



Seventy-Five Years St. John Cantius Church.

Anniversary 1893-1968 St. John Cantius Church, Chicago, IL, p. 39-49. CAP at Orchard Lake.

When an edifice erected to the honor and glory of God is completed, the Bishop of the diocese receives it in the name of God from the hands of the faithful through whose piety and generosity the church was built. The Bishop then solemnly blesses and dedicates the church to the exclusive purpose of divine worship and, from that moment on, the edifice is withdrawn from any and every profane use and it becomes verily and literally a "house of God".

It is just such a moment as this that the parishioners of St. John Cantius parish are prayerfully, thankfully, and very solemnly reliving and commemorating in this—the 75th year of life of their church. Spiritually renovated through missions and novenas, the People of God of St. John Cantius parish are fondly and nostalgically recalling to mind and spirit that moment on Christmas Eve, December 24th, 1893, when the Ordinary of the Archdiocese of Chicago, the Most Reverend Archbishop Patrick Feehan blessed and dedicated the "basement" church of the as yet not completed, beautiful and imposing, present-day structure of St. John Cantius Church.

The very first Holy Sacrifice of the Eucharist was celebrated on the following day, the glorious feast of Christmas, by the Very Reverend Simon Kobrzynski, C.R., the Delegate-Superior of the Fathers of the Resurrection in Chicago. It was truly the "Feast of the Nativity" at St. John Cantius parish that day, as Christ—at the words of consecration—was born again on the Altar of Sacrifice and, then, again at the words—"The Body of Christ"—He was born in the hearts and souls of the founding fathers of the parish, who with their families and many friends received Him in Holy Communion. Such, in brief, was the spiritual beginning of the newly-born St. John Cantius parish.

The mother of all the Polish parishes in the arch-diocese is St. Stanislaus Kostka, which is currently completing its 101st year of existence as a parish. From a rather meager group of twenty-five Polish immigrants, who settled in Chicago prior to 1867, St. Stanislaus Kostka parish grew and developed so rapidly that it soon began to give rise to other filial missions and parishes with truly astounding frequency. As the hundreds and thousands of Poles continued to emigrate from their homeland in search of a better, a more satisfying, and a more free life, the greater number of them continued to find their way to Chicago and continued to swell the population in the environs of St. Stanislaus Kostka. Chicago was then in the midst of a feverish rebuilding and reconstruction program due to the ravages caused by the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. In rapid succession there arose Holy Trinity Parish (1872), St. Josaphat's (1884), and St. Hedwig's (1888)—all under the organizational genius and spiritual direction of Father Vincent Barzynski, C.R., the pastor of St. Stanislaus Kostka. Soon many came to the opinion, at that time, that further divisions of St. Stanislaus Kostka and, therefore,

further multiplication of Polish parishes on the near northwest side of Chicago were now at an end. Such was not to be the case, however.

The steady arrival of new Polish immigrants in the 1890's quickly dispelled this notion. A great number of these settled in an area which soon acquired the name—"Polish Patch" (Wygynana Polska)— about one and one-eighth mile distant from Chicago's Main Post Office. These new arrivals, like the countless who came before them, were also a hardy and sturdy lot which fitted in perfectly and harmoniously with the bustling character of this sprawling city, ever impatient to grow and to become great. Unafraid to use their hard muscles, they swelled the ranks and numbers in every industry, factory, and business—and Chicago grew with them. Imbued with a great love for God and frequently hampered in the exercise of the external cult of their religion by distance and the changeable weather of the city, they once again approached Father Vincent Barzynski with the request of founding still another parish.

Father Vincent Barzynski, C.R., pastor of St. Stanislaus Kostka, was a truly remarkable priest of God and an indefatigable worker and organizer. His almost ceaseless labor for the Church and for souls was not limited merely to Chicago but it spilled itself over almost the entire Middle West—Illinois, Michigan, Nebraska and Wisconsin. Before his death in 1899, Father Vincent had played or was yet to play the important and inspiring role of directing the foundation, establishment and organization of some twenty-five parishes.

Perceiving the validity of the petition of the settlers in "Polish Patch", he went to work at once by naming a committee to study and to find a suitable site for their church; this was in 1892. Despite the panic and the depression of 1893, this search went on and within a few months several lots were purchased at Front and Carpenter Streets for the then very high and seemingly exorbitant sum of \$75,000. With the site purchased, Father Barzynski then entrusted the organizing and the building of the church and parish to the Very Reverend John Kasprzycki, C.R., first pastor of St. John Cantius.

