



History of St. Ladislaus Parish.

Diamond Jubilee Book St. Ladislaus Parish 1906-1981, Nicetown-Philadelphia, PA. p. 35-46. CAP at Orchard Lake.

The birth and growth of St. Ladislaus Parish were very much like that of other Polish parishes in Philadelphia. Large numbers of Polish immigrants came to Philadelphia at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. They had fled Poland because of the lack of religious and civil freedom and economic opportunity under the oppression of the three tyrants who had divided Poland. They wanted to speak their own language, maintain their heritage and practice their Catholic Faith without persecution. Naturally, they sought the support of each other as they struggled to build a new life in a new country. Thus, they settled in certain neighborhoods in Philadelphia; Nicetown was one of them. As the community grew, the need for a parish in the immediate area became more evident.

Courageous and modest beginnings by the pioneers

A number of Polish settlers in Nicetown discussed the possibility of establishing their own parish. There were five Polish parishes already in Philadelphia, but traveling to them was difficult. In March 1904, a committee was organized for this purpose and it met formally in the home of Stanley Slys. The other members of the committee were: Walter Smoczynski, Leon Schurgot, Valentine Mientus, Jacob Solecki, Hieronim Wilk, John Bialy, John Lipka, Thaddeus Jarek, Thomas Schwartz, Joseph Mientus, Francis Waligorski, Francis Dlugosz, Joseph Winiarski, Thomas Dobrzanski, and Francis Krajewski.

Thomas Dobrzanski and Leon Schurgot were appointed to seek the help of Father Gabriel Kraus, Pastor of St. Laurentius Parish. Their efforts finally bore fruit, when on March 15, 1906 Archbishop Patrick Ryan appointed Father John Dabrowski as Founding Pastor of the new parish which consisted of 186 members.

March 10, 1906 in the Catholic Standard and Times was included the following information: New Polish Congregation. Rev. John Dabrowski has been appointed to organize a new Polish congregation in Nicetown, this city."

The first Mass was celebrated on March 25, 1906, in "Old Oaks Mansion" in a wooded estate above Deacon Street at Wissahickon Avenue. Thus began the life of St. Ladislaus Parish, the 6th Polish parish in Philadelphia. The reason for the selection of this patron from a list of 12 Polish Saints and 62 Polish Blessed was never recorded and could not be traced.

Joseph Stanislaus Gawronski was the first child to be baptized in the new parish on March 25, 1906.

This occurred on the same day the first Mass was celebrated. Following him, over 6,300 children have been baptized at St. Ladislaus Church.

The first marriage was between Wladyslaw Klap and Anna Pelczarska on April 28, 1906. Since then about 2,500 marriages have been performed.

Salomea Niewodowska was the first in the new parish to die. Her funeral was held on May 25, 1906. The parish record shows that over 2,700 members have passed away since that time. Among them are all of the 186 organizers to whom we owe a constant debt of gratitude.

For about three years, the "Old Oaks Mansion" served as a temporary church, wherein all services were held. During this period, work to build a church was underway. Land was purchased, for which it was necessary to borrow money. Plans were made for the first structure to be a one-floor edifice that was to be eventually the basement of a school. This building was to serve as a temporary church as well. When it was completed there was room also for the school and a future Sisters' convent.

The school opened in September 1909, just a little over three years from the founding of the parish. Archbishop Edmund Prendergast blessed the new building. The records show that Mr. Labedzki, Mr. Majewski and Mrs. Elser were the first teachers. There were no sisters in the school at that time.

The Pulaski Beneficial Association, originally known as "Tow. Generala Kazimierza Pulaskiego" and organized on Nov. 8, 1903 selected from their members a group of men to be the organization's ceremonial guard. Their uniforms were designed after those worn by military officers in Poland. This group became known as "The Krakusy." They participated in many Polish American patriotic events, as well as standing guard in church during Holy Week at Christ's tomb. One of the first members of this special group was Mr. Frank Frysiek, Sr., one of founders of St. Ladislaus Parish, shown here in 1912.

The most rapid expansion of the Parish occurred in its earliest years. As the immigrants from Poland kept arriving, Nicetown and St. Ladislaus received a large share. In the first five years of its existence the Parish witnessed 210 marriages and 578 baptisms. The new temporary church now served about 400 families and was too small from the beginning.

On November 12, 1911, Father Dabrowski was replaced by Fr. Joseph Gazdzik as Pastor of the parish. Though his term was short he was energetic, and able to deal with the difficulties of a then young parish. He stayed very briefly, however, and was replaced by Fr. Joseph Kuczynski on February 8, 1912.

