

# HISTORY OF SAINT CASIMIR'S PARISH, JOHNSTOWN, PA

(Pamiętnik Złotego Jubileuszu Parafii Św. Kazimierza 1902-1952, Johnstown, PA)



The early history of Saint Casimir's Parish is similar to that of other Polish parishes established in the New World during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. The deplorable conditions existing under the domination of Austria, Russia, and Prussia which held Poland in captivity for one hundred years, led masses of Polish people to seek refuge in a land of opportunity and freedom.

Young men and women pioneered this search for peace and happiness. Arriving here to establish new homes, they were confronted with many hardships. They found themselves in a strange land surrounded by strange people using a strange language. Is it any wonder that their Polish souls yearned for a means by which they could seek God and His Blessed Mother in their own simple yet beautiful Polish manner.

The settlers of Johnstown and vicinity likewise, experienced this urge. Not privileged with a Polish parish, they chose the best solution available, by embracing membership in Saint Stephen's Parish, a Slovak speaking congregation. While attending this church, the Poles organized Saint Casimir's Lodge in 1892. Shortly,

this organization formulated plans for the establishment of a parish for the Polish speaking people. The founders of this Lodge became founders of our parish. They are pictured below.



A few years later a delegation was sent to consult Father Kopera at Windber about the procedure in establishing a parish. Father Kopera advised the delegation to postpone the undertaking until the new diocese would be formed, namely, the Diocese of Altoona.

After the establishment of the Altoona Diocese, some unknown event brought the new Bishop to Saint John Gaulbert's Church in Johnstown. Taking advantage of the opportunity, a small delegation took the available papers and presented them to His Excellency hoping to obtain his permission for establishing a parish. As tradition relates, not only did His Excellency grant permission but, also, encouraged them to inaugurate a building fund for this venture. We presume, this meeting took place in October of 1901, because the collection recorded in the parish financial book is that of November 3, 1901, at which time an amount of \$284.45 was entered. Besides the collections, the fund was considerably increased through the generous contribution of Saint Casimir Lodge and St. Martin Society whose members were assessed.

It is noteworthy to mention that six months before the coming of the first pastor, the latter society was organized for the same purpose as the first.

On November 22, 1901, two lots were purchased from a John Meegan on which site the present church and convent are located.

At the request of Bishop Eugene Garvey, a priest from the Diocese of Scranton was assigned to take charge of the new parish. It is not known when the committee was informed about the assignment but it is interesting to note that on

April 21, 1902, a ten dollar deposit was given in order to reserve a house that would serve as a temporary residence for the coming pastor. On May 20th of that year, Father Bronislaus Dembinski arrived and the books were handed over to him. About a month later the construction of the basement church and rectory, which is the present convent, was begun.

Not quite two months elapsed from the date of the establishment of the parish when a setback was felt. Forty-one bread earners of the congregation were victims in the disastrous Johnstown Mine explosion. The funeral services were conducted by Father Dembinski in Saint Stephen's Church with interment in Saint Stephen's Cemetery. In 1903, Saint Casimir's Lodge donated a cross with an inscription of the names of its deceased members, victims in the disaster, as a monument in Saint Casimir's Cemetery.



The rectory was completed in the fall of 1902, while the laying of the cornerstone for the basement of the church took place on September 4, 1902.

The construction of the basement church was probably completed at the end of November, 1902, or at the beginning of December because the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was celebrated for the first time in the new church either on the first or second Sunday of Advent. The dedication took place on December 21, 1902, at which ceremony the late Bishop Garvey presided

#### THE JOHNSTOWN DEMOCRAT - JULY 14, 1902

St. Casimir's Polish Church is one of the heaviest sufferers by reason of the disaster. Over 40 members of the church were killed in the mine—men who were thrifty, God-fearing and who were pillars of the church. The Rev. Father B. Dembinski, the pastor, stated Saturday that the church will feel their loss keenly. The congregation has but recently begun to grow strong and has started the erection of a fine church and parsonage and was in a nourishing condition.

Two societies connected with the church, St. Casimir's Society and St. Martin's Society, are wiped out by the disaster. For the funeral of each of the dead men there will be a \$50.00 benefit and the assessment on each member will be \$2.00.

Father Dembinski said Saturday morning he thought the societies would be re-organized and that the plans for the dedication of the parsonage in October would not be interfered with by the disaster.