The position of a pastor of a parish is beautifully described by Bishop Carroll, the first Bishop of the United States, who was consecrated August 15th, 1790. Addressing all the Catholics of our country, he said: "It is no longer enough for me to be inoffensive in my conduct and regular in my manners. God now imposes a severer duty upon me. I shall incur the guilt of violating my pastoral office if all my endeavors be not directed to bring your lives and all your actions to a conformity with the laws of God; to exhort, to conjure, to reprove, to enter into all your sentiments; to feel all your infirmities; to be all things to all, that I may gain all to Christ; to be superior to human respect; to have nothing in view but God and your salvation; to sacrifice to these health, peace, reputation, and even life itself; to hate sin and yet love the sinner...; to be patient and meek; to embrace all kinds of persons; to devise means for the religious education of Catholic youth—that precious portion of pastoral solicitude... These are now my duties —extensive, pressing, and indispensable duties." And these certainly were and continue to be the duties of the pastors of St. John Cantius. This occasion of the Diamond Jubilee serves but as a reminder to the parishioners of today to thank God for having given them good and worthy leaders throughout the years. Both, the patron, St. John Cantius, and the patroness, the Good Saint Anne, have interceded strongly for this great blessing to the parish.

With the coming of Father John Kasprzycki, C.R., as the first pastor, the work on building the new parish and church began immediately. Possessed with a great ability to organize and blessed with the necessary patience, he began his pastorate by hiring as architect, a Mr. A. Druiding, who drew

up the plans for the magnificent and imposing, Renaissance-Baroque structure of the present-day church. It was to measure 230 feet in length and 107 feet in width and have a capacity of 2000. The work has begun in the spring of 1893 and, soon, there began rising the footings and foundations of the basement, which was to serve as the first church. The blessing of the cornerstone, which took place in July of the same year, brought the first sense of achievement to the people and priests of the parish. The basement part, crudely finished on the inside, without pews, and with crudely fashioned altars of unfinished wood, became the scene of the first Mass offered at St. John Cantius that memorable Christmas Day of 1893. From then on, the parishioners of St. John Cantius had their own—although as yet unfinished—church and parish. And all this was accomplished within the time of less than a year. However, even the best laid plans sometimes take an unexpected turn. Just as rapid as was the progress in constructing the lower church, so crawlingly slow became the progress in finishing the upper church and the rest of the super-structure. A general economic recession and depression settled over Chicago and the rest of the country; unemployment grew with each day, and a general letdown in industry seemed to take over after the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. The famous Pullman strike, which began in May, 1894, became so serious that it became the first labor-management confrontation which involved the federal government in its dispute. As a result, progress slowed and the priests and people of the parish resorted to a great variety of means to raise even the smallest funds. A novena to St. Joseph was begun on the 9th of March, 1898 to implore the foster-father of Christ for his intercession in their behalf. Soon after the novena came to a close, at a momentous meeting of the 28th of March, the sum of \$3,000 was raised to try to bring the construction to an end. And, soon after that came the joyous announcement from the pastor that the dedication date was set for the month of October. The efforts of priests and people were doubled and redoubled in order to bring the construction to a successful close. The three bells had been installed in the two uneven belfries for over a year and they finally announced the joyous tidings of the blessing and dedication of the upper church. This was held in the afternoon of December 11th, 1898,—almost five years after the first Mass was celebrated in the lower church. Archbishop Patrick Feehan at the ceremonies expressed his great joy at this achievement and the fervent prayer that the future generations of the founding fathers of the parish would continue to thank them and bless them for their generosity under the hardest conditions, for their example, and for their zeal in spreading the Kingdom and Glory of God. The dedication ceremonies closed with Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament and the traditional "Niech Bedzie Pochwalony" ...(May Christ be Praised) in the Polish language.

Father Kasprzycki had done his work at St. John Cantius. With the death of Father Barzynski, the pastor of St. Stanislaus Kostka, Father Kasprzycki was transferred to the pastorate of the Mother of all Polish parishes in Chicago. He remained there for six years (1899-1905) worthily serving the parish and carrying on the work of his illustrious predecessor, the Rev. Vincent Barzynski. In 1905, the Community of the Fathers of the Resurrection elected Father Kasprzycki to the highest office of the congregation—that of Superior-General of the order, with residence in Rome, Italy. He served the order in this capacity from 1905-1920, achieving the longest tenure in this office because of World War I, which precluded any possibility of holding a General Chapter. It was therefore, from the Eternal City and as the Superior-General that he wrote a lengthy letter to the parishioners of St. John Cantius parish—on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of the parish—in which he fondly referred to the parishioners as "the first children that God's love had entrusted to his care that he might lead them by word and deed to an ever greater glory and love of God in peace and harmony." Father

Kasprzycki died while in residence in St. Joseph's Novitiate in Chicago on May 3, 1933.

With the departure of Father Kasprzycki from St. John Cantius for the pastorate of St. Stanislaus Kostka parish, the task of bringing the interior of the church to completion fell to his successors. Father Eugene Sedlaczek (1899-1901) began this task immediately, as well as the construction of the present-day rectory, which stands at the corner of Fry and Carpenter streets. Its construction was completed during the brief tenure of Father Stephen Dabkowski (1901-1902) who, wracked by a severe illness, died at the early age of 47 in 1917.

