This year, the Diocese of Portland celebrates a special anniversary. For 150 years, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, with its soaring spires and graceful arches, has stood as a witness to faith and beauty for the people of Maine and all who visit the state’s largest city.

The cathedral was dedicated on September 8, 1869, with Bishop David Bacon, the first bishop of Portland, presiding, and Father Isaac Thomas Hecker, a renowned missionary priest, serving as the homilist. Quoting from Genesis, Father Hecker declared, “How awesome is this place?” They are words that were true then and remain true today.

“I’ve been amazed by this building and all that it stands for since I came here,” said Bishop Robert Deeley, during remarks opening the anniversary celebration.

The Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops calls cathedrals the most important of a diocese’s churches, saying they are “a sign of unity” and a “sign of the teaching authority and the sacred power” of the bishop.

As he began a presentation on the cathedral’s theological and architectural significance, the first anniversary event, Msgr. Marc Caron, former chancellor of the diocese, spoke about the important role a cathedral plays in the life of a diocese.

“A cathedral is meant to be the heart, center, and exemplar of a diocese. It is the site of the significant events in the history of a diocese: the annual consecration of the chrism for baptism, confirmation, ordination, dedication of altars and churches; the ordination of deacons, priests, and bishops over the years; welcoming a new bishop or burying its former shepherds,” he said.

The responsibility for building the cathedral fell to Bishop Bacon. When he was ordained a bishop in 1855, he chose as his episcopal motto “courage and hope,” and he would need both to see the project through to the end.

“It was truly a testament of faith,” Bishop Deeley remarked.

When Bishop Bacon arrived, there was only one other Catholic church in Portland, St. Dominic Church. He decided to build the new cathedral at the other end of the city and immediately started purchasing land for it.

Designed by John Doyle of New York City, a chapel was built within a year and dedicated in December 1856. Work on the cathedral itself, however, would take more than a decade to complete. A shortage of laborers, materials, and money during the Civil War delayed construction, and then, in 1866, the Great Fire of Portland swept through the city. An estimated 1,500 buildings were destroyed, including the partially built cathedral, the chapel, the bishop’s residence, a convent, and a parish school. Bishop Bacon wrote in his diary at the time, “Nothing of any value was saved.” Undeterred, he went on a fundraising tour to nearby states and Canada. In spring 1868, work began again.

The bishop chose architect Patrick Keely, an Irish-American immigrant, to design the cathedral and a new chapel. Keely was a rising star in church design and someone the bishop knew personally. When he was a priest in Brooklyn, N.Y., he had blessed Keely’s marriage.

In the 1830s, the Gothic Revival movement in architecture was becoming more prevalent, replacing the earlier classical period. It was this style that Keely adopted for Portland’s cathedral.

“He will use very elongated spires, many of which were the tallest structures in their town at their opening, as was the case in Portland, to re-create the Gothic quest for greater and greater verticality,” Msgr. Caron said. “One of the hallmarks of the Gothic movement is to go higher, and higher, and higher, pointing to heaven.”

The cathedral’s spires are of different heights, something that classical architects would have never done.
“They never would have upset the perfect symmetry of a building by adding mismatched towers, but medieval builders did it all the time, and so did Keely. Even though the three towers of the cathedral are of different heights, their individual proportions and their relationship to each other, when taken together, remain as graceful as ever,” Msgr. Caron said.

Although brownstone and granite were most often used as building materials for Gothic churches, Msgr. Caron said Keely used brick because it was less expensive.

“While the Gothic revivalists insisted on stone on stone for the load-bearing interior of a building, Keely did not hesitate to use wood trestles and masonry to carry the weight of the building,” Msgr. Caron said.

The interior of the cathedral, which also reflects the medieval Gothic period, is 186 feet long, with a vaulted ceiling that rises 70 feet above the floor. It is divided into three levels: an arcade of arches which continue through a sanctuary not enclosed by walls, a false triforium of recessed arches above it, and the third level clerestory. Msgr. Caron noted that oftentimes churches do not have actual windows in the clerestory, just recessed frames, but that is not the case with the cathedral.

The stained-glass windows, commissioned by Bishop William O’Connell, the third bishop of Portland, and his successor, Bishop Louis Walsh, were designed by the renowned Franz Mayer Studio in Munich, Germany. They depict scenes from the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

“That is a typical iconographic cycle for many Catholic churches. Mary herself is an icon of the Church. She is the first and foremost disciple. What can be said of her properly is said by analogy of the whole Church, so she figures prominently in many church designs,” Msgr. Caron explained.

One of the most stunning windows, installed in 1902, is the Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception window, located behind the sanctuary. It is to the Blessed Mother under that title that the cathedral is dedicated.

“That particular title had become extremely important in the mid-19th century. While debated for centuries and fervently believed by the Church in the West throughout that time, the Church only formally defined the doctrine (that Mary was conceived free of original sin) in 1854, just as Bishop Bacon was named to Portland,” Msgr. Caron said.

“Already in 1846, the Bishops of the United States had declared the Immaculate Conception the patroness of the country.”

Msgr. Caron also noted that the apparitions of Our Lady in Lourdes, France, during which she declared herself to be the Immaculate Conception, took place in 1858, during the time the cathedral was being built.

While the interior lines of the cathedral remain as Keely envisioned them, there have been beautiful additions and regrettable losses through the years. In 1921, Bishop Walsh commissioned an elaborate baptismal font. In 1930, the Stations of the Cross, handcrafted out of pieces of Venetian glass, were installed. Also added in 1930 were a marble altar, chair, pulpit, and altar rail, all of Gothic Revival design, but they were lost in a 1969 renovation and reordering that followed the Second Vatican Council.

Extensive renovations in the year 2000 reversed some of those changes by adding a new marble altar crafted out of two side altars from the former St. Dominic Church, as well as a pulpit and reredos from St. Dominic.

“That these elements date from 30 years after the cathedral opened, they are, as a group, more in harmony with and more consistent with the basic lines and philosophy of the building,” Msgr. Caron said.

The cathedral was entered in the National Register of Historic Places in 1985. One of its spires, which rises 204 feet, remains the tallest structure in the city. Most importantly, it continues to be a sign of hope and faith.

“The majestic spire of this building pointing heavenwards reminds all who pass by of our future destiny; that by His mercy, we are meant to live forever with God in the joy of heaven, in the joy of our Father’s house,” Msgr. Caron said. “This cathedral has stood for 150 years. That is a tribute to Patrick Keely and the bishops and faithful of the Diocese of Portland. Fostering a strong community of faith, worship, and service here within its walls and in the shadow of its spires is the best way to guarantee its future for the next 150 years. May many more generations become inspired to practice the love of God and love of neighbor by its beauty and majesty.”

To learn more about the cathedral and anniversary events, visit www.portlanddiocese.org/cathedral-150th-anniversary.

How the Catholic Appeal Helps
As the mother church of the diocese, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conceptions hosts many diocesan liturgies and ceremonies. The appeal helps cover related costs.