



A Short History of Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish

Diamond Jubilee 1904-1979 Sacred Heart of Jesus Church, Forest City, PA, p. 6-18. CAP at Orchard Lake.

Dissatisfied with conditions in their native countries and attracted by the promise of a prosperous future in the New World, a large number of Central and Eastern European families emigrated to the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Though the majority of these newcomers made their way to the large cities of the East and Midwest, a sizeable group settled in Northeastern Pennsylvania and found work in this region's coal fields. By the turn of the century, approximately two hundred Polish Catholic families were living in and around Forest City, the northernmost of the small mining towns that had sprung up all along the so-called "Anthracite Belt".

These families naturally desired to pass on to their children the religion, culture, and language in which they themselves were raised. From Poland's long history of foreign occupation, they had learned that the only way their native culture could be preserved and propagated was through the Church. Consequently, in the spring of 1903 a committee representing the Polish Catholics of Forest City requested the Bishop of Scranton's permission to establish a parish and build a church in their community. Bishop Michael J. Hoban granted this permission and in November of 1903 appointed the Reverend Leopold Suchowski the first pastor of Forest City's Polish congregation. The Bishop also placed the parish most appropriately under the patronage of Poland's own St. Stanislaus Kostka.

Father Suchowski's first task was the construction of a church. For this purpose on November 12, 1903, he purchased the plot of land on the corner of Hudson and Dundaff Streets where Sacred Heart Church stands today. By the fall of the following year, a temporary chapel had been erected on this site. In this chapel on October 16, 1904, Father Suchowski offered the first Mass in the history of Sacred Heart parish.

But only a few more Masses were to be offered in this edifice because on January 8, 1905, the chapel caught fire. This fire destroyed the chapel itself as well as its furnishings plus all the liturgical vessels and vestments stored inside. So complete a disaster left the parishioners of St. Stanislaus no alternative but to begin the construction of their church all over again.

The members of the parish were equal to the task. In June of 1905, work began on the foundation for a new church; and by November of that year, services were being held in the basement of this new structure. In 1906, however, work was halted as Father Suchowski was transferred, and St. Stanislaus parish was temporarily reduced to mission status and deprived of a resident pastor. This situation was remedied in September of 1906 with the appointment of the newly ordained Reverend James E. Gryczka as pastor of the parish.

Father Gryczka proved a determined and energetic administrator. His first act was to clear up a misunderstanding among the parishioners by arranging that the parish be transferred from the patronage of St. Stanislaus Kostka to that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Father Gryczka then ordered resumption of work on the new church. Work progressed so well that by April of 1908 the handsome brick structure built by Bloxham and Sons on the ashes of St. Stanislaus chapel and serving the people of Sacred Heart parish to this day, was finished and ready to be formally dedicated. This dedication took place on May 30th amid great pomp and festivity. Visiting clergymen from as far away as Chicago, borough officials, marching bands and members of parish societies from throughout the Diocese, joined by about 3,000 onlookers, paraded up Main Street before taking part in the dedication ceremonies. It is reported that all who viewed the church were "loud in their praise of its beauty."

Father Gryczka next turned to the educational needs of his parishioners. In September of 1910, a parochial school was opened in the basement of the church. First staffed entirely by laymen and then by Sisters of the Bernadine Order, this school would provide elementary education to the children of the parish for the next fourteen years. Father Gryczka also encouraged the formation of many athletic clubs and study groups for all age brackets during his stay at Sacred Heart.

Meanwhile, more property had to be acquired. In 1912, Father Gryczka purchased two homes adjacent to Sacred Heart Church. Over the next four years, one of the homes was converted into a convent for the Bernardine Sisters and the other became the present parish rectory. In 1913 a new organ was purchased, while a short time later the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which still stands above the main entrance of the church, was acquired and installed.

In November of 1916 Father Gryczka's tenure as pastor of Sacred Heart Church came to an end. However, the church, convent, and rectory he had constructed; the school he had established; and the vigorous spirit of accomplishment he had instilled in his parishioners remained a lasting and fitting legacy of his pastorate.

