

St Francis D'Assisi Detroit

Founded 1889

- **LENT 2012**

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Our Story

There are many stories about the founding of our parish, none of which can truly be confirmed because there were no real records kept.

If one talks to the families of the "Founding Fathers" you will be told of numerous meetings held to decide whether a new church was needed and where it should be built. Based on these stories, the actual founding of the parish would have taken place in 1888. These stories could be corroborated by a newspaper article in one of the polish papers entitled: The History of Detroit Polonia Upon the 250th Anniversary of Detroit.

What we do have are the minutes of a meeting held on February 24,1889 at St. Casmir's parish and a second meeting held on February 28,1889 at the home of a Mr. Joseph Malicld. It was at this second meeting that six lots on Wesson and Buchanan and six lots on Campbell and Buchanan were purchased for the amount of \$2,900 with a down payment of \$275.00.In 1889 the City of Detroit Directory showed that Buchanan ran from Grand River Avenue to Junction. Wesson was not listed in the directory. Michigan Avenue was a street of wooden planks and only 30 feet wide. There was a creek running down what is now Military Avenue.

The area where the church was built had been a wheat field and in recent years had changed to vegetable gardens for homes nearby. This western border of the city was overflowing with new people and new homes. Most of the people were Polish and attended mass at St. Casmir, St. Boniface and also St. Albertus. As time passed, the distance proved tiring for the adults and difficult for the children. The people realized that the churches were becoming overcrowded as well. So looking to the future, they decided it was time for a new church and school.

When the first committee was formed, they chose the area of Wesson and Buchanan over a previously suggested area of Gilbert and Clayton, known as the clay banks. A few men went to Bishop Foley and told him of their plans and asked for a Polish priest to aid them. The Bishop assigned Fr. Romuald J. Byzewski to assist the men in starting the new parish. Fr. Paul Gutowski, pastor of St. Casmir's also aided the group in their quest. It did not take long for Fr. Byzewski and the newly formed committee to choose a Polish builder by the name of Martin Landczakowski to build their church. The architect was Henry Engelbert.

In June 1890, the cornerstone was blessed and with that, construction was begun on the first building. It was built on the corner of Buchanan and Campbell. The first floor was the school; the second floor served as the church and the basement was the hall. The church seated 700 people. The cost was about \$35,000 for the new brick building. It was the fifth Polish Parish in Detroit, the second on the west side.

On April 19, 1891, the Polish Catholic societies formed a procession at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Twenty-Third Street to await the arrival of the Bishop and the clergy accompanying him. The procession consisted of the Polish Commanderies of the Knights of St. John, Polish Civic Societies and two bands of music. They led the Bishop and his entourage to the new Polish Catholic Church of St. Francis to bless and dedicate it. After the Bishop had sanctified the walls of the edifice, there was a great rush and soon all available space was occupied. The services were from morning till 2 p.m.

In 1891, the first Confirmation took place in the new church.

In 1892, a four-classroom school was started with 282 children attending under the direction of four teaching nuns.

In 1898, nine years after he had been appointed as the first pastor of the new

St. Francis Parish, Fr. R. Byzewski was transferred to Sweetest Heart of Mary parish.

Fr. Kieruj then built a new and large school, a larger rectory, a convent for the nuns, parish hall and other buildings. The school has 22 classrooms. The hall would be the center of activity.

April 23, 1919, Fr. Felix Kieruj passed away. The tremendous amount of work in the building and maintaining the various functions of the parish took its toll on him. He had gone to Colorado Springs, Colorado to recuperate. It was there that he died. During the period that Fr. Kieruj was away, Fr. Baweja had administered to the needs of the parish.

The body of Fr. Kieruj was brought back to Detroit and lay in state in St. Francis Church. Three days later the Right Rev. Michael J. Gallagher, Bishop of the Diocese of Detroit with the Rev. Fr. F. Gzella as honorary deacon, and the Rev. Fr. A. Grudzinski as the honorary subdeacon, sang the requiem Mass.

After the Mass the body of Fr. Kieruj was escorted by the people of St. Francis Parish, who walked in a solemn procession, along with the church societies and a police escort to the Michigan Central Railroad Station, where it was shipped to La Salle, Illinois, for burial.

May 24, 1919, Fr. Alexander Grudzinski became the pastor of St. Francis and a change was to transpire. The church was \$160,000 in debt. The hall would no longer be the center of parish activities. The people were expected to conduct themselves with dignity and piety. He begged and ordered the people to give generously to the collection basket. His plan worked. With a great deal of determination, Fr. Grudzinski paid off the debt in nine years. Many considered it a miracle because he did not hold any bazaars, festivals or any other fund raising activities for this purpose.

On June 3, 1928, in preparation for the consecration of the church, a preparatory service was held. The Rt. Rev. Gallagher, Bishop of the Diocese, placed in a reliquary the relics of St. Timothy and St. Teophilus, three grains of incense and an attestation written on parchment. The reliquary then was placed in an urn and a number of candles were lit to burn through the night while Matins and Lauds would be recited.

June 4, 1928 at 7 a.m. began the long and solemn ceremony of the consecration of St. Francis of Assisi Church. About 2,000 Catholics of the Diocese of Detroit, clergy and laity participated in a ceremony which had been performed here only about a half dozen times in the century the diocese had been in existence - the consecration of a church building.

