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FINDING ROOM TO GROW

Catholic expansion continues despite recession

GINA GIACOPUZZI

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Construction in the region has dropped to its lowest level since 1991. Despite the economic downturn, however, Catholic churches in the San Diego and San Bernardino dioceses are expanding current facilities and building new parishes with no signs of slowing.

According to the San Diego diocese — which takes in San Diego and Imperial counties and their roughly 1 million Catholics — five projects are under construction or have received approval, eight others are close to being approved and 10 are in the planning stages. These projects range from new school facilities to entirely new churches, often in response to growing congregations.

The San Bernardino Diocese — which extends south to the San Diego County line, and was part of the San Diego

diocese until 1978 — has recently dedicated two churches and has 17 more in the pipeline.

“It was a necessity,” said Cort Peters, director of catechetical ministries at St. Therese of Carmel in Carmel Valley, which is in the final stage of building its 72,300-square-foot campus. “The Masses were getting fuller and fuller; we went from 400 registered parishioners to about 2,400 in the last six years.”

St. Therese had previously held services in an office building, then a high school gym. Bible studies and children’s classes took places in people’s homes. The church was completed a year ago, and upon completion of the parish center, St. Therese will no longer have to borrow office space from the adjacent Notre Dame Academy for administrative offices.

The arduous process of building a new church involves



not only raising money and gaining permission from the local diocese, but also obtaining permits and environmental reviews from the local city or county.

Before the 2007 settlement in the claims of sexual abuse against local priests, the San Diego diocese would occasionally tap into surplus funds and help parishes with insufficient funds finish their projects, according to Chancellor Rodrigo Valdivia at the diocese.

“As a result of the settlement, the diocese is not able to provide this occasional assistance,” he said.

That means the funding for building projects, which generally range from \$5 million to \$10 million, comes exclusively from parishioners.

“We’re having a building drive right now,” said Kathy Howard of St. Elizabeth Seton Parish in Carlsbad.

Like St. Therese of Carmel, the church has grown exponentially and needed a bigger facility for children’s religious education classes and social events. The 1,800-square-foot building will cost \$10 million, and the parish has raised \$2 million, not including pledges.

“We’d like to have it paid off in the next three years,” said Howard.

Other parishes under construction in North County include St. Peter’s in Fallbrook, expected to complete its \$8 million church in spring 2009; and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Rancho Penasquitos, which is planning a sprawling campus with a worship center that seats 1,000, a courtyard, and 16,700 square feet of classrooms. The total funding needed for all churches in the San Diego diocese that are under construction, nearing completion or nearing approval is \$60 million, and capital campaigns to raise these funds are continuing in the face of economic difficulties.

“It’s symbolic of the ongoing importance of churches in



PHOTO COURTESY ST. ELIZABETH ANNE SETON CATHOLIC CHURCH

An architect's rendering of the planned parish center at St. Elizabeth Anne Seton Catholic Church in Carlsbad.

the community — in both stable and struggling economic times,” said David Pfeifer of Domus Studio Architects in a press release.

The San Diego-based design firm has 40 church clients in various stages of design and production, including quite a few local Catholic parishes.

“It’s completely because of the generosity of our parishioners,” Peters said. “We were kind of this nomadic community, and now we have a home.”

Catholic parishes in the San Bernardino diocese are also seeing a need for expansion.

“The growth we’re experiencing is immense,” said John Edwards of the San Bernardino diocese, citing a 1,700-seat church that was just built in Yucaipa. “We don’t really have any other option but to build.”

A parish in Winchester, named for Mother Teresa, that rents out a lodge for worship wants to build a church. Edwards said that it and other parishes may be forced to change their timelines depending on the economy — but added they won’t withdraw building projects.

“We have seen a decline in our Sunday collections, though, and if people are

struggling to follow through on that commitment it makes it difficult to raise money for a church,” he said. “But it doesn’t mean the plans are being scrapped.”

With about 1.2 million Catholics in San Bernardino and Riverside counties, the diocese will help some parishes with financing if necessary, Edwards said. An impediment, however, is that the San Bernardino diocese is responsible for a portion of the San Diego sex-abuse settlement as some of the accused priests were working in parishes that are now part of the San Bernardino diocese.



West Elevation

An architect's rendering shows one view of the planned new church at St. Therese of Carmel in Carmel Valley.

IMAGE COURTESY OF ST. THERESE OF CARMEL CATHOLIC CHURCH