

INSPIRATION TO GIVE

out of the ashes

One year after their historic church was destroyed by an arsonist, parishioners at St. Mary's rallied to meet a fundraising challenge from Catholic Extension to see their beloved church rebuilt

RESIDENTS OF LAMAR, MISSOURI, were horrified on February 8, 2009, when St. Mary's Catholic Church, a fixture of the community since 1904, was set ablaze by an arsonist. St. Mary's was the only Catholic church in all of Barton County and the spiritual home and social hub for Catholics in the region for several generations.



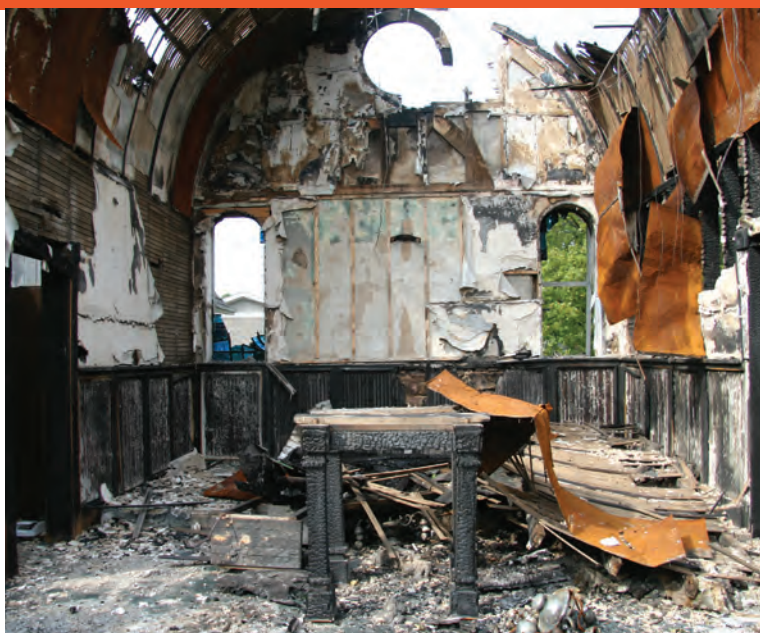
A rendering of the proposed new church

The fire devastated the century-old structure. The cost of rebuilding St. Mary's was estimated at \$1.2 million. Insurance was able to cover \$800,000 of the cost, but the parish needed to raise the remaining \$400,000.

Determined to rebuild, St. Mary's 90 families knew their task would not be easy. The small rural community of 4,500 had been hit hard by the economic downturn. At least 700 residents had lost their jobs. Many of St. Mary's parishioners are retired and living on fixed incomes.



By the end of March, church members had garnered an unprecedented \$175,000 in combined pledges and fundraising activity within a community beset by economic hardship.



ABOVE: The devastation caused by the fire, 2009

In January 2010, Catholic Extension's team shared a plan with St. Mary's — a challenge grant in which Catholic Extension's donors would commit \$150,000 to the fundraising effort if the parish could raise at least \$90,000. Catholic Extension hoped the parishioners could match the challenge in six to 12 months. The team was stunned when, in just two months, the St. Mary's community had accumulated \$130,000 in pledges.

Fueled by the challenge grant, St. Mary's parishioners involved the entire community in countless fundraisers. They sponsored Lenten fish fries, car raffles, carnivals and chili cook-offs. They dug deep into their own pockets.

By the end of March, church members had garnered an unprecedented \$175,000 in combined pledges and fundraising activity within a community beset by economic hardship. Following the parish's overwhelming response to the challenge grant, Catholic Extension announced during Holy Week that the \$150,000 pledge would be honored in full.

Dr. Gene Aug, Director of Development and Properties for the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, lauded St. Mary's parishioners for their resolve to rebuild and credited Catholic Extension's challenge with inspiring people to give.

"These faith-filled people have been deeply committed to making this happen from day one, but Extension's involvement and promise definitely spurred them into more action," said Aug, who noted that other parishes in the diocese and local churches of all denominations also rallied in support.

While fundraising will continue, with the funds raised so far, construction to rebuild St. Mary's has begun and is expected to be complete in October 2010. The new church will draw from the original St. Mary's design and incorporate stones from the old church. It will seat nearly 200 worshipers.

In the interim, St. Mary's parishioners are celebrating Mass and gathering in St. Mary's parish hall, which was built with Catholic Extension funds in 1978. Together, they are honoring their past by rebuilding for their future. ■

To learn more about the communities Catholic Extension supports, visit catholicextension.org.