Father Stanislaus Rogalski (1902-1909), the next pastor, deserves most of the credit for finally completing the interior of the church. During his pastorate the impressive and warm interior of the church that is seen today received its character and direction. The church was painted for the first time and the altars were renewed. Father Rogalski also equipped the church with an organ, the funds for which began to be accumulated already during the pastorate of Father Kasprzycki. The famous clock on the high steeple of the church was installed in 1907. Father Rogalski, who endeared himself to all at St. John Cantius because of his friendly and fatherly character, left for the pastorate of St. Stanislaus Kostka (1909-1912) and, then, became the founding pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada which he served from 1915 until his death in 1933.

His successor, the Rev. John Kosinski, C.R. (1909-1914), left the post of rector of St. Stanislaus Kostka College to assume the pastorate of St. John Cantius. Renowned as a sacred orator and speaker and a progressive educator at heart, he brought many modern ideas to the parish. Accordingly, he installed the latest in ventilating systems for the healthful comfort of the parishioners who thronged the church at every service. He then suffused the interior of the church with the soft light of the most modern of electrical systems and, by installing stained glass in place of clear glass in the church windows, flooded the interior by daylight with the myriads of colors of sunlight. He also contracted for repainting the entire interior—a task which was begun during his tenure, the completion of which, however, he was not to see. Father Kosinski took ill in March, 1914 and died on May 1st of the same year. At his bedside at Columbia Hospital, Chicago, was the Very Rev. John Kasprzycki, C.R., the Superior-General of the Fathers of the Resurrection, who was then in the midst of a canonical visitation of the houses of the community. The funeral, on May 5th, brought out a throng of parishioners and friends of the pastor—the like of which, as to size, had almost never been seen before. The funeral Mass was celebrated by the Most Rev. Paul Rhode, then Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago and the eulogy was preached by the Rev. Ladislaus Zapala, C.R., then rector of St. Stanislaus Kostka College and a future Superior-General of the congregation (1920-1926). Father Kosinski, who died at the premature age of 44, was the only pastor at St. John Cantius to die in office.

An interim appointment to the pastorate—or rather administration—of the parish was the Rev. Vincent Rapacz, C.R., a most beloved assistant pastor at the parish since 1899. Father Vincent, however, loved "priestly" work too much to remain long in the position of administrator. He was the St. John Vianney of the parish; he was wont to speak of the priesthood as the "sweet yoke of Christ and a light burden". His greatest loves were conducting the many and varied services—saying Mass, conducting various devotions, preaching the Word of God, visiting the sick, and hearing confessions. He was a priest to whom time—in matter of hours spent in the confessional—had no limit. Yet, in his very short administration of the parish— from May, 1914 to March, 1915,— he remodelled and improved the entire interior of the rectory—the residence which he shared with his

rother-priests. After he was succeeded by the Rev. Stanislaus Siatka, C.R. in the pastorate, Father Vincent continued his work as assistant pastor at St. John Cantius until his death in 1931. He died on March 29, 1931, after 32 years of the most exemplary and saintly service to God and to the People of God of St. John Cantius— who, grateful, will never forget his love and work for them.

The Rev. Stanislaus Siatka, C.R., proved to be one of the ablest administrators that St. John Cantius ever had. Almost immediately upon assuming the office of pastor (1915-1920), Father Siatka had the old stairs fronting the church replaced with an imposing concrete stair-approach which added greatly to the grandeur of the already most impressive facade of the church. The lower and old 'basement' church area was made over into a spacious and modern auditorium and many larger and smaller halls for the meetings and assemblies of the many societies that existed in the parish. Having installed a new heating system, he also replaced the old wooden fences that encircled some of the property of the parish with the more pleasing and harmonious brick structure that stands even to this day. His greatest contribution, however, was to bring to reality a dream that the entire parish had or a long time, the building of a new and modern convent for the Sisters teaching in the parochial school. This was begun in 1916 and completed and dedicated in August of 1917. The parish now—at long last—could boast of a complete complex: it had a beautiful and artistically imposing church with a capacity of 2000; it prided itself on a very practical and newly remodeled rectory; it had built for its more than 2000 students the latest and most modern of parochial schools and, finally, had constructed the last word in convents—at the time—which sheltered and housed 30 Sisters of the Congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame with its own little House of God, the chapel, a kitchen and dining area, and with enough small, but comfortable rooms so that each Sister could study and relax in the privacy of her own room.

