History of Assumption B.V.M. Church
Diamond Jubilee 1899-1974 Assumption B.V.M Roman Catholic Church, Oil City, PA. CAP at Orchard Lake.

What prompts any group of people in a foreign land to heroic actions such as establishing a religious congregation and building a church to worship in? No doubt, the most important factor must be an intense belief in, and love of, God! In the Pole, moreover, there is a third compelling reason: his love for the "motherland", the home of his forefathers. He may know little about the actual history of Poland, but this he has learned early in life from his parents: in the 1,000 years of her existence, Poland enjoyed little freedom. Her people were almost always oppressed either by harsh rulers of their own, or subjected to tyranny by one foreign power after another. The one place where they could always find solace was in religion, traditionally the Roman Catholic Church. In time, they equated their church with freedom. And when they left the motherland to seek political freedom, they always built a church first, finding spiritual relief and guidance from her priests.

Such was the case with the first wave of immigrants to Oil City at the end of the 1890's. Of course, there had been a large number of Poles in America long before 1899. According to existing historical records, the ship Mary and Margaret left England in 1608 with at least two Poles aboard. Arriving in Jamestown, Virginia, they set up the first pitch shops, as well as tar and soap factories. They earned the reputation as reliable workmen, and assisted John Smith, the president of the colony's council, in protecting themselves from the Indians. Father Isaac Jogues, a French Jesuit missionary, who eventually was martyred for the Faith by the Mohawk Indians, administered to their spiritual needs when they settled in New Amsterdam — New York City.

From this time on, the Poles increased in number and prominence. Among those was Albert Zaborowski who became the patriarch of the Zabiskie lineage of New Jersey; Anthony Sadowski of Pennsylvania who founded Sandusky, Ohio; Thaddeus Kosciuszko, Colonel of the Engineers of the Continental Army and builder of the defenses of New York and Philadelphia, whose designs helped the Americans defeat the English at Saratoga; Casimir Pulaski who joined the War of Independence, fought at Brandywine, and was mortally wounded at Savannah.

Mieczysław Haiman, the historian of American Poles, estimated that 12 Poles served as officers in the War of Independence, and about 100 Americans of Polish descent fought on the side of England.

Father Francis Dzierosynske directed the American Jesuit community in 1821, and in the 1840's helped found Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts.

After the Polish uprising in 1834, some 234 Poles arrived in New York, and, while still aboard ship, formed the Polish Committee in America, the first voice to speak for the Poles to American authorities.
Twenty years later Father Leopold Moczygemba brought a larger group of immigrants to settle near Galveston, Texas, forming the community of Panna Maria (Virgin Mary) from where Father Severin Niedbalski came to Erie to found Holy Trinity parish.

Poles fought on both sides of the Civil War. Gaspard Tochman formed a Polish Brigade in Louisiana and fought on the side of the Rebels: Adam Gurowski organized the 58th New York Infantry, later known as the Polish Legion, and supported the Union. It is estimated that between 4 and 5 thousand Poles fought on the Union side, and about 1,000 for the Confederacy.

Maria Zakrzewska pioneered the way for women to enter the medical profession by opening the New England Hospital for Women and Children in Boston. There she served as a physician, administrator, and teacher of doctors and nurses until 1899.

By 1899, the period of importance in the history of Assumption Parish, the Catholic Church in the United States was greatly increasing in numbers and importance. The first Polish church was erected in 1864, St. Stanislaus in Chicago—the Mother Church of Polish churches in America. At another St. Stanislaus Church in Milwaukee, we have the establishment of the first Polish parochial school. This school system became one of the most important components of the Catholic Parochial School System. It is worthy of note that, in the year of the founding of Assumption Parish, the Felician Sisters were already celebrating their Silver Jubilee in America.

The closing years of the 1890's were difficult years for the United States, and especially for the Polish immigrant. Away from his "ojczyzna", he was torn and besieged by many contrary forces — love for his native land, and the desire to be of service to his adopted country; lack of security among strangers, and the ambition to be somebody; the aloof treatment by the predominant non-Polish hierarchy, and the temptation to set up his own National church. Some, at this time, had defected and brought about the first Polish National Catholic Church in 1895 under the leadership of Rev. Antoni Kozlowski.

Having been drawn to Oil City by the oil and railroad boom, many Poles came here from other established settlements in the States, some directly from Poland, to find the end of their rainbow. They worshipped at St. Joseph Church which was already flourishing since 1864. But it was not their "own" church. They wanted a church where they could hear their native language, go to confession in their own tongue, organize their own societies. . .in a word, to enjoy all the prerogatives of a parish church as it was in the "old country". Religion and culture were so intertwined that one could not exist without the other.