Expansion for permanency by Father Kuczynski

Father Kuczynski arrived from Minersville, Pennsylvania. He was young, fervent and dedicated to guide the parish as it grew and developed through its early years. Father Kuczynski immediately made arrangements with the Bernardine Sisters of Reading, Pennsylvania to staff our parish school. Sr. M. Augustine was the first superior. In 1913, a house was purchased on Hunting Park Avenue and 17th St., to be a convent for the Sisters. This was to serve as their residence until 1955, when a new convent was completed.

In the second five year period of parish history there were even more marriages, 294 being the exact figure. Rate of baptisms almost doubled, with 1,018 being recorded. The parish now had about 700 families, with the same small temporary church to attend.

The next order of business was obviously the building of a larger and permanent church and rectory, and Father Kuczynski began this in 1914. The cornerstone was laid in October of that year and blessed by Bishop John J. McCort. Ludwig H. Giele of Jersey City, New Jersey, drew up plans for the church and rectory. Mr. Anthony Ziernicki, one of our own parishioners, was the general contractor.

October 10, 1914 the Catholic Standard and Times announced:

"Laying of cornerstone of St. Ladislaus Church.

On Sunday afternoon last the Right Rev. Bishop McCort laid the corner-stone of St. Ladislaus' Polish Church, on the southwest corner of Hunting Park and Wayne Avenues, of which the Rev. Joseph Kuczynski is rector. The Bishop had as assistants the Rev. J. A. Godrycz, D. D., Ph. D., LL. D., rector of St. Stanislaus' Church, and the Rev. Leon Wierzynski, rector of St. Hedwig's, Chester. The sermon was delivered by the Rev. M. Monkiewicz, rector of St. Adalberts.

There was a parade in connection with the corner-stone laying, in which marched several thousand men and women connected with church organizations from Bridesburg, Richmond, Germantown and other parts of the city. The pupils of the parochial school, in charge of Sisters of St. Bernardine, took part in the demonstration, which was witnessed by an immense crowd. The picturesque uniforms of the Polish military organizations added much to the appearance of the procession.

The edifice is to be one-story high, 80 by 140 feet, of Gothic style, with entrance from Hunting Park Avenue, and is being built of Port Deposit granite, with Indiana limestone trimmings. A rectory three stories high, 33 by 61 feet, is being built between the church and parochial school building. The latter, in the basement of which services are held, was built in 1906. The parish was organized a year previous in Old Oaks Mansion, where held till the basement was completed."

The first assistant pastor was Father Sebastian Jerzak who arrived in March 1915. It is to Father Kuczynski's everlasting credit that to this time he served so large a congregation by himself.

On February 6, 1916, the church was finished and ready for use, and on that day it was blessed by Archbishop E. Prendergast, assisted by Father Mieczyslaw Monkiewicz and Father J. Poremba, pastors of neighboring Polish parishes. The main celebrant of the Mass that day was Msgr. P. Masson. It was a glorious day for the parishioners of St. Ladislaus and for the entire Philadelphia Polish community.

The beautiful hand-carved wooden altars were installed in 1919. By 1930, the stained glass windows, the Stations of the Cross and other church furnishings were acquired. It was at that time, and still remains, one of the most beautiful churches in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

During these early years, the parish grew in number and activity with many societies being organized. Eventually, "The United Societies of St. Ladislaus Parish" was organized in 1915 by Father Kuczynski, for the sole purpose of uniting all societies into one central group, thereby manifesting more strength, harmony and cooperation among all of the organizations in the parish. At the present time, "The United Societies" is composed of 23 religious, fraternal, veterans and social societies and organizations. It is interesting to note that the first church society was the Adoration Society of the Most Blessed Sacrament, organized in 1906.

The period of two World Wars

As the United States was caught up in World War I and Americans responded with courage and sacrifice to fight for their country, the men and women of St. Ladislaus were no less responsive. One hundred and seven fought in the First World War and six of these brave men suffered death in defense of their new country: Joseph Halas, Alexander Kalinoski, Adam Tworek, John Jajak, Anthony Soban and Anthony Zablotni. A large monument commemorating the brave parishioners who served in this war stands on the front lawn of the rectory. It was erected under the auspices of the Women's Auxiliary of Argonne Post No. 599. Also, several parishioners joined the Polish Army and fought with their exiled countrymen in Europe.

One very special event for the parish after this war was the joy of having the first priest-son ordained. He was Fr. Leon Krajewski, who was ordained in 1923.

In the first quarter century, the parish hosted various dignitaries from Poland, such as: Archbishop J. Cieplak, General J. Haller, Archbishop Przewdziecki and others. All received the traditional warm-hearted Polish welcome from the clergy and parishioners.

