A historical sketch of the Holy Rosary Parish in Passaic, N. J.

(Pamiętnik Parafii Matki Boskiej Różańcowej wydany w 10-letnią rocznicę istnienia (1918-1928),
Passaic, NJ)

The thought of organizing a second Polish Catholic Parish in Passaic, N. J. arose in the minds of the people in the year 1908, at the time when immigration from Poland was at its height and the St. Joseph Church was too small to accommodate all the faithful.

Why this attempt failed, the writer will not try to explain. It must be stated, however, that in consequence of this failure some laymen incorporated a parish under the title of "The Blessed Virgin, Queen of the Crown of Poland," and purchased a plot opposite the present church. All these transactions were made without the proper sanction of the Church authorities. These attempts came to a sad end, for the plot was taken over by other interests.

It seemed that in February 1912, with the death of the late lamented Father Valentine Chlebowski, Pastor of St. Joseph Church, the organization of a second Polish parish would come to a successful realization. But nothing was done. And it was a great pity; for the enthusiasm of the people at this time could have been used to great advantage. In the year 1913 this cause took a more promising turn, for in the spring of this year The Right Rev. Bishop O'Connor directed Father Ignatius Szudrowicz to organize a new parish. He however resigned shortly afterwards, having first incorporated the new parish with John Zurawski, James Serafin and Joseph Kupiszewski under the title of "Holy Rosary Roman Catholic Church in Passaic, N J," in conformity with the State Laws of New Jersey and the Diocesan regulations. Father Julius Manteuffel, pastor of St. Joseph Church, was made the administrator of this nominal parish without any boundary lines, and assigned for the use of the future parish a part of the Sunday collections taken at the Masses celebrated at this time in St. Joseph parish hall.

These conditions continued to exist until May 1917, when Father Stanislaus J. Kruczek, pastor of St. Michael Church, Kingsland, N. J., was appointed by the Right Rev. Bishop pastor of the new Holy Rosary Parish. But already on the second day i.e. May 21 the Bishop withdrew his decision "on account of circumstances"—as he said—"independent of me." Finally February 27th, 1918, on the advice of the late Vicar General, the Right Rev. Mons. Sheppard, the Right Rev. Bishop outlined the boundaries for the new parish, and for the second time irrevocably appointed Father Kruczek as pastor.

A difficult task awaited the newly appointed pastor. There were many difficulties of various natures, and the greatest was that the people in consequence of former disappointments lost hope almost entirely in the formation of another parish. The commencement of this work required great tact and prudence on account of the psychic nature of the people, who were brought to a state of confusion in religious matters by constant agitations of the apostates, by innumerable meetings and by divisions among themselves on war orientation.

A frame building, converted later into a Sister's house, and six lots formerly purchased, were insufficient for the needs of the new parish, which had no church, no
school, no rectory; and moreover all this property had insufficient valuation for the banks as a loan security. But the worst situation to contend with was that the banks were reluctant to give the necessary credit, for they had little confidence in the ability of the Polish people's cooperation in Passaic with their pastor, as a result of some happenings in former years. It must be also remembered that this was the time of the World War. The Government's permission was necessary for making loans and purchasing building material. All this entailed much trouble and anxiety. With God's help, however, all these difficulties were overcome.

As in the year 1913, so also now, the lay leaders made an attempt to drag the pastor into the quagmire of fruitless public discussions, but without success, because on the day of his nomination lie rented a hall for a temporary Chapel. This temporary place of worship was blessed by the Rt. Rev. Mons. Kernan on Sunday, March 5th, and in spite of severe frost a great multitude of the faithful witnessed this ceremony. From this moment on, with the grace of God, enthusiasm and the spirit of generosity grew to such an extent that in a few weeks after the opening of the perils the people contributed at the Easter Services the unheard-of sum of Ten Thousand Dollars. This unusual generosity had its good effects. The Polish people of Passaic regained their good name and respect both with the church authorities and with the local banks. After the Easter holidays everything was done to hasten the erection of the new church. F. J. Schwarz was commissioned to make the plans, and the pastor went out every evening from house to house to take up subscriptions for the new building.

