

Sacred Heart – St. Casimir Parish History

As separate communities, both Sacred Heart of Jesus and St. Casimir Parishes have had a lengthy and rich history of ministry and service to the Leavenworth Community.

ST. CASIMIR CHURCH

The establishment of St. Casimir's Polish Church dates back to the year 1888 when a small contingent of Poles from Westphalia, Germany, began to settle here. Familiar with the German language and customs, they affiliated themselves with St. Joseph's German congregation. With the opening of the Home and Riverside mines in 1889 and 1890, respectively, other groups of Poles came from Pennsylvania and Illinois, some finding employment in the mine and factories, others settling on nearby farms, and some establishing themselves in business.

In 1889, the Poles of the city organized a society and dedicated it to St. Casimir, the Polish saint. John Orzechowski was chosen president; Severin Kowalewski secretary; and John Marcyan, treasurer. Forty-two were enrolled as members in this organization. The Rev. Francis Kulisek was requested to serve as their chaplain and advisor. He frequently came from Frankfort, where he was pastor at the time, to attend the meetings. He also preached to the men in their native tongue and heard their Confessions. It was through Father Kulisek's efforts that the services of other Polish priests were procured to serve the Poles of Leavenworth. These priests would serve the Polish people for a short while, and then go on to larger Polish communities, as their services were in great demand because of the huge influx of Poles in the late 80's and 90's. The scarcity of Polish priests at that time was appalling.

In 1893 Father Alexander Smietana was ordained by His Excellency, Bishop Louis Maria Fink, and appointed Pastor of St. Casimir's. On Easter Sunday of that year, Father Smietana celebrated Mass in St. Joseph's church. He announced that there would be a meeting of all Polish speaking people immediately after the service. At the meeting, Father Smietana heartily exhorted the Polish people to band together and to unite as one large family in order to form a congregation of their own. The following attended the meeting: John Orzechowski, Martin Loboda, Joseph Jurewicz, Jan Babski, Herman Klasinski, Jan Zielinski, John Bredacz, Kasper Wojtylak, Joseph Malinowski, Michael Zawacki, Val Ruczkowski, G. Derezinski, John Szczygiel, Vincent Bietka, S. Kowalewski, F. Bodneszas, M. Wylus, A. Wypychowski, M. Tomaszewski, J. Suwalski, Michael Matuszak, Thomas Goliwas, Louis Szudrowica, Wojciech Johnar, Adam Suchowski, Anthony Titolski, Frank Frenikowski, M. Winicki, Frank Gajewski, Jan Szrejder, Math. Drezinski, Jan Lozinski, Adam Szalkowski, Mich. Wittek, Barth Szymznowicz, John Wisniewski, Jos. Waksmunski, Max Cichocki, Jan Marcyan, Joseph Kuzewski, and Theodore Kowalski.

According to the best information available, there were then about 54 Polish families, numbering about 180 souls. At this meeting Father Smietana asked the people to make voluntary contributions for the purchase of a Church site. St. Casimir society donated \$500. And those present at the meeting subscribed \$1600. A committee of four, Mssrs. Marcyan, Szudrowica, Kowleski, and Zawacki, were appointed at the meeting to select a site for the new church, and after viewing several places, it was finally decided with the Bishop's approval, to purchase a tract of land on Pennsylvania Avenue at Cleveland Terrace, 240 feet x 200 feet, for \$1450.

In the summer of 1893, work on the present church building was begun, and it was interesting to listen to some of the old timers tell about the hardships and difficulties they experienced in building their church. There was a 6 month strike at the mines, and the money subscribed was not forthcoming. The men did most of the work themselves, after a hard day's

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work in the factory or mine, by the light of the moon or a lantern. In May 1894, the handsome new St. Casimir church was dedicated with impressive and appropriate services. It was completed at a cost of about \$7000, exclusive of furnishings.

