Vaeth was named pastor. He was to serve until 1945.

During the hard times of the Depression-era 1930s, Our Lady of Victory, like many parishes, functioned not only as a house of worship but as focal point for numerous social gatherings and activities. Parish organizations flourished—Sodality, Holy Name Society, St. Vincent de Paul Society, and many others. Starting in the mid-1930s, there was an annual May procession for the parish children. Another annual children's event was a yearly pageant on the feast of the Holy Innocents, with as many as 250 young people performing, garbed in the habits of men and women religious. In addition, the parish had a citywide reputation for its yearly carnival. The event took place on today's parking lot and featured amateur performances, dog shows, doll contests, and other attractions.

In 1934 Our Lady of Victory experienced a jump in membership—along with a boost to parish pride—when its boundaries were extended to take in Foxhall Village. By now, hundreds of families lived here. The number of priests staffing the parish also had grown—from one, the pastor, in Father's Yingling's day, to pastor and two associates under Father Vaeth. A new rectory on the parish grounds was built in 1936.⁶

During World War II, the Palisades grew dramatically along with the rest of the city of Washington. So did OLV. "Yet," records the history published in 1994 to mark OLV's eighty-fifth anniversary, "the parish retained a rich inner life that bound together and supported the people who lived here."⁷

The Hess years

When Father Vaeth stepped down in 1945, he was succeeded by Father—later, Monsignor—Carl Hess. During his twenty-three years as pastor, this frugal priest launched a series of major steps and new initiatives which have significantly shaped parish life ever since.

Among these was the founding a parish school. Since the 1930s, Sisters of Mercy from Holy Trinity Parish had ridden the streetcar to Our Lady of Victory every Sunday to teach religious education classes to OLV children. But

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now the time had come for something more. In 1954, Father Hess broke ground for a seven-classroom school and convent, and Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle of Washington dedicated the cornerstone.⁸

With the school under the direction of members of an experienced teaching community of women religious, the Sisters of Notre Dame of Cleveland, classes began in September, 1955. Tuition was three dollars per month per pupil, with a discount for additional children from the same family. In 1959, an eighth classroom and other facilities were added. In June, 1960 the first graduates of OLV school received their diplomas.

In the mid-1950s, Our Lady of Victory was a busy, tightly-run operation. The annual report for 1955 showed 77 baptisms, 29 marriages, and 16 deaths. Receipts were \$107,906.16, ordinary disbursements \$28,766.25, with extraordinary disbursements—building and furnishing the school and convent—\$234,586.86.

The Second Vatican Council still lay in the future, but signs of change were already starting to appear. In the March, 1956 issue of the parish newsletter, the spiritual director of the Holy Name Society, Father Edward Herrmann—associate pastor and future pastor, as well as future Auxiliary Bishop of Washington and Bishop of Columbus, Ohio—announced that the "Dialogue Mass" would begin at the 8 a.m. Mass the following Sunday.⁹

"In the beginning," Father Herrmann conceded, "the use of the Latin may prove difficult, but with a little perseverance I am sure that you will find, as others have in other parishes, that the dialogue Mass is a more intimate way to assist at the Holy Sacrifice."

*A long-awaited and extensive renovation of the church got underway in early 1957. The old tower on the east side at the front of the church came down and a new tower, some 70 feet high, was constructed on the west. The stone walls were faced with brick to match the rectory and school. An east-west transept was added. All in all, the changes increased seating capacity from 208 to 518. The main entrance was redesigned, with a statue of Our Lady of Victory placed above it. In *The Banner* of November, 1956, Monsignor Hess estimated the cost at \$250,000. During the work, charred beams from the fire of 1922 were uncovered in the walls of the building.¹⁰ The new church was dedicated by Cardinal O'Boyle on December 22, 1957.*

The parish celebrated its 50th anniversary on October 25, 1959. In a homily at the anniversary Mass, Auxiliary Bishop John Spence of Washington

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captured the spirit of the occasion in language typical of the ecclesiastical rhetoric of that day:

For fifty years, this nourishing of faith in God has been taking place, day after day, week after week, year after year. How many tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of men, women, and children have been lifted out of the poverty and misery of mere natural existence, and have been elevated to the plenty and riches of that supernatural plane whereon dwell those who know and enjoy their status as sharers in the divine life....Almighty God and his Blessed Mother are to be thanked for their smiling benevolence on this enviable parish.

Enviably indeed, many of his listeners undoubtedly thought.