Reverend Joseph A. Mrozeski succeeded Father Gryczka. Though Father Mrozeski stayed in Forest City only two years, in this time he earned a reputation for eloquence and fervor. Reverend Roman Wandolowski became pastor of Sacred Heart Church in 1918. Father Wandolowski acquired the land where the cemetery is presently located, but he was transferred before any actual work could begin on the property. Reverend Edward Zawadzki succeeded Father Wandolowski in 1920, but his term as pastor was also brief. After only one year's service at Sacred Heart, he was transferred.

On April 21, 1921, Reverend Anthony P. Halicki was named pastor. Reversing the trend of his immediate predecessors, Father Halicki would make Sacred Heart parish his home for the next twenty-one years. Over this long period, Father Halicki earned the loved and friendship of his parishioners as well as of the community at large. His services to Sacred Heart Church were as manifold as they were exemplary.

Father Halicki's most urgent task upon arrival was the liquidation of the large debt the parish had accumulated as a result of the purchases and extensive construction of the previous fifteen years. He performed this duty with patience and skill, and by 1929 the debt was completely discharged. Throughout this period the church properties were maintained and improved by means of judicious purchasing and the personal care and dedication of the pastor. In preparation for the Silver Jubilee of its foundation, Sacred Heart Church was refurbished and redecorated in the spring of 1929. To

keep expenses at a minimum, Father Halicki did a great deal of this work himself. The results were admirable, with altars and statuary repainted or restored and elegantly designed rubber tile laid in the sanctuary and along the main aisle of the church.

Sacred Heart Church's Silver Jubilee celebration took place on Thanksgiving Day, 1929. Following a Jubilee Parade, Father Anthony Lewandowski, a native son of the parish, aided by other native sons and former pastors of Sacred Heart parish, celebrated a commemorative Solemn Mass in the church. A Silver Jubilee banquet that evening brought the proceedings to a close.

Misfortune struck Sacred Heart parish soon after the conclusion of these festivities. On January 7, 1932, just three years after Father Halicki and his parishioners had laboriously renovated the church interior and just over twenty-five years after the destruction of St. Stanislaus chapel, fire broke out in Sacred Heart Church. The church structure survived the fire intact, but damages inside were extensive. Undeterred, pastor and parishioners devoted themselves once more to the task of repair and renovation. Though 1932 was not a prosperous year, the energy and generosity of the people of Sacred Heart parish were such that within a very short time the effects of the fire were nowhere to be seen and the church was restored to its former condition.

The people of the parish endured the hard decade of the thirties and the period of the Second World War with fortitude and faith. During the Depression years and especially during the war years, the parish's membership declined as many parishioners left Forest City to find better jobs elsewhere or to serve in the armed forces. Those who remained, therefore, had to assume responsibility for a larger share of the parish's expenses, and they had to do so at a time when their personal prospects were exceptionally grim. Nevertheless, in spite of all these tribulations, the Sacred Heart parish community maintained itself. Though they may have reduced the parish's membership and hampered its material growth, the economic miseries of the time did not upset the spiritual life of the community. The celebration of Mass, administration of the other sacraments, and instruction of the young went on as always and perhaps assumed an even greater significance in an era bringing first worldwide depression and then world war. And in the second decade of his pastorate at Sacred Heart, Father Halicki continued to administer affairs so responsibly that by the time of his departure in 1942, the parish's condition was positively enviable. All properties were well maintained; no debts were outstanding; and enough money was on account to meet any unexpected parish expense. It was with genuine sadness that the people of Sacred Heart parish bade farewell to Father Anthony Halicki on March 1, 1942.

The Reverend Francis X. Kurkowski became pastor of Sacred Heart Church in February of 1942. Though his pastorate was to be brief, Father Kurkowski's accomplishments were memorable. In August of 1942, after he had ordered the renovation of the convent, Father Kurkowski invited the Bernardine Sisters to return to Forest City to conduct the parish's catechetical school. The Sisters accepted his invitation and thus ended their eighteen year absence from Sacred Heart. In addition, Father Kurkowski supervised renovation of the interior of the rectory as well as some improvement of the church grounds and the cemetery.

To the surprise of all and in the midst of his labors, Father Kurkowski suffered a heart attack in the parish rectory and died there on December 11, 1945. The untimely death of this devoted pastor was mourned by the entire community but particularly by the people of his parish, with whom Father Kurkowski had established a bond of mutual friendship and respect.

