



**THE WHOLE SCHOOL:** Bishop Raymond Burke and St. Mary's School principal Ken Buege gather on the steps of century-old St. Mary's Ridge Church with the entire student body of the 140-year-old school, all 29 of them. (Photo by Patrick Slattery )

## Ridge school, parish celebrate

By **PATRICK SLATTERY**  
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**ST. MARY'S RIDGE** — A countryside church grand in size and beauty, as well as the diocese's oldest parish school jointly celebrated anniversaries on Sunday, April 27.

The St. Mary's Ridge church building is marking its centennial this year, while this is also the 140th anniversary of St. Mary's Ridge School. In addition to its record for longevity, St. Mary's School also holds the distinction of being the diocese's smallest school, with just 29 students in grades

preschool-6.

Bishop Raymond Burke came here on Sunday morning to mark the joint occasion, as he concelebrated Mass with his nephew, Father Kevin Louis, who serves as pastor of St. Mary's and three neighboring parishes in Monroe County.

The entire student body of St. Mary's gathered together in the front pews for the Mass, as students did the readings and sang together as part of the liturgy. Afterward a \$50 per plate banquet was held in the church basement as a benefit for the school. About 125 alumni and friends of St. Mary's School

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# St. Mary's Ridge celebrates

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enjoyed an afternoon together that celebrated all the good that's come out of this little country Catholic school over its 140 years of existence.

In his homily, Bishop Burke praised this parish for its tenaciously loyal Catholic spirit to which the school and church bear evidence. With today's prevailing paganism in society at large, he said that Catholic schools are needed more than ever.

A log cabin school was built by the German Catholic pioneers of St. Mary's Ridge in 1856 even prior to the building of a church two years later. There was no resident pastor at the time, and the first teacher, Quirin Schreier, taught 15 to 20 students.

Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration came to teach in 1873. A new two-story stone building was built in 1889, and a brick addition made for three classrooms and a meeting hall, which was used as winter chapel.

Until 1895 St. Mary's operated as both a Catholic and public school district, but there was a parting of the ways, with the FSPAs leaving but returning a few years later.

In 1896 parishioners voted to build a new stone church. They spared no expense, building a large Gothic-style church with a lavish amount of stained-glass windows at a cost of \$15,000. Three new altars were later purchased from the Hackner Company of La Crosse, and along with the church's many statues of saints, were never removed, and are still to be seen in this church today.

In 1921 the old school burned, and two years later the present school building was completed and ready for classes. Some of the students who lived far away boarded at the parish during the week. From 1937-55, while Father Urban Baer was pastor, grades 9 and 10 were added.

The first lay teacher, Theresa Brueggen, began to teach here in 1960, and by 1972 St. Mary's had an all-lay staff. Margaret Laufenberg began to teach here in 1965, and in 1972 also became the school's first principal. She retired in 1992 after 26 years at St. Mary's.

At the anniversary banquet, Laufenberg received special recognition for

her many years of dedication to Catholic education.

With a rising financial obligation and declining enrollment, the school at times came perilously close to closing, but always somehow averted its demise.

St. Mary's Ridge has never been a large parish, and today consists of about 100 households, two-thirds of what it was at its peak, as Old Order Amish farms have become predominant in the area.

The pastorate of Father Roger Schekkel, from 1986-95, did much to breathe new life into the school. Kindergarten was started and grades 7-8 were reinstated, and enrollment took an upswing. In addition the Holy Family Endowment Trust Fund was launched.

Father Louis, pastor since 1995, has continued to provide vigorous leadership on behalf of Catholic education. This school year marks the first time ever that St. Mary's and neighboring Sacred Heart in Cashton have shared the services of a principal, Ken Buege.

St. Mary's School has three full-time teachers — Sue Geier, Mary Downing and Deb Luxton — who teach multi-grade classrooms from preschool through grade six.

At the banquet, Director of Schools Don Novotney noted that the La Crosse Diocese has more small Catholic schools than any other in the nation, as St. Mary's Ridge is one of 25 in the diocese. He praised the high quality of education at St. Mary's and its small school cohorts, and noted that it has been more than 20 years since the last small Catholic school closed in this diocese.

St. Mary's School sent out invitation letters to about 900 alumni, and Father Louis said it was a delight to hear from so many who expressed how much this church and school have meant in their lives.

The banquet tickets purchased provided a financial boost for the school, as \$35 from each plate went back to the school. Various raffles were also held during the event, as well as the auctioneering of a football personally signed by Green Bay Packer star Gilbert Brown. Paul Brueggen offered the top bid of \$380, and upon receiving the prize, immediately handed it back for keeps to one of the most zealous Packer-backers on the Ridge, Father Louis.