After obtaining permission from the Government for the purchasing of building material and for obtaining a loan offered by a local bank of Passaic, actual work on the new building was commenced July 18th, 1918. Mons. James Mooney, rector of the diocesan seminary, blessed the plot and dug the first shovel of earth for the foundation.

Work on the new building progressed with an accelerated tempo, and on February 9th, 1919, the Rt. Rev. Bishop blessed the basement to be used as a temporary church; and from this day on services were held therein. This joyful moment for the people and the new place of worship were sanctified by a two-weeks mission. A new affliction visited the embryonic parish, for a strike broke out in the city and lasted three months.

In the spring of 1919 work was resumed on the building. The new building would contain a church with a seating capacity for 1,000 people and a parish school of seventeen class rooms, which was opened on February 1st, 1920. This new structure was dedicated January 2nd, 1921, by the Most Rev. Archbishop Felix Guerra of Santiago, Cuba, who was visiting at this time with the Rev. pastor. He also sang the Pontifical High Mass. Father Ernest Matzel, S.J. preached an appropriate sermon. The parish was also honored by the presence of the famous artist, Wojciech Kossak, and Adam Didur, who sang at the church services.

Four lots located between the church and the Passaic river were acquired in the beginning of the year 1920, and in the Spring of the same year work on the new rectory was begun. The year 1921 and the first half of 1922 were taken up with the finishing of the
details in the buildings, organization of parish activities, and the payment of debts. In Lent a two weeks mission was given, and in May Confirmation was held. On Sunday, June 11th, Father Francis Kowalczyk, a newly ordained priest and a member of the congregation, said the first Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Humanly speaking one could now expect a peaceful and a favorable development of the parish. The Almighty, however, in His inscrutable ways decreed otherwise. A great calamity befell the new parish. A fire broke out June 12th, 1922, in a neighboring house and destroyed the recently completed church building. In an hour the fine church and splendid school were reduced to ruins and smoldering debris. This calamity filled the hearts of the parishioners with sadness and sorrow, for their work, efforts and generosity were destroyed by a merciless element. Besides the material loss, which reached the sum of $150,000, the parish suffered a greater moral loss. The parish, deprived now of church and school, was disorganized and the faithful were in a spirit of depression. With tearful eyes the people attended Mass on the following Sunday after the fire, in the basement of the ruined church building. But hope in a better future was not abandoned. Within a week's time the faithful contributed about six thousand dollars, which, together with the money received from the Insurance Companies, was used to rebuild and restore the church and school the very same year; and, besides, several lots made vacant by the disastrous fire were purchased. On April 8th, 1923, after a complete rebuilding and restoration, the building was dedicated by the Right Rev. Bishop Ernest Coppo of Kimberley, Australia, a friend of the Rev. pastor, who also pontificated on this occasion. The sermon was preached by Father Ernest Matzel, S.J.

As a result of hard work and of the nerve wrecking experience of the disastrous fire, the pastor's health gave out. He was afflicted by a serious illness and was made inactive for over a year. But with the regaining of his health he again returned to his former activity. He
purchased a fine electric organ for the church for the sum of $15,000. This new organ was blessed on October 4th.

In the year 1926 preparations were made for the erection of the last building, a new home for the Ven. Sisters, but a strike of Bolshevik origin lasting for over a year, interrupted this undertaking. The strike leaders having no respect for anyone, published an unfounded attack against the pastor. But the truth prevailed. The same agitators in an open letter retracted their attack and offered an apology.

The year 1926 will be remembered forever in the annals of this parish, for it became indissolubly united with the name of that great and holy Bishop, John F. Cieplak, who chose the Holy Rosary Rectory for his headquarters during his sojourn in America. Here he received his nomination for the Archbishop of Wilno; here January 22nd, 1926, he solemnly pontificated in the presence of the Rt. Rev. Bishop Joseph Schrembs, many Monsignori and the Rt. Rev. Vicar General J. A. Duffy. By the choice of the Polish clergy Father S. J. Kruczek was made the official traveling companion to the Archbishop in his journeys in America. The pastor assumed this task with the permission of his Ordinary, for which a written petition was made by Bishop Paul Rhode. From overwork and unabating zeal in the work for Christ and love for his people the Archbishop succumbed to a severe illness and died shortly afterwards. He fell like a soldier on duty, after visiting 376 parishes in the U. S. and fortifying the faithful in the true faith. With sobs and tears on February 20th, the parish tendered their last farewell to the mortal remains of the Archbishop by a solemn funeral in this church. The funeral services were conducted by the Rt. Rev. Bishop Schrembs of Cleveland, Ohio. The eulogy was delivered by the Right Rev. Thomas McLaughlin, rector of the Diocesan Seminary. Father Gabriel Kraus of Philadelphia addressed the mourners in Polish. A great multitude of people, with the Polish Ambassador, the Hon. John Ciechanowski, and Consul General the Hon. Gruszka, among a flood of lighted candles, flowers and banners, bemoaned the death of that great Archbishop.