Following Father Kurkowski's death, Reverend Clarence Sikorski administered the parish temporarily. On January 7, 1946, Reverend John P. Lipski was appointed pastor of Sacred Heart Church, a position he would retain for the next ten years.

In the first few years of his pastorate, Father Lipski was forced to make a number of major repairs and improvements to the parish properties. Within a span of five years, the rectory, church, and convent were repainted; a new slate roof was installed over the church; and a new Baldwin organ (with chimes) was purchased for the choir. Father Lipski also revived the men's and women's parish organizations and arranged for a program of released time religious instruction for children of the parish attending public schools.

This work was culminated on November 11, 1954, with the celebration of Sacred Heart Church's Golden Jubilee. This major parish event was marked with appropriate ceremony and festivity. In the morning Bishop Henry T. Klonowski, joined by all living former pastors and all parish vocations, celebrated in Sacred Heart Church a Solemn Mass of Thanksgiving for the blessings bestowed on the parish over the past half century. That evening, over three hundred parishioners and friends, along with clerical and civic dignitaries from throughout the area, toasted the accomplishments of the Sacred Heart parish community in a joyous anniversary banquet. Not even a fierce, late autumn snowstorm raging outside could dampen the spirits of the celebrants.

Father Lipski's stay at Sacred Heart concluded just one year after this Golden Jubilee commemoration. His leave taking was, of course, a sad event, but the sadness all felt must certainly have been mixed with a sense of satisfaction, for this industrious pastor left behind a parish community fully prepared to enter the second half century of its existence with faith and confidence.

The Reverend John A. Madaj became pastor of Sacred Heart Church on October 6, 1955. He would make Sacred Heart parish his home for the next fifteen years and leave an indelible mark on its history. With respect to the material condition of the parish, some necessary updating and improvement took place during Father Madaj's pastorate. Over the course of his fifteen year tenure, the parish rectory was remodeled gradually until practically the entire interior had been refurbished. In addition, the church edifice itself altered in appearance when a large, two story addition to its south side was built in 1963. This addition gave to the church an enlarged sacristy, a badly needed new kitchen in the church hall, and a processional entrance that could also serve as a convenient means of access to the hall below. The replacement of all the stained glass windows enclosing the nave of the church, as well as the construction of a parking lot behind the rectory and some landscaping of the church and cemetery grounds, were also completed during Father Madaj's pastorate.

But Father Madaj's most important service to the parish lay in a different area. As became clear almost from the day of his arrival, this pastor's main interest was the liturgy. From the outset, Father Madaj took exceptional care with whatever services he presided over, trained his choir and acolytes expertly, and, through education and exhortation, brought his congregation into the decade of the Sixties with an informed and sensitive appreciation of the church's liturgical life. Then, in the period following the Second Vatican Council, Father Madaj's labors on behalf of liturgical sophistication came to fruition. Few pastors could have adapted their parishes to the liturgical reforms ordained by the Council with greater success than that achieved by Father Madaj and the people of Sacred Heart parish. When the Council's wishes became known, Father Madaj neither temporized nor objected but instead aligned himself squarely behind the movement for renewal. As soon as

the American bishops permitted, he installed in the sanctuary a portable altar of sacrifice that enabled the celebrant to face his congregation during Mass; he encouraged his people to participate fully in the liturgy by responding in word or song wherever required; and, as expeditiously as possible, he modified the marriage, baptismal, and funeral rites of the Church in accordance with the Council's directives. Throughout, Father Madaj's energy and enthusiasm for these tasks never flagged. When new hymns had to be introduced, he made it a point to rehearse them with the assembly prior to Mass; when the standard missallettes proved confusing, he went to the trouble of producing his own; when the ancient rite of concelebrating was revived, he brought together five fellow priests and with them concluded one memorable Forty Hours devotion with the first concelebrated Mass in the history of Sacred Heart Church.

These efforts paid off handsomely. At a time when some pastors and parishes were still clinging to obsolete forms, the people of Sacred Heart, thanks to the initiative of their pastor, were as liturgically advanced as any parish in the Diocese. That they still participate enthusiastically in the Church's liturgy is due in no small measure to the pioneering work performed by Father Madja. The liturgical education of his people is Father Madaj's lasting legacy.