In response to their request for at least a Polish speaking priest, Bishop Tobias Mullen of the Erie diocese sent Father Maximilian Polaski, just ordained on February 25, 1899, and arrived at Oil City on March 3, to serve the needs of the Polish people, and, if feasible, to organize a parish for them. The forty families and some 80 single adults were pleased with their own new priest, and by April there was talk of starting a church for themselves. While St. Joseph was large and beautiful and accommodating, it was not theirs. After the Easter Sunday Mass, April 2, 1899, they met, perhaps in some private home or hall, as there are no records to indicate where, and drew up a letter to the Bishop indicating their resolve and capability to build a church of their own. Bishop Mullen acceded to their request, and a drive was begun to raise funds immediately. From newspaper accounts of the Golden Jubilee celebration in November 1949, we learn that, of the original founders, only the
following lived to celebrate the event: Mr. & Mrs. Simon Gajda — Mrs. Catherine Gesing — Mrs. Frances Horos — Mrs. Helen Krzyzynska — Mrs. Antoinette Lefanowicz — Louis Nowicki — Joseph Obara — Mrs. Catherine Pilewska — Francis Schossler. At the time of this writing, only Mrs. Frances Horos survives.

What is now Oliver Manor was seriously considered, but the idea was abandoned when transportation became an issue. Street cars did not go beyond Hasson Park, and the distance from there to the church was not only too far, but impassable because of the muddy and wooded terrain. It would have been a pleasant site today — on top of Oil City, in the peace and quiet of what most readily resembles a Polish village.

What about Seneca Street? That would have been an ideal spot also if it weren’t for the fact that many parishioners would have to cross the railroad tracks to and from church. With the amount of rail traffic in 1899, most would be late for services, and there was a real threat to life since the crossings were not guarded. As a matter of record, there were two fatal accidents and numerous other serious ones.

The most likely place should be one where it would serve most of the people until such a time as conditions warranted a change. Fortunately, there was just such a place — "Palace Hill". Not only was it easily accessible to most of the parishioners, but there was already a church built by the Presbyterian Congregation some 14 years earlier, but now abandoned and for sale!

On May 5, 1899, the lease for transferring the Presbyterian chapel, along with the manse, was drawn and recorded, and on May 16 the property was purchased for the sum of $1,800 by Father Polaski. Acting for the Presbyterian church were C. E. Cooper, W. H. Wise and C. M. Loomis.

It doesn’t take much imagination to see the joy on the faces of that first Assumption congregation as they looked at the property that was exclusively theirs. John Anderton, a local builder, was hired to remodel the church to suit Catholic services. The ceiling was raised, the body of the church enlarged, several windows added, and the identifying spire of the Protestant church was removed and replaced with a golden Cross. A coat of white paint emphasized the neat white lines of the church overlooking Oil Creek valley so that it presented a pretty sight to all who entered the city from the north. As soon as the main and two side altars were installed, the church was ready for dedication, even though pews had yet to be installed in the place of chairs. The people could not wait any longer. On Sunday, September 3, 1899, Bishop John E. Fitzmaurice came from Erie to Oil City to dedicate the church to our Lady of the Assumption with all pomp and splendor of the Catholic liturgy. From newspaper accounts we read that more than 1,000 persons were present for the dedication ceremonies, coming from near and far. An amusing aspect of the occasion was that, since the new church could only hold 500 people, these seats were reserved for Poles only, while the others had to be satisfied with looking in from the outside.

The dedication began at ten in the morning and consisted of a procession from St. Joseph rectory to Polaski Street, accompanied by the Sheridan Cadets, St. Joseph Temperance Society, the Catholic Men's Benevolent Association, all from St. Joseph Parish, and the newly formed members of Assumption Parish with a large group of parishioners from St. Stanislaus Church, Erie.

As the procession wound its way from Pearl Avenue to Harriot, then to Stout, Graff, Spring, Plummer and Spruce streets, many along the way joined the throng escorting the Bishop in his carriage
to Emerald and Polaski streets. Accompanying the Bishop in
the carriage were the vicar General of the diocese, the Very Rev. R. J. Sheridan, Father Sheehan and
Father Ignasiak of St. Stanislaus church.

The High Mass of dedication was celebrated by the founding pastor, Father Polaski, in the presence
of the Bishop, and the music was rendered by the choir of St. Stanislaus church. Father Ignasiak
preached a sermon in Polish, followed by congratulations by Bishop Fitzmaurice. He noted that
Bishop Mullen was pleased that the Polish people now have a church of their own where they could
practice their beautiful customs and traditions.

