

Catholic Churches See Much Needed Improvements

Editor's note: This story was originally published June 23, 2023, on the Catholic Extension Society's website. Father Matthew said, "As we assessed our churches we noticed some wear and damage. This is, however, a phenomenal problem as it means the churches are being used. As costs kept rising, we applied for a matching grant from Catholic Extension."

The following improvements were made:

St. Thomas of Canterbury (Thedford) - flooring and ceiling replaced, repainting and adding an Enthronement for Jesus.

All Saints (Hyannis): flooring replaced and repainted.

St. Mary's (Mullen): repainting.

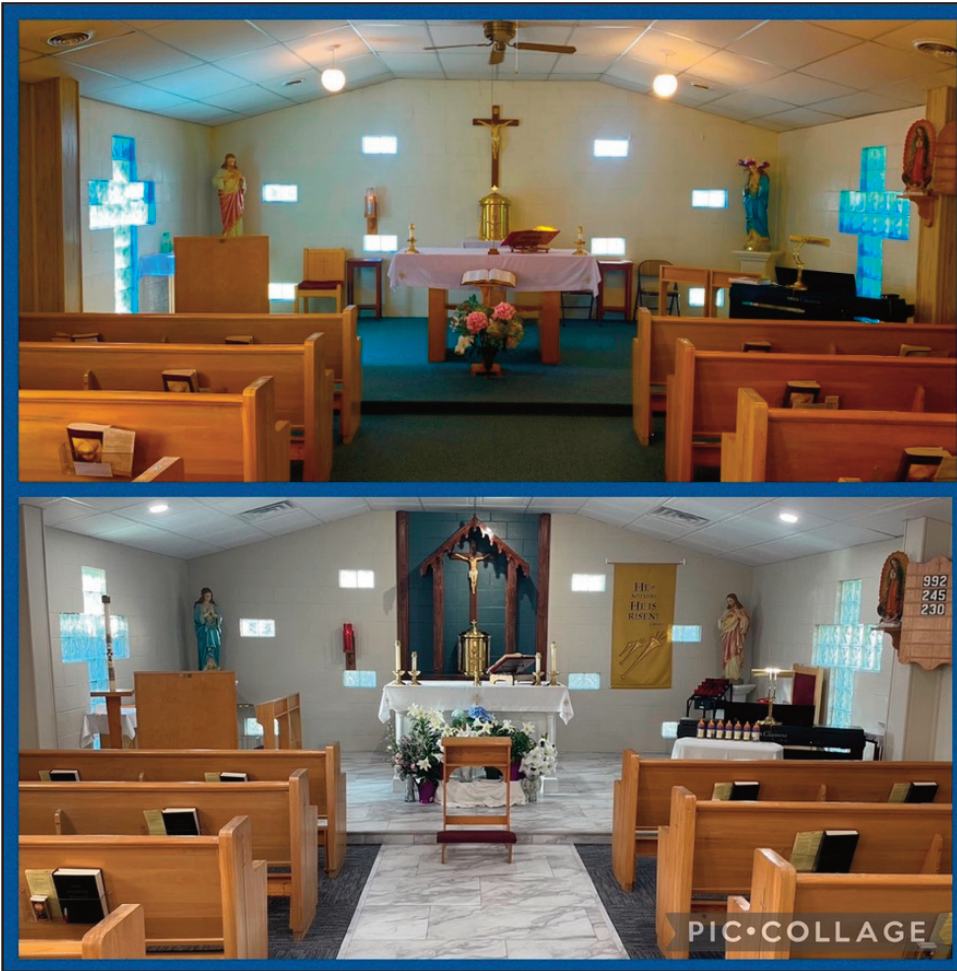
"Through some private parishioner donations, we also repaired Chalice, improved a Crucifix, added stencil work, provided grants for youth retreats, and provided meals for on-going adult formation," Father Matthew said.

"Best of all, we have grown our spiritual activity. Although a building is important, it is nothing without the Church, the people of God."

Story courtesy of Catholic Extension Society
Faith and family are a priority for cattle ranchers in the Nebraska Sandhills.

In its early days, Catholic Extension Society built thousands of churches in the American heartland. When new settlements of Catholic families were in need of a church, Catholic Extension Society helped erect a place of worship for these resilient, far-flung communities of people working the land as farmers and ranchers.