More than 600 men and women of the parish answered the call to service in World War II. Twenty-two of these died a martyr's death. They were: Joseph Gierczak, John Frysiek, Leon Kendra, John Mientus, Felix Pinciurek, Ladislaus Kielar, John Larwa, Theodore Kendra, Carl Radziul, Ladislaus Marciak, Ladislaus Prawdzik, Alfred Perkolup, Edward Jankowski, Sigismund Magiera, Walter Niewodowski, Stanley Wlas, Joseph Kwiatanowski, Thaddeus Ponczka, Stanislaus Smalarz, Joseph Gogoj, Joseph Baniewicz, and Joseph Tomkiewicz. These men have not been forgotten. A plaque with their names is set in the church wall. It was donated by Tow. Matek Zolnierza.

Many of the parish's servicemen from both world wars joined the Argonne Post No. 599 of the American Legion in Nicetown. Annually, the Post remembers its deceased veterans at a Mass in our church and Memorial Day Services at the war monuments on our grounds.

Post-war period of significant progress

After the second war another but smaller wave of Polish immigrants came to America, and many located in Nicetown. A group of 30 was sponsored in 1950 by several St. Ladislaus religious and civic organizations, which cooperated with the National Catholic Welfare Conference and the Polish-American Immigration Committee. Many other families and individuals were sponsored by relatives already established here, and the parish gained several score new members. Their children entered our school, which for several years was filled to capacity. Their arrival also promoted a brief revival of Polish language instructions in the school.

In March of 1948, the Holy Name Society was organized. It grew rapidly to become one of the mainstays of the parish. At its peak, there were about 300 members, who were very active in Parish and Diocesan programs. Large contingents participated in "The Holy Hour of Adoration" on October 10, 1948 and "Holy Name Rally", dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima, on October 11, 1953. The society also took part in the Holy Year Pilgrimage in 1950. The society has from its beginning supported parish programs and maintained its religious purposes on a regular basis.

The Parent-Teachers Association was formed in 1950. It assisted the school for twenty-five years with procurement of school equipment and promotion of extra curricular functions. More importantly, it created a strong tie with the teaching staff.

By November 1950, the mortgage on the parish was paid and a special banquet was held to commemorate this happy event. Father Kuczynski read a letter of congratulations from the Archbishop of Philadelphia, Dennis Cardinal Dougherty.

In 1954, construction of a new convent was begun behind the school. Groundbreaking took place on August 15, 1954. Archbishop John F. O'Hara blessed the cornerstone on June 26, 1955.

Eventually, this Sisters' former residence and the entire adjacent block of homes on Hunting Park Avenue were destroyed by the City of Philadelphia in order to build a new gym for Simon Gratz High School. It was a sad event for the parish and one from which it has never recovered. Despite the protests of the parishioners and Father John Naja, who was Pastor at the time, the City through the insistence of the School Board, ordered the houses condemned.

After 44 years of dedicated service to the people of St. Ladislaus, Father Kuczynski was called by God to his reward on August 31, 1956. He has long been remembered for his administrative ability, patriotism, and spiritual leadership. He was laid to rest on the front lawn of the rectory, staying with the people he loved so much.

Father John Judycki, then Assistant Pastor, administered the affairs of the parish until Cardinal O'Hara appointed Father John A. Naja as the new pastor on November 15, 1956. Father Naja came to us from Pottstown, PA., where he had been Pastor of SS. Peter and Paul Parish.

He immediately recognized the need for some improvements and additions and he worked to add two classrooms to the school; enlarged and renovated the auditorium; enlarged and furnished the rectory with an office and meeting room. Subsequently, he acquired more land adjacent to the schoolyard and provided a large parking area and two large garages.

During his time, and by his encouragement, Boy Scout Troop 588 was formed in 1960 principally through the initiative of Mr. Frank Kulik. It provided an excellent opportunity for knowledge, experience, and discipline for young men of our parish, until it disbanded in 1974. At its peak, the troop numbered 55 Boy Scouts, 10 Explorer Scouts and 20 Cub Scouts, plus about 25 men and women who served as officers, scoutmasters, counselors, den mothers, etc. In addition to the usual and normal scouting activities, our troop took part in all civic and religious affairs and for several years combined camping with field work for the Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Doylestown, PA.

Principally through the guidance of Mr. Paul Walters, Advancement Counselor, the scouts received

many honors and hundreds of merit badges. The following nine boys advanced to the highest rank of "Eagle Scout": Sigismund Orzechowski, Raymond Matura, Robert Jaconski, William Stunder, Paul Skiendzielewski, Michael Skiendzielewski, Edward Tumas, Michael Koziel, and Edward Peszek. Mr. Frank Frysiek, the Institutional Representative, received the coveted "Order of St. George" for his many years of effective work for the troop.