Father Alexander Smietana resigned from his office as pastor in October 1897, after 4 years of truly strenuous, but fruitful work. He was succeeded by the Rev. John Grudzinski, under whose guidance the parish underwent many improvements. When Grudzinski took charge, the parish comprised about 75 families. The church was the only building on the present site, and a portion of it was used as a parish house. About 50 children were taught by lay teachers in the basement. Through the efforts of Father Grudzinski, teaching Sisters of the Felician community from Chicago were secured. Ever since then, the school has been under their careful and zealous care and guidance. The enrollment of the school varied during Father Grudzinski's pastorate, which lasted 16 years, from 75 to 125. The advent of three Sisters made need of larger quarters urgent, so Father Grudzinski gave up his own rooms in the rear of the church and set about building the present rectory, built at the cost of \$5000.

No sooner was the new residence finished than Father Grudzinski decided that a new school building was needed. He purchased an acre of ground adjoining the church property on the west. W.F. Feth, architect, drew the plans for the building. The contractor, with the aid of parishioners, commenced work on the school. Through the efforts of Senator Stillings and Warden Haskell, brick was furnished from the state prison, practically at cost. The new school was built for about \$10,000.

Father Grudzinski pastorate at St. Casimir was marked by exemplary harmony between pastor and parishioners. This was but the natural result of the faith peculiar to the Polish people and the zeal and success with which the pastor worked for his flock. His memory will live in the minds of the parishioners of St. Casimir. In April 1913, Father Grudzinski, because of ill health, resigned as pastor of St. Casimir church. He was succeeded by the Rev. Francis Kozlowski, of pious memory, who as pastor of St. Casimir for 2 years and seven months, rendered inestimable service to the people of this parish. On December 29, 1915, the Rev. Joseph F. Laczniak was appointed pastor of St. Casimir church. Zeal for the people and energy in undertaking marked the work of the new pastor.

In 1916, there were 170 families and 160 children enrolled in the school. The new pastor's delight was his school. He encouraged higher education. Graduates of St. Casimir school who continued their studies in higher institutions of learning occupied prominent positions in all walks of life. The parish is justly proud of its sons and daughters who have served in various capacities.

The rectory was remodeled in the 1970's, and the church was renovated. During this period, with the consolidation of the separate elementary schools in Leavenworth, St. Casimir School was closed, and the teaching mission of the Felician Sisters came to a close in Leavenworth.

In 1986, the school building was remodeled and reopened. It was dedicated as the Xavier Early Childhood Center for preschool, kindergarten students and a day care center for children under the supervision of the Leavenworth Catholic School System.

In 1987, the old rectory was remodeled as a parish office and meeting place; it became the Parish Center for both St. Casimir and its sister parish, Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In 1995, the church was renovated extensively and dedicated on March 19. The Feast of St. Joseph The Carpenter Building by Archbishop James P. Keleher and Father Bill Hagelin.

SACRED HEART OF JESUS CHURCH

For more than 111 years, Sacred Heart of Jesus Church, 1401 2nd Avenue, has proudly served the community of Leavenworth, Kansas. Over the years, "Sacred Heart" Church has been an integral part of the spiritual, educational and economic stability of the area.

It was in 1854, following the Kansas-Nebraska Act, that Leavenworth became the first city of the Kansas Territory because of its central location and promise for growth, the first Bishop of Kansas, Bishop John Baptiste Miege, moved his episcopal residence from St Mary's, Kansas to Leavenworth. He immediately began the task of firmly establishing and strengthening the roots of Catholicism in the state.

The growth of Leavenworth at that time was equal to what Bishop Miege had anticipated. By the end of 1856, the number of Catholic families in Leavenworth had grown from the original seven to 600 Catholics. The first chapel, which was soon outgrown by its congregation, was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception.

When the Sisters of Charity of Nashville responded to Bishop Miege's request for teachers in 1858, their arrival in the territory brought with them the first civilian hospital in the State and a Catholic School. The number of Catholics grew to 2,000 by 1859.