One of these churches was St. Mary's in Mullen,



COURTESY

Pictured above is St. Thomas of Canterbury's (Thedford) before and after pictures. Flooring and the ceiling was replaced, repainting was completed and an Enthronement for Jesus was added.

Nebraska, built in 1926.

St. Mary's is still home to a faith-filled community today. Catholic Extension Society rebuilt the current brick church in 1964.

Although times have changed, families here maintain their humble, hardscrabble way of life. Cattle ranching is the primary industry.

The church and its two far-off missions make up the Sandhills Catholic Community, located in the Sandhills region of western Nebraska in the Diocese of Grand Island.

The two missions include St. Thomas of Can-

terbury in Thedford and All Saints Church in Hyannis.

These two missions are about an hour's drive from each other.

Catholic Extension Society is supporting repair projects at all three churches to ensure these sacred spaces are safe and beautiful for generations to come.

A shepherd of ranchers:
The Sandhills Catholic Community encompasses 5,000 square miles and serves about 150 families. Most parishioners, such as those who attend St. Thomas of Canterbury in Thedford, drive 50 miles

or more from their cattle ranches to attend Mass.

Father Matthew Nash, who grew up in Nebraska, leads the community. He requested to shepherd the people of this region.

"The ranchers care about being good stewards of what they've been gifted. They make sure the cattle are cared for and raised on land that is good for them. They work hard at it," he said.

Each weekend he drives on long stretches of highway to celebrate Mass at each church.

"All three parishes work cohesively together and do their best to support one another," he said. "They know that it's sink or swim for all of us up here."

A respect for and active participation in the Christian faith is commonplace in this area. Father Nash said that

looking out for each other and living the beatitudes are part of people's DNA. The faithful welcome and trust one another to the point that the church doors are kept unlocked.

"You can ask anyone for help, regardless of their background, and they'll do it," Father Nash said. All the Christian denominations work together toward common goals, and they take turns hosting

different community events, such as baccalaureate services for the graduating public high school class.

Leanne French, Carol Wright and Kris Forsen are parishioners at St. Mary's. They shared what makes this faith-filled area a wonderful place to live.

Carol Wright is the of-

See Catholic Church Page 2

Fire Danger High

Thedford Fire Chief Spencer Burk reported 1,000 acres burned southeast of Brownlee towards Eatinger Road in a fast moving fire Monday, February 24. The call came in at approximately 1:00 p.m. and in addition to the Thedford Fire Department, Brownlee, Seneca, Halsey, Purdum and Dunning worked to contain the fire whipped by wind and fueled by dry conditions.

Wayne Eatinger reported approximately 500 acres burned on the Eatinger Ranch and one house and barn were threatened.

Eatinger credited the work of area fire departments, neighbors and ranchers in containing the fire.

Burk said the fire started from a brush pile with a burn permit that started back up when the wind picked up.

Custer County Fires
Also in the early afternoon on Monday, grass fire calls began coming in from several locations in Custer County.

Many of the fire calls quickly included calls for mutual aid sending agencies criss-crossing the area to assist. All available personnel from Custer County, as well as nearby fire departments, were engaged in the effort.

By 3:00 p.m. Monday, Custer County Emergency Manager Mark Rempe indicated they were aware of five active fires in Custer County.

There were also concerns about potential for homes in danger, particularly in an area about 15 miles northeast of Arnold.

Officials said the fires impacted over 6,000 acres with that number rising.

Two firefighters were injured in a fire truck rollover in response to the fire near Lillian Road. One firefighter was taken by Broken Bow ambulance to the hospital and a second firefighter was transported by LifeNet North Platte to a regional trauma facility.

Benjamin Bohall, Custer County Complex Fire Public Information Officer with the Nebraska Forest Service reported on Wednesday, February 26, fire crews were actively battling three wildfires in Custer County, with efforts focused on containment and monitoring hot spots.