In the year of 1927 the last building, a splendid convent for the Ven. Sisters, was erected. This building was solemnly blessed by the Rt. Rev. J. A. Duffy, Administrator of the diocese. The sermon in Polish was preached by Father A. Warol, S.J., the well known Jesuit missionary and the founder and editor of the Polish "Sacred Heart Messenger." June 12th of the same year on the fifth anniversary of the great fire, a large bronze statue of the Sacred Heart, erected on a granite base in the parish garden, was unveiled and blessed; at this ceremony the entire parish was also dedicated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. In the fall of the same year as a crowning achievement of all the parish activities during the last ten years of its existence, the work of painting and decorating the interior of the church was begun.

Everything was done and built that a well organized parish should have. From small and insignificant beginnings arises a beautiful picture of the parish buildings, the value of which exceeds half a million dollars, and all erected by the toil and generosity of the parishioners and without any outside help.

In order to properly commemorate and glorify the tenth anniversary of the parish a Committee was organized. Through the sponsorship of this committee several fine celebrations were held and a Jubilee Fund of Ten Thousand Dollars was subscribed for by the church members.

In order to complete the picture the zealous and persevering work of trustees, collectors, members of the Third Order of St. Francis, Holy Rosary Society, Children of Mary, Ladies' Auxiliary, Young Men's Club, St. Theresa Club, and a long line of others must here be mentioned. Due credit must be also given to the Ven. Felician Sisters for their quiet but most efficient work in the school, church and in the entire parish.

Thanking our Lord and the Blessed Virgin for all the graces and blessings, the parish extends words of acknowledgment and gratitude to all the good and generous members, as also to the former curates the Rev. Fathers: W. Slawinski, J. Pokorny, J. Taranowicz, P. Taborski, but especially to the present curates, the Rev. Fathers Francis Kowalczyk and Edward Polan for their zealous work in the parish.

Every Polish Catholic Parish in America is the center not only of religious life but also of every national, organizational, social and cultural activity in the given locality.

The last year of the world war and the following years formed a veritable heroic period in the history of the Polish people of the Holy Rosary Church. Under the stimulating appeal of the Rev. Pastor an efficient Parish Citizens' Committee, composed from the representative members was formed. Besides heavy contributions for their own church the parishioners made also generous donations for national, humanitarian and benevolent causes. To all the drives during the World War the parishioners responded with unusual generosity. Within a month after Father Kruczek became pastor of the Church a sum of One Thousand Dollars was contributed by the people of the parish to the campaign of the Arlington Catholic Protector. At no time throughout these years was the parish dispensed from Diocesan collections or assessments. It can be said without any fear of contradiction
that no one who was in need and knocked at the door of this congregation's mercy, was ever sent away without help and assistance.

As citizens of this country the parishioners performed their duty faithfully: they purchased Liberty Bonds and War Saving Stamps in one week for $368,000.

Great progress was also made during these ten years in culture and education, as is proved by the great number of young people attending various institutions of higher learning, colleges and universities, as also by a considerable number of boys and girls who are studying instrumental music.

To foster physical training, since in a sound body there is a sound spirit, clubs have been organized both for boys and girls for the pursuance of social and athletic activities. These clubs are growing successfully.

As can be seen from this fragmentary narration, the Polish people of the Holy Rosary Church of Passaic have labored during the last ten years to their knowledge and ability for God's greater honor and glory. Whether all that could be done was accomplished, and whether it was well done, let the impartial generations of the future decide.