By the mid 1860's the influx of German, Irish and Polish families to the area led to the splintering off and organization of various "national" parishes. The waves of immigrants to the United States brought with them the desire to maintain their rich cultures, languages and customs. They desired to have Priests and Sisters that could speak their language and assist them in their effort to assimilate into their new homeland.

The establishment of Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish dates back to the year 1885, when the establishment of a new Catholic parish in the south part of Leavenworth had been deemed necessary because of the increasing Catholic population. On April 7, 1884, according to Court House records, the Most Reverend Louis M. Fink bought from Annie W Penman Lots 1 and 2 in Block F in "Fackler's Addition". Later on, Sixth Street and an alley were vacated.

As far back as the early 1870's, a Catholic school had been maintained for the benefit of the children of South Leavenworth on the site of the present day Sacred Heart Convent. This school was a small frame one-story, one room house situated on the corner of Sixth and Linn Streets. A movable partition was used to make it a two-room school house. The first teachers were two Sisters of Charity, who walked back and forth from the Cathedral Convent in North Leavenworth each day. There were no street cars, buses, sidewalks, nor paved streets of any kind, but the Sisters never failed in their duty.

On August 16, 1885, the Most Reverend Louis M Fink O S B, Bishop of the Leavenworth Diocese, realizing a need for an additional parish in southern Leavenworth, issued a decree for the establishment of Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish.

This decree assigned the boundaries and appointed the Reverend Thomas J Downey as pastor. In its entirety, the decree reads as follows:

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN, GREETING, By these presents we make known that we rejoice at being able to fulfill the earnest prayers of many of the faithful of our city and surroundings by establishing a new congregation for the English speaking of the Faithful in South Leavenworth under the title of "The Sacred Heart of Jesus", and we appoint the Reverend T J Downey as its first pastor in accordance with the Laws and Usages of our Diocese. The limits of the new congregation shall be. on the south side a straight line running from the north line of Mt Calvary Catholic Cemetery, east and west, excepting St. Mary's Academy and the St Vincent's Orphan Asylum and their territories; on the north, the line of Spruce Street running from the Missouri River west. Until further arrangements can be perfected, the members of the new congregation will attend Divine Services at the Cathedral as heretofore, but their pew rent and other prerequisites shall be applied for the benefit of the new congregation and its respective pastor, and shall be under his administration according to the Laws of the Diocese. Baptisms, marriages, funerals, sick calls, and other business and duties will and shall be attended by their respective pastor. The confessions will be heard at the Cathedral by the priests of both congregations. We hope that the good people of that part of the city will be glad at seeing their desire

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fulfilled, and will assist their pastor in getting their own place of worship without any unnecessary delay. Louis Mary, OSB"

The first Mass was celebrated in the small school house after the decree of August 16, 1885, but Father Downey immediately began plans for a new church upon his appointment as pastor.

The new church was begun as soon as possible and Bishop Louis M. Fink laid the cornerstone on October 17, 1886.

Michael Oliver Marie, a French Canadian, drew the plans for the new church and it was built by Michael Desmond and Samuel Schaefer. It was originally a one-story brick building with a basement and with living quarters for the pastor in the back of the church.

In the following years, Father Downey continued his good work and a second story was added to the structure. The second floor was then used for Mass and the first floor, was made into two classrooms for school purposes. One of the Sisters who taught in those days reported the average daily attendance was "about one hundred bright, lovely, happy children who daily made the welkin ring with gladsome song and merry laughter".

The Sacred Heart Altar Society Women's club was established in the early days of the parish with their primary purpose the care of the altar and church furnishings and to assist the pastor in any way they could. They assisted at summer picnic dinners, ice cream socials and, in the Fall of the year, week-long bazaars were held with dinners served each day. Over the years, the society has become affiliated with the Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Women.

In 1910, Sacred Heart's first pastor, Father Downey, resigned because of poor health. He died Jan 22, 1926 and is buried in his family plot in Plattsburg, Mo.

He was succeeded by Rev Rudolph B. Groener who was pastor for ten years. After ten years he was given a leave of absence because of illness.