The three fires were:

- East Table Road Fire: 475 acres, 30% contained
- Lillian Fire: 900 acres, 30% contained
- Eureka Valley Fire: 2,750 acres, 70% contained

The East Table Road Fire, which ignited Tuesday night, was burning approximately three miles northeast of Merna, primarily in canyon areas. In addition, crews were working to suppress and monitor hot spots on the Lillian Fire and Eureka Valley Fire, both located in the Merna

See Fire Page 6

SJNSB Annual Meeting

LINDA TEAHON

The Sandhills Journey National Scenic Byway, Hwy 2 from Alliance to Grand Island, held its annual meeting and awards banquet on Saturday, February 8th at the One Box Convention Center in Broken Bow.

A full day of speakers and events took place, starting with the monthly business meeting. Accomplishments for the year were many.

Speakers during the afternoon included Carmen Minnick, manager at Carhenge located north of Alliance. She gave an interesting presentation about the number of visitors year around and the economic impact the site has on the area.

Nebraska Humanities speaker Karen Wyatt Drevo of Norfolk, in character of her great-great grandmother, described the process of coming to America in the 1800's to homestead near Nebraska City. The description of hardships endured was very emotional at times for the audience.

Nebraska authors John Hunt of Broken Bow and Alan J. Bartels gave updates on their new books.

A delicious evening dinner was served by Legends of Broken Bow. The entertainment was from Ansley native Tazy Q.

Each year the Byway of-



COURTESY

Pictured above (at left) Linda Teahon presents Dixie Hoffman with the Enhancement Award during the SJNSB Banquet for the recently renovated Cowpoke Hotel at Thedford.

fers a \$500 grant to a new or existing business of five years or less.

This year Ol' Ironsides - BBQ of Cairo was the recipient.

Alan J. Bartels and Mike Adams were selected as Individual Friends of the Byway. The Byway Business Award went to Downey Well Drilling of Merna. Dave Downey does many tasks at The Barn, SJNSB Information Center in Broken Bow.

Jean Adkins, age 86, earned the Byway Frontline Award for her many hours of volunteering at The Barn.

The recently renovated Cowpoke Hotel at Thedford was featured for the Enhancement Award along the Byway. Dixie Hoffman accepted the award.

The entire afternoon and evening was enjoyed by the attendees networking with old and new friends.

The next big event for the Byway will be the 17th annual Polar Bear Tank Race at Mullen, March 7 and 8, sponsored by Glidden Canoe & Tanking along with Mullen area businesses and individuals.

Speed Reduction Approved

A speed limit reduction on Highway 2 has been approved by the Nebraska Department of Transportation. The speed limit between the Thedford Volunteer Fire Hall and Dollar General east of Thedford will now be a 55 mile per hour zone.

Signs will soon be installed by the NDOT and a mobile radar trailer will be in use for a short period of time.

Thomas County Sheriff Joseph Smith requested the reduction in the speed limit last March following a triple fatality and another fatality in July on Highway 2.

Speed was not the primary cause of those accidents.

"There has been an increase in the number of businesses along the highway and there are more people turning in and out of approaches," Sheriff Smith said. "By reducing the speed limit it will allow for people slowing down to make



stops at businesses."

Sheriff Smith added he was very appreciative of the support of the Thomas County Commissioners, business owners, the Village of Thedford board, Thedford Rural Fire District and the state in approving the application in making the 55 speed limit a reality.

"Hopefully this will reduce accidents," he said.

There has been an increase in commercial traffic on Highway 85 and a three-year record of all accidents was used in reviewing the application.

"We also feel by drop-

ping the speed limit to 55 it will improve compliance of the 35 mph zone through the Village of Thedford.

The Village Board of Trustees approved Ordinance 2025-4 establishing the maximum legal speed limit on a portion of Nebraska Highway 2 within the corporate limits of Thedford and repealing ordinances in conflict with the new ordinance. The ordinance states no person shall operate a motor vehicle within the City Limits at a speed greater than 55 miles per hour on State Highway N-2 from the intersection with Cattle Drive Lane to the intersection with Railroad Street. The ordinance was passed and approved February 3, 2025.

Sheriff Smith said there will be increased enforcement by the Thomas County Sheriff's office and the Nebraska State Patrol in the new 55 mph zone and motorists are advised to comply with the new speed limit.

"Thank you for your cooperation and we hope to make safety in our county a number one priority," Sheriff Smith said.