Vatican Council II and after

Time moved on. The parish newsletter for October 1962 noted the opening of Vatican Council II and urged prayers for its success. "The Church is the community of all the faithful, bishops, priests, and laity, and even though they have different functions and prerogatives, all are deeply involved in ecclesiastical life. This is true especially during such major events as the Ecumenical Council," a page-one item read.

In these years, statistical indices of American Catholicism were at their peak in many categories. Our Lady of Victory had six Sunday Masses and two daily weekday Masses. Confessions were heard every Saturday from 5-6 and 7:30-9 p.m. A list of parish organizations in May, 1964 included, among others, CYO Teen Club, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Cana Club, Holy Name Society, Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, and Cub Scouts.

As happened everywhere else, changes came fast and furious in this small corner of the universal Church in the years immediately after Vatican II. Probably most obvious were liturgical: Latin gave way to English in the Mass, the main altar was re-situated so that the celebrant could face the congregation. Lay lectors made their appearance in 1968 and in time were followed by lay ministers of communion. By the early 1970s, a number of ministries were open to women. A parish council was instituted in 1967.

The now-Auxiliary Bishop Herrmann took over as pastor in 1968, succeeding Monsignor Hess. As the parish history of 1985 remarks, the old pastor had "presided over a period of unprecedented growth in Our Lady of Victory and much of what happened in his 23 years as pastor resulted from his diligence and devotion to God." Monsignor Hess died on April 15, 1978.

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Another notable event of these years was the arrival in 1970 of Msgr. Harry Echle, who was to remain at Our Lady of Victory and serve as chaplain at Sibley Hospital for the next quarter of a century. This quiet, self-effacing churchman was widely revered and, though he sought no honors, was often honored despite himself. Monsignor Echle died in January 2006.

Not all changes in the postconciliar years were progress. Events surrounding Our Lady of Victory School are a case in point. After auspicious beginnings and a decade and a half of success, the school fell on hard times in the 1970s and 1980s. Suffering from declining vocations, the Sisters of Notre Dame cut back on staffing and eventually left OLV entirely. Reflecting this development as well as changing demographics, the school's enrollment suffered a steep decline. In June 1964 the parish newsletter had featured photos of 35 smiling graduates; by June of 1995, there were only nine.

Yet by then a renaissance was already underway. In 1990, an energetic and capable lay principal, Susan Milloy, took over at OLV. Enrollment was boosted by an influx of students from a school at Marymount University in Arlington that recently had closed. Other out-of-parish youngsters in growing numbers also began attending OLV.

Milloy, honored as the Washington archdiocese's outstanding principal in 2001, left Our Lady of Victory in 2004 to be founding principal of a new Catholic school in the Maryland suburbs. In 2007 her successor, Mrs. Sheila Martinez, led OLV to recognition by the U.S. Department of Education as a National Blue Ribbon School—only one of 50 schools in the country so honored and the first Catholic elementary school in the District of Columbia to receive this coveted award.

Looking back, looking forward

Bishop Herrmann left as pastor in 1973. He was succeeded by Msgr. Ralph Kuehner, who held the position until 1983 and was succeeded by Msgr. John Benson, pastor from 1983 to 1991. Then came Father William Foley, pastor from 1991 to 2002.

By this time, signs of the growing shortage of clergy affecting the Church everywhere in the United States had begun to appear at Our Lady of Victory. For years the parish had had a pastor and three associates. Gradually, the number of associate pastors dwindled, from three to two, then from two to one. And finally to none.

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The crunch was partly relieved by OLV's permanent deacons, Edward Redding and, later, Leo Flynn. Also providing important help have been priests "in residence" in the parish who have performed many pastoral duties. In 1991 nevertheless Father Foley found it necessary to advertise for a lay pastoral associate. The first of these was Scott Hurd, a married former Episcopal pastor who'd converted to Catholicism; he was ordained as Catholic priest in 1999 and now serves on the staff of the archdiocesan pastoral center. The parish also has had—and continues to have—the assistance of seminarians serving here on week ends as part of their pre-ordination pastoral training. In addition, many lay people have stepped forward as volunteers in a variety of roles, and choir director Dr. John Warman is a longtime stalwart of the parish staff.

In 1999 extensive renovations again closed the church for months, with Mass celebrated in the auditorium. OLV celebrated its ninetieth anniversary on October 30 of that year with a Mass at which Cardinal James Hickey of Washington presided. Father Foley, in his message to the parish, expressed thanks to God for "the gift of faith that has sustained this parish and been a beacon of hope for many others.... Members of this parish...have throughout these 90 years been a quiet source of strength for people both high and lowly. Let us pray that we continue this mission."