The festivities ended with a dinner for the clergy at St. Joseph rectory since Assumption parish still
lacked facilities for the pastor; and home dinners for the laity who spent the rest of the day rejoicing
and thanking God for the many blessings that came to them that day.

Lest the reader be misled into believing that through all the events culminating in the blessing of
the first church of Assumption there was solid cooperation among the Poles of Oil City, let it be
known that such was not the case. From the beginning there were the faint-hearted and poor in
vision who decried every movement of the pastor and committee as foolish and vain. There is no
positive evidence of outright hostility, but enough circumstantial evidence to surmise that the church
must have been founded with difficulty. And yet, when the parish became an accomplished fact,
and the faith of the pastor and committee vindicated, there was a renewal of hope in the future of
Assumption parish. The roster of parishioners increased steadily, especially with the influx of new
families who settled in Oil City simply because there was a church of their own.

Within two years the converted church was over-crowded, and the people had another dream —to
build a brand new church large enough to accommodate present and future generations! Why not?
People were steadily employed, the economy of the country looked great, and Oil City was as nice
a place to live in as any. Accordingly, committees were appointed, plans were drawn, and the work
of canvassing was apportioned among volunteer workers.

The project had hardly been started in 1901 when, out of nowhere, the bottom fell out of the econ-
omy of Oil City, and a large number of families were forced to leave the city and seek employment
elsewhere. Rut the dream lived on, and it was revived two years later when jobs again became
plentiful. Some of the old-timers returned, along with many newcomers, and the drive for funds
for a new church was resumed.

Additional land was purchased along Emerald Street, the old frame church moved to the rear of
the new property, and space on the corner of Emerald and Polaski streets reserved for the new
building. Even the basement of the old church was fitted for the proposed parochial school which
was to open in September of 1906.

Frank Kielas, a member of the parish, agreed to put up the new church at a cost of $15,000. By July
22, 1906, the work was advanced far enough to allow the laying of the cornerstone. The Very Rev.
P. J. Sheridan, Father Renehan and Father John M. Gannon, D.D., (shortly after consecrated Bishop
to assist Bishop Fitzmaurice), assisted Father Polaski and Father Thomas Grochowski, C.SS.R. of
North East, Pa. at the rite and ceremony of blessing the cornerstone. It was a gift of D. J. Kelly, then
in charge of the masonry work on the church.
(In the summer of 1973 the cornerstone was removed for the first time to allow repairs to the church, and to the amazement of all, contained only a sheet of ledger paper, tightly rolled, and squeezed into the top of the stone. The names, or any other information that may have been inscribed on the paper, are so illegible that it reveals no information whatever.) The construction of the new church on Emerald and Polaski streets revived interest in building another church across the tracks, somewhere along upper Seneca Street, as was suggested in 1899. This would mean splitting the parish in two, and even though Assumption was now fairly large, numbering some 400 families, it was thought unreasonable to break up a successful venture.

Somehow, cool heads did not prevail, and the organizing of a committee to build another church was initiated. It was fairly successful, too. A beautiful brick-veneer church, school, and rectory were erected at 339 Seneca Street. Since Bishop Fitzmaurice was unable to send a Polish priest to pastor the new St. Michael church, he had to refuse accepting it as a part of the Erie diocese. As an alternative, the people turned to Bishop Hodur, Primate of the Polish National Catholic Church of America, and he came to Oil City to personally bless the church and accept it as part of the fast-growing number of National churches. Father Guzik was its first pastor, succeeded by Father Kuznik. In 1922 the congregation ceased to exist as a parish church, and this spring it was demolished to make room for a Redevelopment Program.

Father Polaski continued as pastor of Assumption parish until September, 1925, when, because of chronic illness, he asked the Bishop to be relieved and sent to a smaller parish. He took charge of St. Joseph Church in Osceola Mills for three years, and after having sufficiently recovered from his illness, was sent to St. Adrian Parish in Delancey, Pa., where he served until March, 1936. Ill health again forced him to ask for relief, but this time, in retirement. He moved to Smyrna Beach, Florida, where he died on November 6, 1939.

In September of 1925, Father Polaski and Father Stephen Dlugolecki exchanged pastorates. In 1919 Father Dlugolecki became the first resident pastor of a small parish, St. Joseph at Osceola Mills, where Father Polaski felt he could regain his failing health. The exchange was made, and Father Dlugolecki became the second pastor of Assumption parish.

