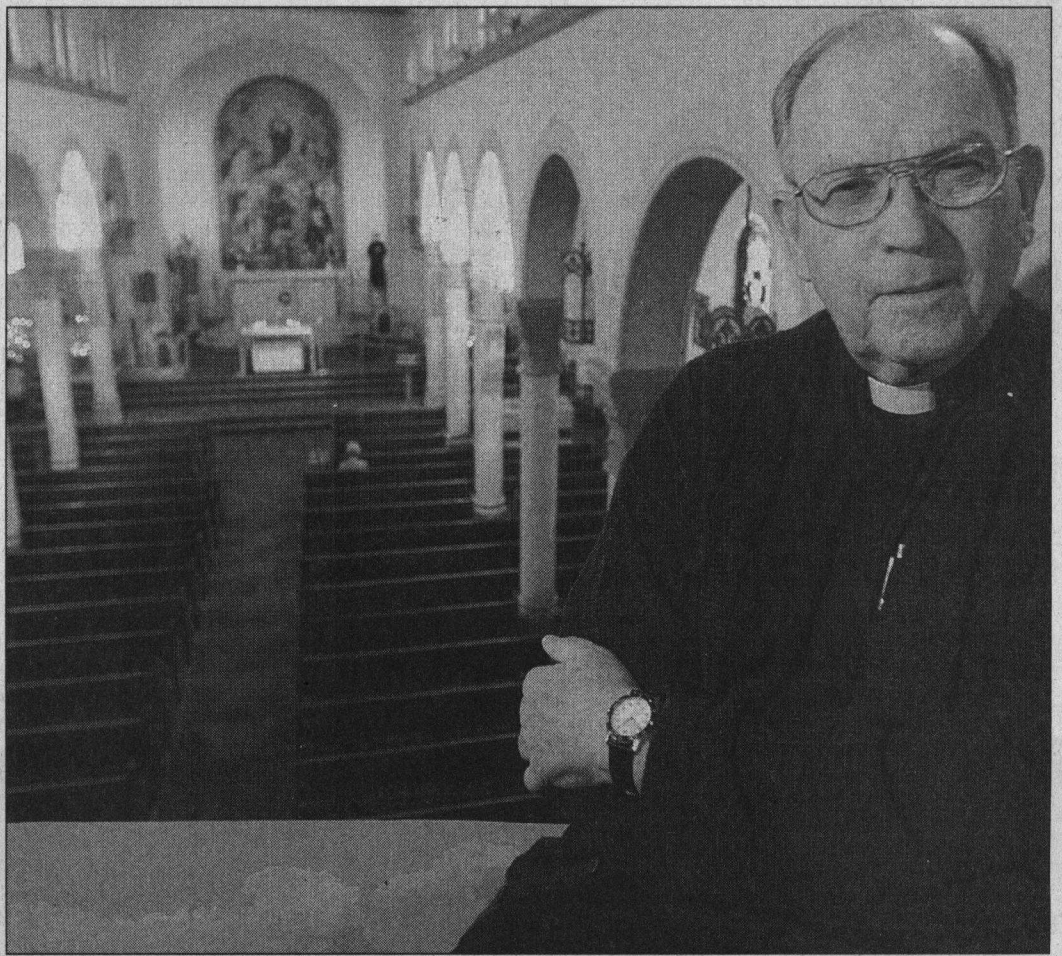




Bill Lovejoy/ Sentinel photos

The current incarnation of Our Lady Help of Christians Valley Church was erected in 1928.



Father Harry Rasmussen is pictured in the balcony above the sanctuary at Our Lady Help of Christians Valley Church on East Lake Avenue.

# Church commemorates 150 years

## The Valley Church in P.V. celebrates its history

By DANIEL LOPEZ  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

The Rev. Harry Rasmussen and the parishioners at Our Lady Help of Christians Valley Church are ready to add another page to the history of their church.

The parish on East Lake Avenue, commonly known as "Valley Church," will commemorate 150 years of service in the Pajaro Valley this weekend.

"It's pretty special in a sense when you think 150 years," Rasmussen said.

The parish is the second oldest in the county, behind only Holy Cross Parish at Mission Santa Cruz. That church was founded in 1791 by Father Junipero Serra.

The first cornerstone of the Valley Church, built originally as a 36-by-26-foot structure, was laid Nov. 25, 1855, on the same site where the present church that holds 300 people was built in 1928.

Whereas the first services were attended by only a small number of local families, the congregation has grown to include about 1,500 families with a wide range of cultural and ethnic back-

**'It's pretty special in a sense when you think 150 years.'**

REV. HARRY RASMUSSEN

grounds.

"(The church) has a wonderful history," said Bishop Sylvester Ryan of the Diocese of Monterey. Ryan will celebrate an outdoor Mass as part of the anniversary.

The Rev. P. De Vos of Mission Santa Clara founded the church, selecting the site for a church and cemetery in July 1854. The property overlooks what was then called Laguna Grande, now College Lake, and was donated by William Francis White and Eugene Kelly.

At that time, Watsonville was a community of 30 homes, and most Catholics attended Mass at Mission San Juan Bautista, according to letters from White's daughter, Lucy White.

"A lot was done by the people here to make the parish grow," said Rasmussen. "I feel real grateful for those who made the initial sacrifice to start something."

By 1860, the building proved too small

for the parish community and was enlarged.

In 1901, the Franciscan Fathers of Mission Santa Barbara built a Gothic-style church near the old church. The Franciscan Fathers had taken over the parish.

Twenty-six years later, the church burned down in a fire sparked by a defective lamp.

The buildings of St. Francis School, which began as an orphanage in 1869, also were destroyed.

Today's Roman-style church, built with fire retardant materials, replaced the razed structure.

Just as the church buildings have undergone transformations, the face of the parish community has also changed, Rasmussen said.

In the early years and throughout its history, Anglos have kept a presence in the church, but many immigrant populations have also called the parish home.

Croatians, Portuguese and, more recently, Latinos are part of Valley Church.

In the past five years alone, the parish's Latino community has grown dramatically, Rasmussen said.

**If You Go**

**WHAT:** 150th parish anniversary of Our Lady Help of Christians Church.

**WHEN:** Mass at 4:30 p.m. Saturday; dinner at 6:30 p.m.

**WHERE:** 2401 E. Lake Ave., Watsonville.

**DETAILS:** Dinner tickets are \$5 for adults and \$7 for children nine and under, and available in advance or at the door. Raffle tickets are \$25 each, or five for \$100 and are available at the parish office 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, or after weekend services.

As a result, the church also increased its offering of Spanish-language masses to three per week.

On Saturday, the parish will gather to celebrate the history of their church with an outdoor Mass.

A tri-tip and tamales dinner will follow. A new Ford F-150 pickup and cash prizes will be raffled to benefit the church.

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