This ceremony took place exactly twenty-three years after the present church was dedicated.

St. Francis D'Assisi Church is only one of three churches consecrated in the Archdiocese of Detroit, and at the time was only the fifth church in the nation to be consecrated.

July 3, 1939, Fr. Maximillian Gannas took over the duties of pastor of St. Francis. There were no debts on the church but there were many necessary repairs needed to the church buildings. The church was painted inside. The lower part of the hall was rebuilt and renovated and the upper portion was redecorated. Fr. Gannas renovated the three altars in the church and the communion rail. He wanted everything looking its best for the Golden jubilee that was to come.

October 13, 1940, the Golden jubilee of St Francis was celebrated. The most Rev. Edward Mooney, Archbishop of Detroit, presided at the Mass, sung by the Pastor, Rev. Fr. Gannas. More than 1,000 parishioners and clergymen participated. In 1941 there was expectation and celebration. In October of that year the Rosary Society of St. Francis celebrated its Golden Jubilee.

The United States was at war and many of the young men of the parish were enlisting in the service. As the men enlisted, those left behind began to do their part to help. For Valentine's Day the school children sent 500 greeting cards and 200 games and puzzles to soldiers in army camps throughout the country. For Easter they prepared 2,200 presents for the soldiers of St. Francis.

They also purchased \$1,045 in defense stamps, contributed \$31 for Masses, for the soldiers, and gave \$78.50 to the missions. The latter project was done in a five-week period. There were many other projects to follow.

Rallies were being held to get parishioners involved in the war effort. On the hall, movies were shown of the fighting and bombing to encourage people to sign up as Air Wardens.

It was also during this time that Fr. Gannas encouraged the men that were left behind to become ushers and to form an Ushers Club.

The Polish Roman Catholic Union marked its 70th Anniversary in St. Francis Hall in October 1942. Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts from St. Francis and St. Andrew performed for the group. Among the guest speakers were Fr. Gannas,

Gov. Murray D. Van Waggoner, Senator Brown, Judges O'Brien and Moynihan and Msgr. Krzyzosiak, Rector of Orchard Lake Seminary. It was considered quite an honor for Fr. Gannas and the parish to host this affair.

1943 thru 1944 the parish remained active doing their share for the war effort. Fr. Gannas and the parishioners, like other parishes were involved in the war bond effort. In March of 1944 St. Francis received a War Bond because St. Francis led the churches on the west side with sales of \$51,800 in bonds in the fourth war loan drive.

In 1945 the war ended and as the men of the parish returned home, things began to return to normal.

1949 proved to be a bad year for the parish. A life size statue of St. Francis was ordered for the parish grounds. The artist that was hired to create the statue changed studios. This led the parish and the Archdiocese into litigations against the studios and the artist. Eventually the statue was finished and now graces the parish grounds.

1955 saw major repairs and alterations done to the parish buildings. The convent was remodeled to give each one of the sisters a separate sleeping room. A change from the large dormitory that made the upper floor of the convent. New steps and doors were placed on the church during this time.

In the mid 1960's permission was granted to paint the church. Archbishop Deardon in a letter to the pastor reminded him of the special nature of the church building. He reminded the parish that this was one of three consecrated churches in the Archdiocese and the cost of painting was to be well over \$60,000. (At that time consecrated churches were not allowed to be in any form of debt, for the fear that a consecrated church no longer be a place of worship.)

During this time the city of Detroit underwent major population changes. People began to move in large numbers from the inner city to the suburbs. The reasons for the population shift is beyond the scope of this history. It will however play a role in the late 1980's when all inner city parishes are studied for their viability.

In 1970 a marble altar was placed in the sanctuary to bring the church in line with all the liturgical changes made by the Second Vatican Council.

The relics that were placed in the High Altar during the consecration ceremonies in 1936 were moved to the new altar. It was also during this time the communion rail was modified to give a better view of the altar and sanctuary. The age worn marble floors of the sanctuary were also covered in red carpet. The crucifix which hung from the right pillar of the communion rail was moved to the rear entrance of the church. With decreasing attendance at weekday masses, the rise in cost of heating such a large church, the old caretakers house was turned into a chapel where weekday masses were to be celebrated during the winter months.

In March of 1985 all inner city parishes we were asked to take part in the City Task Force. The task force was to make recommendations to the Archbishop Szoka for dealing with the problems of inner city churches. In 1986 a Self-Study was done by the parish to determine the viability of the Parish. This study was to be used by the Task Force to make recommendations to the Archbishop whether to keep the church open or close it. With declining vocations to the religious life the School Sisters of St. Joseph had to say good bye to the parish. This was not good timing. It only fueled the speculation that St. Francis was among the growing list of city churches slated for closure. An announcement was made on September 28, 1988 only one year away from the Centennial Celebration, it was determined that St. Francis was a viable parish and that it should remain open.

The People of St. Francis had much to celebrate. The parish received the gift of a young and vibrant pastor just in time for the celebration.

The people of Saint Francis D'Assisi are a proud and strong people. If you take a look at the history of the parish, the City of Detroit, the United States, and the world. This parish is a testimony to the human spirit inspired by the HOLY SPIRIT. This community has survived; two world wars, the great depression, and two race riots. If our church building could only talk what lessons could it teach us about ourselves, who we are as a community, and what we want for future generations.

STO LAT!

(One hundred Years!)