Father Steve was born in Makow, Poland, on December 15, 1887. At 17 he came to America with his family and settled in Reynoldsville, Pa. Since there was no Catholic high school in the vicinity, his parents sent him to the oldest Polish boarding school in America, St. Mary's, in Detroit. He continued his studies at the Orchard Lake College, and for his course in Philosophy, Bishop Gannon transferred him to St. Bonaventure Seminary, Olean, N. Y. There he earned his Bachelor's Degree in the sacred sciences, and returned to St. Cyril and Methodius Seminary for Theological studies.

On July 11, 1914 the most Rev. Edward Kelly, Auxiliary Bishop of Detroit, ordained young Steve to the priesthood in the presence of his family.

Father Steve's first assignment was to St. Stanislaus Church in Erie where he served as an assistant until 1919. The people of Osceola Mills were long petitioning Bishop Gannon to send them a resident priest, and after five years of parish experience, Father Steve was ready to take his first pastorate. Father Polaski and Father Steve were frequent guests of each other during these five years, and being aware of each other's parish problems, agreed on the exchange with Bishop Gannon's blessing. It was a beneficial move to both. Father Polaski recovered well enough to take on the larger parish of St. Adrian in Delancey, Pa. some few years later, and Assumption parish
once again had a young priest.

Although Father Dlugolecki stayed but six years at Assumption, he re-opened the parish school in 1926 with the kind assistance of the Felician Sisters of Coraopolis, and built the present rectory. Many still recall the easy-going attitude of Father Steve, his reluctance to exact money from the people, and his keen sense of humor. And so it was with great sorrow that he acceded to the wishes of his bishop in 1931 to take over St. Casimir parish in Erie. In the years he spent at St. Casimir he built a beautiful new parish school and convent, and completely remodeled the church. For this and other achievements he was rewarded by the Holy Father and his bishop by being elevated to the ranks of the Pontifical family, being named Monsignor.

On May 7, 1967, Monsinor Stephen Dlugolecki died at St. Vincent’s Hospital, Erie. He is survived by two nephew-priests: Father Stephen Dobosiewicz of St. Anthony Parish, Cambridge Springs, Pa., and Father Leo Dobosiewicz of Newton Falls, Ohio.

1948 was a sad year for the diocese of Erie insofar as it lost many priests by untimely deaths. Monsignor Severin Niedbalski, founder and pastor of Holy Trinity church in Erie, died after a prolonged illness in January of this year. The celebrant of his funeral Mass was Monsignor Francis Robaczewski, founder and pastor of St. Hedwig church in Erie. He, in turn, died two weeks later, thus creating two important vacancies to be filled.

Archbishop Gannon called upon Father John Mieczkowski to fill the Holy Trinity pastorate because of his proven ability as administrator at Assumption parish.

Father John Mieczkowski was born in Thorn, Poland on January 26, 1889, and came to this country with his parents at an early age. They settled in Erie, where Father John attended St. Stanislaus grade school, and later, Sts. Cyril and Methodius College and Seminary. For his theological studies he transferred to St. Bernard’s Seminary in Rochester, N. Y. He was ordained for the diocese of Erie at St. Patrick Cathedral, Rochester, by Bishop Charles Colton, D.D., on June 7, 1913.

He served as assistant at St. Stanislaus Parish, Erie, from June 1913 till August 1914, when he was appointed Pastor at St. Helen’s Parish in Eleonora, Pa., attending the Missions of Big Soldier, Wishaw, and Sykesville. From June 1924 until December,

Father Mieczkowski was loaned to the Cleveland diocese to assist at St. John Kanty Parish. In February of 1925 Father Martin Meagher of St. Philip Church, Crossingville, Pa. died, and Father John was recalled to fill the vacancy.

He served there until Dec. 19, 1931, when he came to Assumption to replace Father Dlugolecki. For the next 17 years Father John worked tirelessly and faithfully for the good of his parishioners, paying off all debts and accumulating a substantial savings for his successor, Father Joseph Pol.

After his transfer to Holy Trinity Parish in Erie in 1948, Father John lived until September, 1959, when he died suddenly in a barber’s chair after attending his parishioners on First Friday Communion calls.

To succeed Father Mieczkowski, Archbishop Gannon appointed Father Joseph Pol to be the fourth pastor of Assumption Parish.

Father Joseph Pol was born in Erie on April 29, 1895. He was baptized and educated at St. Stanislaus grade and high schools, where he achieved city-wide fame as an athlete, especially in basketball. For Philosophy and Theology, Father Pol chose Sts. Cyril and Methodius College and Seminary in
Orchard Lake, Michigan.