The Reverend Thomas Kinsella was the third pastor of Sacred Heart Parish. He came in December of '1911 and in 1914 was transferred. Father Kinsella is buried in the Ursuline Cemetery in Paola, Kansas.

He was replaced by the Reverend Maurice Burk who only remained until 1916. During his pastorate, the present rectory was built in 1915. Father Burk was the fourth pastor of Sacred Heart and is buried in Mt Calvary Cemetery in Kansas City, Kansas.

Having returned from the West, Father Groener returned to Sacred Heart and replaced Father Burk in 1916 and remained as pastor until June, 1919. During this time he worked to reduce the debt incurred by the building of the rectory. He is buried beside his mother in Mt Calvary Cemetery in Leavenworth.

On June 5, 1919, the Fr Patrick J. Smith arrived in Leavenworth to begin his work as pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus Church. His first work on coming to the parish, where he served for five years, was to complete the payment of the debt on the new rectory and to start a drive for a new church. Upon his departure in 1924, the books showed that he had collected \$1954.01 for this purpose! He is buried at Mt Calvary Cemetery, Leavenworth.

The Reverend Michael J O'Farrell became the sixth pastor of Sacred Heart on December 1, 1924 and served until 1934. His primary mission was to continue to collect the necessary funds to build a much needed new and larger church.

The cornerstone of the new church was laid by Bishop John Ward on May 16, 1926, and the church was dedicated with solemn ceremonies on November 24, 1927. Our present church structure is of Romanesque style and is an admirable work of art. The parishioners contributed \$25,340.26 and \$38,000 was borrowed. The Green Construction Co of Lawrence built the church which was designed by a local architect, Myron Feth.

Sacred Heart of Jesus Church was constructed in the Romanesque style. Romanesque designates a style of Western architecture that developed from Roman principles. It reached its height from about the 11th to 13th centuries, and was characterized by rounded arches, massive columns, and elaborate ornamentation.

The first child baptized in the new church occurred on December 5, 1926. She was Elizabeth Joan Schindling (Cook) who is still an active member of the parish. The first marriage was that of August Kersten and Theresa Peet, which took place on August 16, 1927.

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At the close of 1926 the financial statement showed the debt of the parish to be \$42,000. By the time Father O'Farrell left the parish in 1934, the debt had been reduced to \$31,700.

On May 1, 1934, Father O'Farrell was transferred. He later retired in California where he died in 1947 and is buried there.

He was followed by the Reverend Joseph F Selting who remained as pastor of Sacred Heart Parish for 28 Years. Under the spiritual guidance of Father Selting, the parish grew in size and added many new additions to the parish facilities.

The Golden Jubilee of Sacred Heart Parish was celebrated in 1935 by having a two-week Mission. It was under the tenure of Father Selting that Sacred Heart Church was consecrated in solemn ceremonies by the Most Reverend George J Donnelly, Bishop of Kansas City, Kansas on October 26, 1948.

From 1950 to 1960 there were many improvements made in the parish. The Sisters' Convent, at 521 Linn Street, was built in 1950 of brick that matched the church. Seven Sisters took up residence in the convent on August 18, 1950. As soon as the convent was completed, donations came in for a new school. Lots had to be bought to provide space for the school building and playground facilities.

A campaign to raise monies to build a new school began on "Pledge Sunday", January 23, 1955. The goal of the parish was to raise \$110,000. After contacting each family in the parish, pledges totaled \$130,499.21. It was during this building campaign that Father Selting was elevated to the rank of Domestic Prelate, with the title of Right Reverend Monsignor, on January 23, 1955. "Monsignor" is a title of honor for a priest. It originated in feudal Europe when clergy designated with this courtly title of distinction were considered to be connected in some way with the papal household. It is still a practice in some dioceses for a bishop to recommend and pope to approve this designation for certain diocesan clergy.

