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Mass, eucharistic procession mark anniversary of first U.S. bishop

by Mark Zimmermann by Catholic News Service

Bowie, Md. — On May 18, 1789, about two dozen priests then serving in the new United States of America met at a chapel in White Marsh and had an election at which they nominated Fr. John Carroll to be the first Catholic bishop of the United States.

That fall, Pope Pius VI appointed Carroll as the nation's first Catholic bishop to lead the new Baltimore diocese, which at that time encompassed the Catholic community living in all 13 original states.

On May 18, 2014, Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl celebrated a special Mass at Sacred Heart Church in the Washington suburb of Bowie to mark the 225th anniversary of that milestone in U.S. Catholic history. He then led a eucharistic procession to the Chapel on the Hill, where Carroll's election took place.

"It was at that chapel those priests in this new nation selected John Carroll to present to Rome as their candidate for the first bishop," Wuerl said in his homily. He noted that in the years that followed, "the church has grown and grown and grown. ... What took place 225 years ago in that chapel is bearing fruit."

Through the church, Catholics continue to encounter Jesus Christ in the word of God, in the Eucharist, and as the people who are the body of Christ in today's world.

"Because of what happened here 225 years ago, you and I can touch the person of Jesus Christ in his church," the cardinal said.

The program for the Mass noted that "the Catholic Church in America began in an organized way right here at Sacred Heart with the nomination of John Carroll as the first bishop. The pastoral care of a bishop forged a new era in the founding of Catholic parishes, schools, hospitals, orphanages and other social

institutions."

A holy card available to Massgoers included a quote made in 2010 by Archbishop Pietro Sambi, then the apostolic nuncio to the United States, who as he visited the Chapel on the Hill, said, "From a tiny seed of faith in this humble chapel, the Catholic Church in America blossomed."

In 1789, the Catholic population in the United States was comparatively small and scattered, with an estimated 6,000 Catholics then living in Maryland. Today, 272 active and 175 retired bishops serve in the 195 archdioceses and dioceses in the United States, where an estimated 66.8 million Catholics live.

The Washington archdiocese, which includes the nation's capital and five surrounding Maryland counties, has about 620,000 Catholics. This year, the Washington archdiocese -- which was founded in 1939 -- is marking its 75th anniversary, and Wuerl presented a 75th anniversary medallion at the beginning of Mass to Msgr. Charles Parry, Sacred Heart's pastor.

After the anniversary Mass, Wuerl led the eucharistic procession from Sacred Heart Church to the Chapel on the Hill, followed by a Knights of Columbus honor guard and by a crowd that included hundreds of parishioners of all ages, along with area elected officials, judges and public safety officers who attended the Mass.

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The bells tolled in the church and in the bell tower of the historic chapel as the people in the procession climbed the steps that wound through the woods, on the pathway from the parish church to the Chapel on the Hill.

Afterward, Parry told the *Catholic Standard*, Washington's archdiocesan newspaper, that it was fitting to conclude the anniversary commemoration with a eucharistic procession to the Chapel on the Hill.

"Our whole life (as Catholics) is centered on the Eucharist," he said, adding, "It's a joyful time to recall our Catholic roots and our Catholic history."

Sacred Heart's pastor noted that about 100 parishioners attend the two daily Masses at the historic chapel, and parish staff members and volunteers maintain the chapel, where many parishioners' baptisms, weddings and funerals are held.

Barbara Reilly, a parishioner at Sacred Heart for about 30 years, said people there regard the historic chapel as "very holy ground."

"It's just the most wonderful place. I come to daily Mass in the chapel. It's the perfect start of every day," she said.

As he walked back down the hillside after the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament at the Chapel on the Hill, Wuerl said it was special for him to commemorate the anniversary of the selection of the nation's first Catholic bishop.

"It's a reminder of how important our ties with our history are. We stand on the shoulders of all those who came before us," he said. "Here we are, commemorating the beginning of the U.S. hierarchy, and all those bishops who helped build up the church we have today."

[Matthew Zimmermann is editor of the *Catholic Standard*, archdiocesan newspaper in Washington.]

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