On November 30, 1919 he was ordained priest by Bishop Gannon and assigned to his home parish as assistant for the next 16 years. When Father Casimir Rybinski of St. Michael Church in Dubois died from injuries sustained in an auto accident in October of 1935, Father Pol was assigned as the succeeding pastor until 1948 when he came to Assumption parish. Although Father Pol was an outstanding athlete, his health was not as good as one might expect of a physical culture faddist. He suffered from a chronic illness that ended his life five years later in September 1953.

Within two weeks of Father Pol's death, the fifth pastor of Assumption was named in the person of Father Joseph Kacprowicz.

He is also a native of Erie, having been born on "priests row", the 600 block of East 14th Street which has given more priests to the Erie diocese than any other block in the diocese — 7 altogether.

He attended St. Stanislaus grade and high schools, and after graduating in 1928, enrolled at St. Mary’s College, Orchard Lake. In 1930 Bishop Gannon transferred him to St. Mary's University and Seminary, Baltimore, Md. for his courses in philosophy and theology.

On Ascension Thursday, May 21, 1936 Bishop Gannon ordained young Joseph to the priesthood. After a two week vacation, he was assigned to his native parish as assistant, until 1942 when he accepted his first pastorate at St. Barbara Church in Houtzdale, Pa.

Coming to Assumption Parish in the fall of 1953, Father Kacprowicz undertook to remodeling and updating the parish: the old stain-glass windows were replaced by modern, light color-glass, new pews installed, wood paneling was affixed to the old wainscotting, a new vinyl floor was laid, and the sanctuary was refurnished. Easter of 1960 was the great day of joy — the entire church was renovated!

Father Joseph was also instrumental in the planning and building of V.C.H.S., together with the other five pastors of Oil City, by serving on the board of directors, and contributing $90,000 towards its construction.

In June of 1967, while on annual retreat, Father Kacprowicz was notified by Bishop Whealon that he had been appointed to St. Casimir Church, where he is continuing his work as priest and able administrator. We wish him many more fruitful years in the Lord's vineyard!

Father Anthony J. Nowakowski, a native of Erie, was educated in both public and parochial schools of the city, and upon graduation from Cathedral College (Gannon) entered St. Mary's University and Seminary, Baltimore, Md. He was ordained in Baltimore by Bishop McNamara of the archdiocese of Washington, D.C. on November 17, 1943, for the diocese of Erie where he served as an assistant at Holy Rosary, Sacred Heart, St. Callistus (Kane, Pa.) and St. Hedwig in Erie. His first pastoral appointment was at St. Michael Church in Dubois, from November 1959 until June 1967, when he was assigned to his present pastorate at Assumption in Oil City.

In the last seven years many additional improvements were made. The school auditorium was extensively enlarged by removing the old stage which once was the center of attraction for the parish. Here, proud parents would watch their children perform school plays, and dance to the rhythm of a broken down piano pounded by one of the good sisters. The removal of the stage added that much more space to the auditorium. With a drop ceiling, indirect lighting, paneled walls, a large
bar, and complete new kitchen facilities, it serves a much needed purpose as a reception center for weddings, dinners, and parties. A revised heating system and cold air control make the Social Center a pleasant and beautiful place to socialize any time of the year.

The church was remodeled by stages, starting with a glass door entrance, a marquee with snow-melting element, a new boiler and baseboard heating, a bridal chamber in the basement of the church with direct entrance to the vestibule of the church, and this year, a new paint job, and wall-to-wall carpeting of the entire church.

We salute the fine people of Assumption parish who gave of their money and talent, and who continue to support the parish in every undertaking to make Assumption B.V.M. Church the finest in Venango County!

NATIVE SONS
Father Francis Duda
Father Bronislaus Worsa
Father John Czajka
Father A/ bin Majdanik
Father Dan Kresinski
Father Andrew Zapora

DAUGHTER — NUNS OF PARISH
Sister M Thecla Wydro, C.SS.F.
Sister M. David Krasowska, C.SS.F.
Sister M. Valerie Jasiota, C.SS.F.
Sister M. Laetitia Szaiewicz, C.SS.F.
Sister M. Justine Zawisiak, C.SS.F.
Sister M. JuHanne Piiewska, C.SS.F.
Sister Louise Marie Olsofka, C.SS.F.
Sister M. Francine Horos, C.SS.F.

Sisters of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost:
Sister M. Regina Flis
Sister M. Esther Serafin
Sister M. Martina Serafin
Sister M. Angeline Futyma
Sister Terese Poweska