On October 2, 1955, Msgr Selting turned the first spade of earth at the ground breaking ceremonies for the new school. Ten months and twenty-four days later the school was dedicated on August 26, 1956 by Archbishop Edward J Hunkeler.

This new school - replacing a structure which had served at various times as a church, school and parish hall, and which was constructed in 1886 – had been erected at a cost of approximately \$200,000.

Msgr Selting died in September of 1962. His faith and dedication to Sacred Heart Parish will never be forgotten.

Recent years have brought dynamic changes to Sacred Heart Parish. The first session of the Vatican II Council met in October, 1962, shortly after Msgr Selting's death. His successor, Reverend Henry Grosdider, appointed pastor in 1962, had to cope with the tremendous impact of the changes in the Church brought about by the Vatican II Council.

Fr Grosdider instituted the weekly bulletin for the parish so that people might read about & understand the many changes in the church as well as be informed about parish activities. During Father Grosdider's tenure the rectory was refurbished and the old school building that had been the old church was finally razed, making room for a large parking lot and playground area between the church and the school. Prior to his departure, plans were underway for the redecoration of the church.

On July 1, 1971, Reverend William Landwehr was assigned as pastor. For ten years this cheerful, saintly priest and his sister, Isabelle Landwehr who served as his housekeeper, ministered to the people of the parish with devotion and love. Father Landwehr's rapport with children is still remembered by many to this day. Fr Landwehr initiated "CCD," the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine to the parish where lay teachers now began to share some of the burden of teaching religion to children that were enrolled in the public school system.

In 1979, Sacred Heart School became Xavier Catholic Primary School as part of the city-wide consolidation of Catholic schools to achieve optimum educational efficiency with minimum expenditure. The former Sacred Heart School now housed the first & second grades.

Father Landwehr's health was failing rapidly in 1979 but he continued to carry out his duties. The parish was deeply saddened by the death of Father Landwehr in February, 1981. At this time Rev Charles McGlenn was appointed temporary administrator until a new pastor could be named.

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On July 1, 1981 Rev Gerald E Sheeds, better known as "Father Jerry", was appointed pastor of both Sacred Heart and St Casimir Parishes. A major concern that he carried was the responsibility of bringing the two parishes closer together by having one Pastoral Council and sharing personnel in order to serve both parish communities. He was also instrumental in carrying forth the spirit and directives of the Second Vatican Council.

Under his 5 year tenure as pastor, protective glass was placed on the outdoor stained glass windows in the church, and additional playground and parking areas south of the school were made available. A Rodgers electronic organ was also purchased. The small school cafeteria was also air-conditioned.

On July 1, 1986, Father William M "Bill" Haegelin was transferred as pastor of St Lawrence Church in Easton & St Joseph of the Valley Church in rural Leavenworth County as the new pastor of Sacred Heart & St Casimir Parishes. "Father Bill" was no stranger to the people of Sacred Heart Parish since he had been sent to "help out" in 1983 for a 6 month period while Fr Jerry took a short sabbatical.

By this time, both parish facilities were in need of much repair. Father Bill rolled up his sleeves and with the collaboration of the parish finance-maintenance committee and the Pastoral Council, began a strategic plan for the future that included many improvements to the parish plant & spiritual life for Sacred Heart and St Casimir parishes.

On January 26, 1997 Father Gary P. Applegate became Administrator of Sacred Heart & St. Casimir Parishes until priest selections in July. He was then appointed the Pastor in July of 1997. Fr. Gary was the pastor of Sacred Heart & St. Casimir Parishes until July of 2003.

On July 20, 2003, Father Phillip J. Winkelbauer became the new pastor of Sacred Heart & St Casimir Parishes. In 2006 both parishes were joined into one parish. Currently, the Sacred Heart-St. Casimir Parish community has a single pastoral council, finance council, pastor, program plan and staff. Both church sites are maintained and Mass is offered weekly at both churches. Programs, committees, and organizations are open to all parishioners, regardless of the church site of Mass attendance, and participation is welcomed and encouraged.