

Parishioners work together to renovate St. Emerence in Rivière Qui Barre

Parishioners in Rivière Qui Barre, a tiny hamlet northwest of Edmonton, are celebrating a major achievement after completing a \$50,000 renovation to their church building over the past year.

For Joanne Byfield, the process was “overwhelming and miraculous.”



Kyle Anthieren works on the new handmade wooden arches behind the altar.
Photo supplied

“People are just astonished when they come in and see what it looks like. It looks like a new church, and it’s pretty amazing,” said Byfield, a member of St. Emerence Parish.

Officially the hamlet only has an estimated 56 people, but over a hundred attend Mass each Sunday. And many of them donated money or volunteered their time and labour to help renovate the 50-year-old church.

The church sanctuary, sacristy, and hall were completely overhauled, with the interior stucco walls replaced with new drywall. New electrical work and lighting was also installed. The walls received a fresh coat of paint, and statues of Mary and Joseph were restored, with handmade arches now surrounding them.

“Even for wedding pictures and everything, having (the arches) in the background is so much nicer than what it was before,” said Don McRae. A

parishioner for 17 years, McRae contributed by restoring the church skylight and he helped to install new pews.

The first St. Emerence Catholic Church was built in 1895. It was demolished after its foundations had deteriorated beyond repair. The current building was completed in 1968.



Before the renovation



After the renovation

Fundraising for the renovation began in April 2017 with a telephone campaign that raised \$16,000 within two weeks. The money was then used to renovate St. Emerence's aging stucco-covered exterior walls.



St. Emerence parishioners work on the skylight and new sanctuary wall. Photo supplied

“I just thought, ‘Wow, this is incredible! Who would have thought this could happen in a matter of weeks?’” said Byfield. “I think once the outside was done, people started to get a sense of ‘we could do this, we can actually, probably get this money and do this renovation.’”

The initial campaign was then followed by larger, private donations from other parishioners, including a former parishioner now living in Calgary.

“I asked him if he would be interested in contributing, and he said ‘I have a cheque ready for you,’” said Father Miguel Irizar, the pastor of St. Emerence Parish. The amount was kept private, but Irizar said “He’s a very generous man who cares about the church he grew up in.

“God provided us with whatever we needed, and it’s amazing to see. It’s my hope that the renovations we did will help the parishioners of Riviere Qui Barre have a beautiful church for many years to come.”

The church’s pews were salvaged from a defunct church near Stettler, about 180 kilometres south of Edmonton.



The exterior of St. Emerence before the new stucco was applied during recent renovations. Archdiocese photo

However, not everyone wanted to replace the pews, explained Byfield. Some St. Emerence parishioners had a strong attachment to them. Parishioners and their children grew up sitting and playing on the old pews.



Father Miguel Irizar Archdiocese photo

“I understand people who have been upset, I know there are a few, a handful. But overall the reaction to people who come in, who have been here for decades, the feedback I get is ‘This is fantastic, it’s beautiful,” Byfield said.

Father Irizar, who is leaving St. Emerence Parish, said he wanted to see the renovation to its completion before his studies in Rome. And one thing that parishioners can agree on is how instrumental he was in getting it done.

“(He) helped us carry the old pews out and bring in the new pews. He’s not scared to work, I’ll tell you that much!” said McRae.

Joanne Byfield agrees. “He definitely lit a fire under people in our community to get this done. It’s been really overwhelming and touching, the number of

people who have been involved and supported it in whatever way, (with) labour, money, or finding other people to help out.”