The long and happy pastorate of Father John A. Madaj at Sacred Heart Church came to an end on January 28, 1970. A testimonial banquet was held in his honor two weeks later, and, after a moving farewell, Father Madaj graciously made way for his successor, the Reverend Daniel D. Olszewski, Though different from his predecessor in style and personality. Father Olszewski served Sacred Heart parish with no less zeal and no less significant effect. If today's parishioners own their knowledge and love of the post-conciliar liturgy largely to Father Madaj, they owe the splendid church in which they worship largely to Father Olszewski. Under his direction, the interior of Sacred Heart Church was completely restored and renovated over the course of the year 1971. Because this renovation was the first major one undertaken on the interior of the church in forty years, its scope was great. The entire church was repainted; a new altar of sacrifice, pulpit, and communion rail were installed; all statuary was cleaned and, where necessary, restored; new pews were placed in the nave and choir and new carpeting was laid all through the church. Father Olszewski also took care not to neglect the rest of the church edifice as well as the other church properties in his renovation plans. As part of the overall renovation, therefore, the church's red brick exterior was cleaned; the church hall was repainted; and the rectory's exterior was remodeled.

The result of this extensive labor was wonderful to behold. The 1971 renovation harmoniously blended modern styles and materials with Sacred Heart Church's traditional decor in such a way as to retain and enhance the basic character of the church while adjusting aspects of it to contemporary taste. Thus, in the church today, the main altar still rises in the rear of the sanctuary as a majestic backdrop and repository of the Blessed Sacrament; while, in keeping with the requirements of the contemporary liturgy, a more modest altar of sacrifice occupies the foreground of the sanctuary. In like manner, the stained glass windows flanking the nave retain the style and color they have always had; while austere carved stations of the cross which, in characteristic modern style, dramatize rather than portray the sufferings of our Lord, now occupy the spaces between them. By means of these and other felicitous touches, throughout Sacred Heart Church today, a balance reigns between traditional and contemporary aesthetics. Consequently, the 1971 renovation delighted old and young equally and must be regarded as one of the most successful ever undertaken in the parish.

To defray the cost of these projects, Father Olszewski and his parishioners mounted an initial building fund campaign as well as a large number of fund raising activities. The enthusiasm with which these latter were conducted and their evident popularity throughout the community have made them to this day an integral part of the parish's social life. Indeed, every season of the year since 1972, Sacred Heart Church has sponsored some activity, whether it be a Fall Festival or a summer picnic, that has attracted wide parish and community interest. As a result of such activities and of the generous financial support regularly rendered by the parish community as a matter of course, Father Olszewski was able to pay for the renovations he had superintended with relative ease. In fact, by the time of his departure, a substantial surplus had accumulated in the parish treasury.

Father Olszewski's tenure at Sacred Heart concluded on September 2, 1975. As it had done five years before, the parish paid its departing pastor an eminently deserved tribute at a farewell dinner given in his honor two weeks later. Rarely in the history of Sacred Heart parish had a pastor accomplished so much in the way of physical renewal in so short a time and with such superb effect as had Father Olszewski. The grief all felt on losing their pastor was, therefore, tempered by gratitude for the services this exemplary administrator had performed for the parish.

The September 2nd announcement of Father Olszewski's transfer and the appointment of a new pastor to Sacred Heart Church contained an extraordinary piece of additional news. On this day the people of Sacred Heart parish learned that Bishop J. Carroll McCormick had merged their congregation with the congregations of two neighboring Forest City parishes and had appointed Reverend Joseph E. Papka to administer the affairs of all three reorganized churches. The Bishop had decided that even though services would continue normally in each church and each would keep its own administrative identity, in the future Sacred Heart Church, St. Anthony's Church, and St. Michael's Church, heretofore separate and independent entities, would constitute one parish and should be considered as such by all parties concerned.

This news surprised the whole community as well as the members of the parishes affected, and all awaited the consequences of the reorganization somewhat apprehensively. The unprecedented nature of the Bishop's action left no one with any clue as to how such a union of three separate national parishes had fared previously. Many naturally wondered if the people of the three parishes could cooperate amicably and if the pastor could devote sufficient time to the affairs of each body; many voiced their fears that the consolidation was really only the first step in a plan to eliminate certain parishes altogether. At the time, pessimism about the success of the consolidation seemed far more common than confidence.