Following is the list of names of the dead members of the church, as given out by Father Dembinski:

Frank Guzik, John Krajewski, Frank Tyburski, Bronislaus Wisniewski, Andy Zajdal, Jacob Byszewski, Anthony Andrzejewski, John Walawender, Anthony Kilian, Paul Glac, Tadislaus Dąbrowski, John Sadlyk, John Nowak, John Truzynski, John Drobka, Anton Lazarski, Frank Lazarski, Adam Jankawski, Haniz Ziolk, Boleslaus Wieszchawski, Michael Vilc, Bernard Dobrzyniecki, Joseph Maslawski, Peter Pustelniak, John Tyniec, John Lorzyjek, Valentine Plaga, Ladislaus Kawa, Jacob Dalczyk, John Zaba, Bronislaus Telkawski, Frank Andrzejewski, Paul Tutula, Joseph Ryczek, Jacob Hull, John Karasiewicz, Frank Pazniak, Steve Kosci, Lawrence Pozniak, Jacob Maslawski.

The scenes in Cambria City yesterday were a repetition of those of the day before. In all there were 17 funerals from the various foreign Catholic churches in that part of the city, the interments all being made in Lower Yoder cemetery. The pitiful little black crepes have disappeared from most of the doors where they were to be seen Friday and Saturday and when the day opens in that part of the city today it will have much of its wonted look of business and energy and its people will go to their work, those who will enter the mine this morning, with only memories of their comrades who fell.

On December 9, 1902, a lot was purchased from J. C. Darby on Edward's Hill which was converted into the parish cemetery. This grant of land, which lies at the foot of the present cemetery, was not practical because it was too steep. When word reached Father Dembinski that the adjoining lot was for sale, he immediately purchased it and had the seven interned bodies transferred to the new cemetery. This latter lot was purchased for \$1000 from a Daniel Felix. This cemetery was dedicated on July 17, 1903.

In January of 1903, the parochial school was opened and was conducted in the basement of the structure which was separated from the church by a partition. Mr. Szymanski, the organist of the parish, was the first school teacher.

The parish records reveal that the Sacred Heart Society was started in May, and is functioning satisfactorily to the present day.

Nothing unusual was accomplished within the next three years except that the debt was gradually diminishing and funds for the completion of the church were raised. Because the membership of the parish was increasing steadily, additional help was necessary. Father Anthony Baran was appointed as the first assistant at Saint Casimir's in 1905.

In 1906, work on the completion of the church structure was renewed. According to tradition, the Cambria Steel Company donated the steel and bricks necessary for the construction.

During this time it is interesting to note that the first bells were purchased and blessed on February 24, 1907. Another noteworthy fact was the extraordinary privilege granted to Saint Casimir Parish by Pope Pius X, now Blessed Pius X. This is the "Toties Quoties" Indulgence which was given for all times not only to parishioners but also to anyone who makes a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and fulfills the required conditions. For complete information please read the scroll on the opposite page.

On August 8, 1907, the new addition was dedicated by Bishop Eugene A. Garvey. In 1908, a Mr. Rybacki was employed as the first janitor of the parish.

Not only the Poles from Cambria City, but from outlying communities as well, worshiped their Creator under the roof of the new structure. A large group of parishioners were residents of Conemaugh and Moxham. At the request of the people of Conemaugh Father Dembinski built a chapel in 1910, henceforth it became a mission church of St. Casimirs. The chapel served a double purpose. On Sundays the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was offered for the people and on week days it was converted into a two class school-house. The property for the chapel was bought from Cambria Steel Corporation.



A fact worthy of remembrance, along with other events of importance, is that in 1910 St. Casimir's Church was chosen by His Excellency Bishop Eugene A. Garvey as the place for conferring of Orders to Seminarians. In the group of recipients of Minor Orders that year was Father Anthony Habrewski of Sacred Heart Church, Portage, Pa. The other two churches where Ordinations were held in Johnstown are St. John Gaulbert's and St. Columba's.

On February 27, 1911, two lots were purchased from John Ignatz and John Bombera for the site of the new rectory. The former cost \$2500.00 while the latter \$2000.00.

For not quite ten years the parochial school existed under the tutorship of lay people. The following served as teachers: Mr. Kujawski, Mr. Majerowski, Mr.