A very special event - the Polish Millennium

In 1966, people of Polish heritage, over the entire world, observed the Millennium of Poland's Christianity. These ceremonies have been recorded in golden words in the chronicles of Polish history.

The opening Mass of the Philadelphia Regional Observance was held at the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul. The Most Reverend Ladislaus Rubin, special delegate of His Excellency Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, Primate of Poland, participated in and delivered a Homily at another Pontifical Mass at the Philadelphia Civic Center on Sunday, September 11, 1966.

A special committee was formed at St. Ladislaus Parish by the Pastor, John A. Naja, to deal with the observance of the Millennium. This committee faithfully attended all the meetings of the general Philadelphia committee and guided the parish through activities. Our parishioners attended the Pontifical Masses in great numbers, filling 3 buses for the Mass at the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, and filling 9 buses for the Mass of Thanksgiving at the Philadelphia Civic Center. The children of our parochial school participated in the procession leading to the Mass at the Civic Center. Through the United Societies, our parish was the first to donate \$1,000 to Rev. Msgr. Palecki, the General Chairman, to cover various expenses incidental to the ceremonies. We were highly commended by the General Committee for our cooperation and extensive participation.

A great honor for Monsignor John A. Naja

For the excellence of his work and successful administrative accomplishments, Father Naja was rewarded by his Holiness Pope Paul VI who elevated him to the rank of Monsignor with the title of "Honorary Prelate" on May 18, 1969. The honor was shared by all the parishioners who rejoiced that their Pastor was singled out for this privilege. A large delegation from the parish attended the ceremony at the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul.

Following the trend of the times, the "St. Ladislaus Senior Citizens" organization was formed in November 1975, through the initiative of Mr. Frank Frysiek. The group now numbers about 265 men and women, who are very active in several programs and bind themselves to the parish through their activities and meetings at our hall.

In June 1976, having reached his 75th year, Monsignor Naja retired, as is the policy of the archdiocese. He had been Pastor for 20 years. As a sign of gratitude, the parishioners honored Monsignor with a beautiful banquet and extended to him their thanks for his years of leadership and devotion.

Father Pelczar's pastorate

The new Pastor, appointed in June 1976, was Father Edward Pelczar. He was a young priest, and this was his first pastorate. He worked hard to improve the financial situation of the parish, although he was faced with a decline in membership and relocation of many young parishioners.

Father Pelczar was our pastor for a relatively short period of time from June 1976 to June 1978. Perhaps the high point of his stay came in September 1977. Through arrangements made by our St. Cecelia's Choir with St. Peter's Church in Philadelphia, Father Pelczar celebrated a Mass in Polish to honor the recently canonized Bishop John Neumann. This was a memorable occasion, attracting many guests from other Polish parishes in the area.

Another special event in which our parish played an active role was the 41st International Eucharistic Congress held in Philadelphia from the 1st to the 8th of August 1976. Many parishioners observed this solemn occasion by being present at a special Polish Mass on August 7th in Veterans Stadium. Karol Cardinal Wojtyla was the main celebrant.

Father Pelczar resigned his pastorate in June 1978. His replacement as Pastor was Father Bernard Witkowski, native of St. Adalbert's Parish in Philadelphia.

Father Witkowski's current pastorate

Father Bernard came from the National Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Doylestown, where he was the Administrator by authority of Cardinal Krol. This experience is constantly reflected in the care given to the parish, as in a short time he had renovated the Sisters' residence, school hall, rectory and the church towers. As a former teacher at Cardinal O'Hara High School, he displays an extraordinary interest in education. He visits the school often and has initiated and conducts special lectures for adults during Lent. He is especially dedicated to the spiritual life of his parishioners.

The routine activities of this nation, this parish and every individual was joyously interrupted in October, 1979, by the pastoral trip to the United States by Pope John Paul II, formerly Karol Cardinal Wojtyla of Krakow, Poland. As no one else in history, he drew attention to the presence and dignity of Poland and Polish people everywhere. Our Pastor met with the former Cardinal previously in Poland when he helped in making arrangements for the visit of 19 Polish Bishops and the Cardinal to the Eucharistic Congress. Our parish was especially proud of the Holy Father and let the entire community know this by beautiful signs on the church doors. A large contingent of parishioners joined the huge throng in a special Mass celebrated by The Holy Father at Logan Circle.

Our parish took part in another notable event for Polish-Americans nationwide on February 17, 1980. The Polish National Alliance was organized in Philadelphia, PA in 1880, and observed its centennial here, in a three-day program of events commemorating the founders. On the final day, a closing Mass was celebrated at St. Ladislaus by Cardinal Krol. The church was filled to capacity by officers and members of the Alliance and our own parishioners. Several priests from neighboring Polish parishes joined Fr. Bernard in welcoming and assisting the Cardinal on this auspicious occasion.