Today, approximately five years after the three parishes became one, most of these fears and apprehensions have dissipated. Cooperation and interaction among the parishioners has become far more the rule than the exception. Beginning with the children of the parish, who now receive First Communion and the Sacrament of Confirmation all together in one body at Sacred Heart Church, Father Papka has worked tirelessly to bring the members of the three parishes together in common endeavors, common spiritual societies, and occasionally in common worship. These efforts have induced the parishioners to move freely among each other and to assist each other readily. The participation of members of St. Anthony's and St. Michael's Churches in the various committees which have planned Sacred Heart Church's Diamond Jubilee Celebration is clear evidence of this mutual support the three bodies are now providing. The present arrangement might

best be described as symbiotic. Each church contributes its share to the maintenance of the whole parish, and by so doing, each derives benefits for itself. The plurality of ethnic backgrounds and traditions making up the whole is recognized at the same time as it is subsumed within the larger unity which is the Sacred Heart Parish Community.

Regarding Sacred Heart Church itself, Father Papka has made many contributions. Continuing the reorganization of the men's and women's societies which was begun by his predecessor, he has broadened the membership of each and has striven to revitalize them in the spirit of the modern church. He has also sponsored numerous educational activities, ranging from adult Bible Study classes to lay directed CCD programs for elementary and high school students. Father Papka has also made a number of improvements to the church itself. Over the past few years, he has had a new bell system and new roof installed for the church and lately has added a portico above and a glass enclosure around the church's main entrance to protect against the elements. In addition, for the Jubilee celebration this September, Father Papka has had much of the interior of the church repainted and redecorated.

Sacred Heart Parish, therefore, marks this milestone in its history with joy and thanksgiving. In this seventy-fifth year of its existence, the parish's membership is, with the addition of St. Anthony's and St. Michael's parishioners, large and stable; the great majority of its parishioners attend Mass and receive the Sacraments regularly; its young people remain loyal to their parish and give generously of themselves in its service; its church is strikingly beautiful and its other properties are well maintained; its books are balanced and its financial standing is sound.

How has it arrived at so enviable a condition? Perhaps the answer lies with those who throughout this chronicle have remained nameless. The names of all the pastors, their terms of service, their outstanding qualities, and their contributions to the spiritual or material well-being of the parish have been carefully recorded, but hardly any mention has been made of the individual persons who have made up the Sacred Heart parish community. This omission has been unavoidable because space simply would not permit the inclusion of the names of those families whose members have remained devoted parishioners over a span of three generations; of those parishioners who gave their lives in service to their country in four wars since 1917; of those present and former parishioners who have achieved great success in their professions or have made outstanding contributions to their communities or have entered the service of the Church as priests or religious; of those men, women, and young people who have assisted the pastors of this parish over the years as catechists, choir and society members, lectors, acolytes, ushers, and custodians, along with those who have donated their time and energy for all parish social functions. A history of a parish must describe buildings and name pastors, but neither beautiful buildings nor brilliant pastors can make a parish's history the continuing record of successful achievement which Sacred Heart parish's certainly is. Only those unacknowledged but never to be forgotten people who over seventy-five years have firmly supported their parish, brought honor to it in life or death, and spread its fame wherever they have walked, can be recognized as the subjects of this history and the authors of their parish's triumphs. To them alone does this history now finally offer due homage.

FORMER PASTORS

Rev. Leopold Suchowski (1903-1906)
Rev. James E. Gryczka (1906-1916)
Rev. Joseph Mroziewski (1916-1918)
Rev. Roman Wandalowski (1918-1920)
Rev. Edward Zawadzki (1920-1921)
Rev. Anthony Halicki (1921-1942)
Rev. Francis Kurkowski (1942-1945)
Rev. John P. Lipski (1946-1955)
Rev. John A. Madaj (1955-1970)
Rev. Daniel D. Olszewski (1970-1975)

PRIESTLY VOCATIONS

Rev. Anthony Lewandowski
Rev. John Juraszko
Msgr. P. P. Niebrzdowski
Rev. Martin Stankiewicz
Rev. John Kozlowski
Rev. Constantine Chrapowicki
Rev. Leo Kozlowski
Msgr. Stanley Piorkowski

VOCATIONS — NUNS

Sister M. Concelia
Sister M. Blogoslawa
Sister M. Humilia
Sister M. Henrietta
Sister M. Josepha
Sister M. Chrysantha
Sister M. Ignatia