Szymanski, Mr. Prawdzik, Mr. Partyka, and Mr. Otto. Realizing what a tremendous asset religious teachers would be in raising the scholastic standard of the school, Father Dembinski set out in a search of a Community of Polish Sisters who would assume the supervision of the school. His first attempt ended in failure since replies were in the negative. Not losing hope he wrote Bishop Rhode, then in the Archdiocese of Chicago, and it was through the intervention of the Bishop that the Franciscan Sisters of Kunegunda agreed to send Sisters. The Sisters arrived here at the beginning of September, 1912, and occupied the old rectory while Father Dembinski moved into the new one. The first Sisters to arrive were Sisters Mary Czeslawa, Dyonizya, Angela, Salezya, and Lauretta. The first year two hundred children enrolled. The school was held in the basement of the church and consisted of six grades. In March, 1913, the work on the new six-room school began and was completed in September and dedicated on the twenty-first of that month. To make way for the new structure one of the buildings which stood on the lots was moved to Chestnut Street and Tenth Avenue where it stands today.

Besides the two bells in the right belfry, it was seen fit to purchase three more and place them in the left belfry. Mr. and Mrs. Valentine Anastasia Mrowka donated \$1,000 for this purpose. Mr. Martin Zieralski donated one of the bells in the right belfry. The new bells were consecrated on September 13, 1914.

Our second janitor came to us in 1916 and it with us to the present day.

For the next six years no unusual event occurred. In December, 1920, an amount of \$2217.50 was collected as a donation for a marble mission cross which was to be imported from Italy. The Piata was installed in the Fall of 1921 at the cost of \$2362.77.

With the coming of Bishop McCort, the chapel at Conemaugh was raised from the status of a Mission to a Parish in 1922.

After doing a magnificent job, Father Dembinski left for Poland in the early part of May, 1923, never to return. Father Mackowiak, then assistant, took charge of the parish for two years until the coming of the new pastor. During the remaining years of his life Father Dembinski was Chaplain at the Felician Sister's College in Warsaw, Poland. His colorful life came to an end February 27, 1949.

The assistants who served under Father Dembinski were: Fathers A. Baran 1905, V. J. Szyperski 1911, Joseph A. Wozny 1911-1913, Ignatius Pilz 1913-1915, John Dekarski 1916- 1918, Stanislaus Wolf 1918-1919, J. A. Figlewski 1919-1920, Michael Mackowiak 1920-1925.

### **Father Ladislaus Finke—1925-1951**

With the resignation of Father Dembinski as Pastor, Bishop McCort assigned Father Ladislaus Finke, R.R. as his successor. Before coming to Johnstown, Father

Finke entered the Salesian Order and was ordained in Rome. After his ordination he was sent to Canada to take care of the Polish people there. While visiting Johnstown, he met Bishop McCort. His Excellency recognized what an asset Father Finke would be in the Lord's vineyard in this locality because of the mastery of several languages. Father Finke wanted to return to Canada but His Excellency asked him to stay in the Diocese and assigned him to Boswell. From there Father Finke came to Saint Casimir's on March 15, 1925. In that same year he added a second story to the school. The new addition was opened in February 1926.

The Young Ladies' Sodality was organized in 1933 and its first moderator was Father Stephen Lewczyk.

Another great disaster befell the parish on March 20, 1936. This was the Johnstown flood. Unfortunately, no pictures are available, which would expose the extent of the damage caused to church property. Observers credit Father Dembinski for his fore-sight in constructing the church in such a manner that the flood did the least possible damage. The flood waters were a foot and a half short of the main part of the church.

In 1939 a male organization was formed under the moderator ship of Father Casimir Ossowski. This is the Holy Name Society.

As evidence of love for our country the parish gave over 300 members to the Armed Forces who served in the Second World War, with many paying the supreme sacrifice.

In 1946, the parish was blessed with its first priest, Father Walter Kurdziel. The young Levite was ordained on May 25, 1946 in the Blessed Sacrament Cathedral in Altoona, and celebrated his First Solemn High Mass the following day.

Father Finke passed away to his heavenly reward June 16, 1951, at the age of 82.

The following priests served under Father Finke: Fathers William Schroll 1928, W. J. Babula 1929, Stephen Lewczyk 1929-1937, Casimir Ossowski 1937-1952, Bronislaus Worsa 1946-1951, Anthony Czeslawski 1950-1952.

### **Father Casimir Ossowski—1951-**

Because Father Finke's health was failing and he was unable to cope with all the problems connected with the parish. His Excellency, the Most Reverend Richard T. Guilfoyle, D. D. appointed Father Casimir Ossowski as Administrator. Prior to his coming to Johnstown Father Ossowski served as pastor in Hollsopple, Hooversville, and Altoona respectively. He also served five years as assistant at Saint Casimir's from 1937 to 1942. During the one and a half years of his pastorate much has been accomplished. The roof of the church was relined with copper, the rectory was remodeled, the convent was painted and the church proper has

undergone renovation. He likewise organized the Parent Educators Group which promises to be a great aid to the parochial school.

