

CHURCH OF ST. CASIMIR, JOHNSTOWN, PA

(Helen Lech, *Naród Polski*, February 22, 1996)

Johnstown, PA - The early history of St. Casimir Parish is similar to that of other Polish parishes established in the New World near the turn of the century. The deplorable conditions existing under the domination of Austria, Russia, and Prussia, which held Poland in captivity for 100 years, led masses of Polish people to seek refuge in a land of opportunity and freedom. Arriving here to establish new homes, they were confronted with many hardships: they found themselves in a strange lan'd surrounded by strange people, speaking a strange language. They yearned for a means by which they could seek God in their own simple, beautiful Polish manner.

Their early needs were fulfilled by embracing membership in St. Stephen Parish, a Slovak-speaking congregation. While attending this Church, the Poles organized St. Casimir Lodge in 1892. This organization formulated plans for the establishment of a parish for the Polish-speaking people. On November 22, 1901, two lots were purchased upon which the church and convent are currently located.

At the request of Bishop Eugene Garvey, first Bishop of the newly formed Diocese of Altoona, the Pastoral duties were assigned to Fr. Bronislaus Dembinski, a priest from the Diocese of Scranton, PA. Soon after his arrival the construction of the basement church and rectory, which is the present convent, was begun.

Not two months elapsed from the establishment of the parish when a setback occurred: forty-one bread earners of the congregation were victims in the disastrous Johnstown Mine explosion. The names of the deceased miners are inscribed on a cross as a monument in St. Casimir Cemetery.

The rectory (the present convent building) was completed in the fall of 1902. The laying of the cornerstone for the basement of the church took place on September 4, 1902, with the first Mass being said in the new church on the first or second Sunday of Advent of that year. Bishop Garvey dedicated the church on December 21, 1902.

In January of 1903, the Parochial School was opened in the basement of the building, and was separated from the church by a partition. In 1906, work on the completion of the church structure was renewed; Cambria Steel Company donated the steel and bricks needed for the construction. The first bells were purchased and blessed on February 24, 1907. The completed church was dedicated by Bishop Garvey on August 8, 1907.

An extraordinary privilege was granted to the church on February 24, 1907, by Pope Pius X, who was later canonized: this was the "*Toties Quoties*" or Portiuncula Indulgence, given to parishioners and others who make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and fulfill the required conditions.

In 1910, Fr. Dembinski built a chapel at the request of the people of Conemaugh, which later developed into Assumption Parish. Among its previous pastors was Fr. Walter Kurdziel, and its present pastor is his nephew Fr. Dennis Kurdziel, both native sons of St. Casimir parish.

On February 27, 1911, lots were purchased for the construction of the current rectory. In March of 1913, work was begun on the parochial school building, which was dedicated on December 7, 1913. By this time, the school was staffed by the Franciscan Sisters of Kunegunda.

In December of 1920, money was raised for the statue of the Pieta, which was installed in the church in the Fall of 1921.

After doing a magnificent job, Fr. Dembinski left for Poland in May of 1923, never to return. He became chaplain of the Felician Sister's College in Warsaw, and died on February 27, 1949.

The assistants who served with Fr. Dembinski were Reverends A. Baran, V. J. Szyperski, Joseph Wozny, Ignatius Pilz, John Dekarski, Stanislaus Wolf, J. A. Figlewski, and Michael Mackowiak, who served as administrator of the parish for two years, until the new pastor was appointed.

The second Bishop of the Diocese, His Excellency John McCort, appointed Fr. Ladislaus Finke as pastor in March of 1925. In that same year, he added a second floor to the school. As late as the 1950s, children of St. Casimir studied about Poland and the Polish language in the school.

Along with the rest of the community, the parish suffered through the calamity of the flood of March 20, 1936. Damage to the parish was minimal, thanks to the foresight of Fr. Dembinski, who had constructed the church with the possibility of floods in mind.

