

Sisters of Mercy celebrate renovation of 1899 chapel

Hundreds took vows in Sacred Heart Chapel

BELMONT — With memories still vivid and cherished, the Sisters of Mercy in Belmont celebrated April 15 the renovation of the 110-year-old Sacred Heart Chapel, where a number of sisters worshipped and made their vows.

Taking part in the celebration — which included prayer, Scripture and reflection — were Mercy Sister Paulette Williams, Mercy Sister Michel Boulus, Mercy Sister Mary-Andrew Ray and Mercy Sister Kathy Green, as well as Benedictine Abbot Placid Solari of Belmont Abbey and Dr. William Theirfelder, president of Belmont Abbey College.

“When I walk into the chapel now, I remember the way we were,” said Mercy Sister Rosalind Picot, who took her perpetual vows in the chapel in 1960.

“I relive the ceremonies, rituals and prayers, and I relive the sense of community of being together in prayer,” she said. “The chapel represents the exterior symbols of internal realities to which we espouse.”

Built in 1899, Sacred Heart Chapel, along with the original convent it adjoins, is the oldest building on the campus of the Sisters of Mercy in Belmont. The construction of the chapel and convent was funded by Susie Burns, who later became Mercy Sister Mary Mercedes Burns.

Monks from Belmont Abbey helped clear the land and, according to legend, made the bricks. Until 1962, when a new convent and chapel were built, an estimated 200 sisters took their final vows in Sacred Heart Chapel.

Students at Sacred Heart College continued to use it for the next 25 years.

Sister Ray, who took her final vows in the chapel in 1958, is the North Carolina archivist for the sisters.

“I remember the beauty, the closeness and the many events that took place there,” she said. “The history delights me as an archivist. We want to preserve as much as possible of its memory and its heritage.”

Sister Jerome Spradley, who took her final vows in 1956, reflected upon how times were different back then.

“We didn’t have air conditioning. In the summer, we had two huge fans that almost blew you away, and of course, the windows were open,” she said. “In that time, all of us were in the traditional habits.”

Fully restored, Sacred Heart Chapel contains many of its original features, including three altars, the hardwood flooring immediately surrounding them, stained glass windows and wooden pews.

“You always want a place like that chapel to continue forever,” said Sister Spradley. “To have it restored to its original state is a wonderful thing to all of us who remember it.”

“To go into that chapel brings back the commitment I’ve made to God and community,” said Sister Picot. “I remember the sisters who are now deceased who prayed in that chapel and with whom I prayed.”