Father Paul Lee succeeded Father Foley as pastor in 2002. He was succeeded early in 2006 by Father Milton Jordan. Matters covered in the parish bulletin in February of that year offer a sketch of parish life early in the twenty-first century: Lenten parish mission, "Protecting God's Children" workshop, D.C. Kickoff Day for the Archdiocesan Legislative Network, Bible study, Knights of Columbus, fiftieth anniversary of the parish school, Covenant House, Centro Tepeyac Pregnancy Center. Later in the year, Eucharistic Adoration began in the parish in an oratory reserved for this purpose.

One of the most positive features of life in Our Lady of Victory in recent years has been the growing ethnic diversity of the parish. Among those represented at OLV are Filipinos and other Asians, Latin Americans, Hispanic Americans, Africans, African Americans, and others. A Korean community worshiped here in Father Lee's time. A Croatian community still does. This diversity is reflected in the student body of the parish school as well.

For health reasons, Father Jordan stepped down as pastor in June 2008. He was succeeded by Father David Werning, who as a seminarian a

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decade earlier had done week end work at Our Lady of Victory and who celebrated his first Mass here on May 31, 1998.

In his first annual report, published after a month on the job, Father Werning painted a picture of a community of faith with many strengths and some problems. Income from the offertory collection was stable, expenses were down, there was a nagging debt to the archdiocese. Sunday Mass attendance averaged around four hundred a week. The school was thriving, as were ministries and volunteer programs of all sorts, including So Other Might Eat (SOME), Meals on Wheels, the Grand Oaks assisted living facility, and a recently inaugurated chapter of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

"I have no doubt that if we all discern prayerfully our commitment to God and each other OLV will continue to be a place of true worship and life-giving love," the pastor wrote.

Who can doubt it? Four centuries after the summer when Henry Fleet sailed up the Potomac and waxed eloquent about what he found here, the Indians and beaver skins, the sturgeons and woods swarming with game are long gone. Yet today, as for a hundred years past, Our Lady of Victory Parish continues to be a "most healthful and pleasant place" in this region so admired by the English trader. Indeed, just how pleasant and how healthful OLV is, and in how many ways, would very likely have been beyond the imagining of even that entrepreneurial and inventive chronicler of long ago.

Russell Shaw

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¹ Quoted in Frederick Gutheim, *The Potomac* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1949), 39.

² When the name "Whitehaven" appears on the deeds of houses in this area, it is because their lots fall within the 759 acres of a royal land grant to Lord Baltimore dating variously said to date back to 1675 or 1689.

³ At the turn of the last century, the park was the site of a zoo.

⁴ Rev. Rory T. Conley, *The Truth in Charity: A History of the Archdiocese of Washington* (Editions de Signe: Strasbourg, 2000), 68.

⁵ The Ottoman threat to Western Europe was definitively ended by the raising of the siege of Vienna in 1683.

⁶ This also was the era when, in 1939, Washington, D.C. was separated from the Archdiocese of Baltimore and became an archdiocese in its own right, even though Archbishop Michael J. Curley, who had succeeded Cardinal Gibbons in 1921, continued to serve as Ordinary of both Sees. This unusual arrangement continued until Archbishop Curley's death in 1947. The following year, Archbishop Patrick A. O'Boyle was named Archbishop of Washington, a new archbishop was named in Baltimore, and the Archdiocese of Washington was expanded to include Montgomery and Prince Georges counties and the counties of Southern Maryland.

⁷ *Our Lady of Victory: A History*, edited by Rev. C.G. Butta and Joann Wilson, compiled by Allan L'Etoile. This earlier publication has been an invaluable resource in the writing of the present centennial history.

⁸ Enclosed in a copper box inside the cornerstone were a medallion of the reigning pontiff, Pope Pius XII, copies of the *Catholic Standard*, the *Washington Evening Star*, the *Washington Post* and *Times Herald*, a monthly parish newsletter called *The Banner*, a description of the school and convent, plans for a coming renovation of the church, and some contemporary coins.

⁹ The *Dialogue Mass* was a popular liturgical innovation of that era in which the congregation joined the altar boys in reciting certain prayers and joined the priest in the saying the Creed and other prayers. Like the rest of the Mass, it was all done in Latin.

¹⁰ As far as is known, the charred beams are still there.