Fr. Finke passed away to his heavenly reward on June 16, 1951, at the age of 82. During his tenure, he was assisted by Reverends William Schrall, W. J. Babula, Stephen Lewczyk, Casimir Ossowski, Serafin Stachowicz, Bronislaus Worsa, and Anthony Czeslawski.

Bishop Richard Guilty appointed Fr. Casimir Ossowski to be the next pastor of St. Casimir's. He had established the Holy Name Society in the parish while an assistant in 1939; he also organized the Parent Educators Group and Guild to assist the parochial school. In the mid sixties, the school became part of the West End Catholic Schools, a consolidation of the eight parishes from the West End of Johnstown.

On July 20, 1977, the city suffered its third major flood. Once again, St. Casimir sustained minimal damage. The church basement was totally remodeled in time to celebrate the parish's Diamond Anniversary in December of that year.

Assistants who served with Fr. Ossowski included Reverends Bronislaus Worsa, Anthony Czeslawski, Stanley Zubricki, John Halka, Francis Zywicki, Bernard Przybocki, Lambert Sidor, William Rosenbaum, and Deacons John Little and Robert Mazur.

In September, 1987, Msgr. Ossowski retired, becoming Pastor Emeritus, and Bishop Joseph Adamec appointed Fr. George Koharchik as pastor. Fr. Henry Stange served his Deacon assignment at St. Casimir's, and was ordained while here. Fr. Joseph Maurizio served as part time Parochial Vicar at St. Casimir Church.

Native sons of the Parish who have become priests include Frs. Walter Kurdziel, Dennis Kurdziel, Anthony Pollack, and Eugene Gomulka. Many other sons and daughters entered religious life.

The church was constructed in the Romanesque style with the exterior of stone construction and the interior faced with a warm, bull brick. The altars, altar rail and massive pillars in the nave are made of white Carrera marble from Italy; the same marble is used in the walls of the Sanctuary.

The main altar consists of large and small columns with a crucifix on top. At the foot of the crucifix are statues of the three St. Marys. To the right of the altar is a statue of Saint Casimir, the Prince of Poland and Patron of the Parish. A statue of St. Adalbert Woyciech, the first Bishop of Poland, is to the left of the altar. The center of altar is built in a half circle. Around the main table are many small chapels holding statues of different saints. The Tabernacle is located at the center of the altar between the chapels. There are five stained glass windows above the altar showing the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary. The Sorrowful Mystery are along the right wall of the Church, facing the Altar. The Glorious Mysteries are on the left wall.

Above the left side altar is a statue of the Sacred Heart with St. Margaret Mary kneeling before Him. Above the right side altar is a statue of Mary holding the child Jesus, with St. Dominic kneeling before them.

Six columns of oak wood hold the upper part of the six-cornered pulpit which came from Rome, as did many other appointments in the church. At the opposite side of the church is a replica of Michelangelo's Pieta, sculpted in Italy and brought to this country in 1921.

The stained glass windows were also made in Italy. On the right, from floor to ceiling, is a round window depicting St. Barbara, patron of coal miners, because she suffered extreme torture in an under-ground prison. The window, donated by the coal miners, is in memory of the 1902 explosion in Rolling Mill Mine where 41 parishioners lost their lives.

On the left side the window depicts St. Florian, patron of the first Polish immigrants in Johnstown who worked in the local steel mills by the melting iron and red hot rails. Florian was a Roman soldier who became a Christian and was burned on a red hot grate and thrown in the river. This window was donated by the steelworkers.

The Stations of the Cross are also marble and came from Italy. The organ was reconditioned by the Cannarsa Organ Company of Hollidaysburg, PA, in 1959-60. It is a two-manual electro pneumatic action organ; many of the pipes from the original organ in the church were used in the reconstruction.

For many years, the music for the High Mass on Sunday was provided by the Kolko Młodzieży Polskiej (KMP), the Polish Youth Singing Society, which was composed of many members of the parish who wished to use their talents to praise God in song.

Submitted by Helen Lech, National Director of PRCUA District #3 Photo by Helen Lech