

North Carolina was part of the Diocese of Charleston, which was formed in 1820, until the North Carolina Vicariate Apostolic was established in 1868 with the installation of Bishop James Gibbons. At that time the Bishop had but three priests and only Raleigh, Edenton, and New Bern had churches. There were 15 other missions and stations where Mass was offered in private homes and approximately 700 Catholics in the state.

In 1910 Amelia Erath Russell arrived in Swansboro from New Iberia, Louisiana where she had met and married Charles Taylor Russell, a Swansboro native, three years earlier. Mrs. Russell was the first Catholic in Swansboro and traveled frequently to New Bern by horse and buggy to attend Mass. She began to put regular contributions into a box, praying to see a Catholic church in her town. She eventually saved enough to buy a plot of land on the main street, which she later donated for the first St. Mildred Chapel.

By the time the Raleigh Diocese was established in 1924, there were 6000 Catholics in North Carolina. In 1926 James Bryant Cannon and his wife Ella donated land in Maysville, Jones County, on which a church was built and dedicated in 1928. Here a priest came to say Mass once a month, and later twice a month.

The four daughters of James Bryant Cannon's brother, John and his wife Catherine, had gone to the Benedictine Abbey established in Belmont, NC for nurse's training and brought back the Catholic faith which was embraced by other members of the family. Lydia Cannon, one of the four daughters, married Aaron Drew Dixon. Thomas E. Meadows and his family came to Maysville in the early 30's, joining the small Catholic community there in Jones County, and Mrs. Amelia Russell traveled here to attend Mass in her one seat automobile. The Cannons, Dixons, Meadows, Anne McKutchon (the first known Catholic in Jones County) and Amelia Russell formed the nucleus of the early Catholic population in the Jones-Onslow Counties area from which the parishes of Holy Innocents, Maysville and St. Mildred, Swansboro evolved.

On November 28, 1944 additional land off Highway 17 in Maysville was donated by J.W. and Debbie L Meadows to Bishop Eugene J. McGuinness, second Bishop of Raleigh. J. W. Meadows was a cousin of Thomas E. Meadows. The church built in 1928 was moved to this property and the Trinitarians established the Holy Innocents Cenacle here with a mission in Swansboro where Masses were held mostly in the home of parishioner May Chadwick. Bishop McGuinness had wide experience at the Extension Society and continued the expansion of the missionary Diocese of Raleigh.

An important element of mission work under Bishop Vincent S. Waters, third Bishop of Raleigh, was the Outdoor Trailer Mission. North Carolina had a Catholic population of less than 1% but during the summer this population multiplied. To accommodate the seasonal increase, many areas, including Emerald Isle, were served by two motor chapels. They were 35 feet in length, 8 feet wide with an inside height of 6 feet 8 inches. The interior was divided into three compartments: chapel, living quarters, and reception room. They had outside altars and folding platforms.

After World War II Camp Lejeune, established in 1941, became a major Marine installation and greatly contributed to the growth of the Catholic population and the area in general. Large numbers of military personnel were introduced to a new part of the country. Their presence continued to grow and many servicemen made their homes in and around Swansboro. Some remained when their years of active service ended. Others resumed careers that had been interrupted and came back to the North Carolina coast after retirement.

On July 4, 1948 the first St. Mildred Chapel in Swansboro was dedicated by Bishop Vincent S. Waters. This first chapel was a former military guardhouse which was placed on the land donated by Amelia Russell.

In 1952, two bridges and a causeway were erected on Highway 24 over the White Oak River, making Swansboro more accessible to communities to the east. And in 1961 St. Mildred became the main parish due to area growth resulting from development and tourism. Holy Innocents became the mission church and both Maysville and Swansboro were served by the Trinitarians until 1964 when both churches became diocesan churches. Holy Innocents in Maysville was closed in 1989.

In the 1960's and 70's, until the opening of the B. Cameron Langston Bridge which connected Emerald Isle to the mainland, members of St. Mildred Men's Club took chairs and tables to the Emerald Isle Town Hall just before Easter weekend. These were kept at the Town Hall until Labor Day and were used for Masses said by the priest from St. Mildred Church. Transportation was by way of a ferry which operated between Cape Carteret and Emerald Isle.

In October, 1969 the present brick six-sided church was dedicated by Bishop Waters. At that time the parish consisted of 65 devoted families. The women cleaned the church, washed altar linens, and provided flowers; the men did all necessary repairs and maintained the buildings and grounds. The original church was converted into a parish hall and served in that capacity until 1993. In August of 1975, the beautiful stained glass windows donated by the parishioners were dedicated while Fr. Vincent Mahoney, a former Navy chaplain, was pastor.

Tourism intensified after the B. Cameron Langston Bridge was built in 1971 and development of the island and the coastal mainland escalated rapidly. Catholics moving into this area became members of St. Mildred Parish. A larger hall was needed and a building fund was created when this need for continued expansion became apparent. The parishioners held cake sales, suppers, raffles and bazaars. In August 1993 the present parish hall addition to the church was dedicated by Bishop Joseph Gossman, the fourth current Bishop of Raleigh.

The original church, which had been the parish hall, was given to the White Oak Ecumenical Outreach Ministries and was moved to its present site on Highway 24. It is now a thrift shop appropriately named "The Hem of His Garment". St. Mildred is one of 15 churches comprising this ecumenical group providing meals on wheels along with assistance for the needy. The entire staff of the thrift shop, are volunteers.

A parish library was opened in 1992 to complement the ongoing Catholic education of member families. The library provides reference materials, inspirational literature and video tapes.

In 1989 the Missionaries of Our Lady of LaSalette assumed the staffing of the parish and Father Emile C. Dusseault, M.S. became pastor. In August 2000 Father Donald Baribeau, M.S. became pastor upon Fr. Dusseault's retirement.

St. Mildred Catholic Church is now a parish of more than 600 families, continuing to grow and, having established yet another building fund, is looking forward to new facilities