Yes—the parish was really ready to celebrate its accomplishments. And no more fitting occasion for this could have been provided than the Silver Jubilee of the parish. Father Siatka with his committee and parishioners appointed a Sunday in October of 1918 as the official day on which this event was to be observed. After a two-week mission, preached by Jesuit Fathers, the solemn high Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated by Father Francis Gordon, C.R., the Delegate-General of the Fathers of the Resurrection in Chicago. Father Vincent Rapacz, the "Vianney of St. John Cantius", was deacon and Father Ladislaus Filipski was subdeacon. Father Ladislaus Zapala, then a rector of St. Stanislaus Kostka College and the future Superior-General of the congregation, preached the inspiring sermon. There was also an afternoon service, conducted by the Rev. John Obyrtacz, C.R., and the Memory Book on the occasion of the Jubilee relates that the church was "thronged to overflowing from morning till night by a grateful people humbly thanking God for His love of them and His goodness toward them, as well as, for the precious freedoms of religion and speech which they enjoyed in the United States". In 1920, Father Siatka was transferred to the pastorate of St. Hedwig Parish.

The work of the pioneering priests and people was finished. The parish was firmly established and it seemed that the work of the succeeding pastors would consist principally in maintenance and the continuation of the spiritual and material growth of the parish. Father Stephen Kowalczyk, C.R. (1920-1929), while zealously performing the administrative duties of pastor, saw in the pastorate an opportunity to foster and promote religious vocations. He dedicated himself to the work by making it possible for the graduates of the parochial school to continue their education—especially at Weber High School. His personal and continued interest in them and his

constant encouragement and understanding prompted many of them to enter the novitiate of the Fathers of the Resurrection. His enthusiasm for this work never waned and he was to continue in the same way during his pastorate at St. Hyacinth parish (1930-1939). During his two pastorates, Father Kowalczyk was personally responsible for more than 30 vocations to the priesthood in the Congregation of the Resurrection and, truly and fittingly, deserved the title of "Zealous Promoter of Religious Vocations".

New forces, however, began to take over. About the middle of the "Roaring Twenties"—with the country and the city enjoying the post World War I wave of prosperity and with the city changing from the horse-and-buggy days to the automobile—St. John Cantius parish was dealt its first critical blow. The construction of Ogden Boulevard dislocated many parishioners of St. John Cantius, forcing them to move to other areas and regions—thus breaking up what had been a solid ethnic neighborhood. Even the people who remained in the area began to think twice before sending their children to the parochial school out of fear of the tremendously increased traffic. While the parents themselves remained loyal to the church—travelling by car or streetcar on Sundays—their children attended other schools. The number of pupils began to decline.

This then was the situation into which the Rev. Walter Bartylak, C.R. (1929-1934) walked when he became the pastor succeeding Father Kowalczyk. Add to the above scene the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression of the "Thirties"— and we have a picture that is anything but promising. Yet, Father Bartylak, the first pastor of St. John Cantius of American birth, was equal to the task. He immediately began organizing the youth of the parish into various societies, the activities which were designed to prevent frequently unemployed young men and women of the parish from becoming restive. In this, he was highly successful. Throwing open the doors of the halls and other meeting places in the parish, he drew the youth to the parish and with each activity, strengthened their loyalty to God, country and parish proportionately.

This can be attested to even today by many who then were members of these societies and who even today prove over and over again a feeling of special kinship or brotherhood for each other. The Memory Book, on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the parish in 1943, mentions that the most active groups during the tenure of Father Bartylak were the St. John Cantius Sportsmen, the Sodality of St. Therese of the Infant Jesus, the Panama Circle, and the Scatter Joy Circle. Despite so much activity and in spite of the depression, Father Bartylak found time and money to renovate the entire sanctuary of the church. Beginning with the vaulting of the sanctuary, he embellished it with a truly artistic Resurrection of Christ by the Polish artist, Lesiewicz; he renovated the main altar with a redesigned and more beautiful throne for the Eucharistic King, and he installed a special lighting system for the sanctuary, which even now, continues to highlight the awesome and real presence of Christ among us, especially during the Forty Hours Devotions and on the other more solemn feasts of the Church. When Father Bartylak was named superior of the newly founded Resurrectionist Mission Band in Castleton-on-the-Hudson, New York, he was succeeded in the pastorate by the Rev. Theodore Klopotoski, C.R., (1934-1939). Father "Ted"—he soon acquired this shortened but friendly and endearing name—continued in the traditional Resurrectionist manner of pastors. With maintenance demands at a minimum, he devoted all his effort to the spiritual betterment of the parish. Working with a calm that belied the times, he sustained and strengthened the parishioners in their faith and loyal citizenship throughout the height of the depression. His administrative ability received its due recognition in his appointment as pastor of

St. Hyacinth parish, a post that he held from 1939 until 1954.

The next pastor, Father Joseph Prusinski, C.R., brought an entirely new atmosphere to the parish. This was the time of World War II. Always genial himself, he hosted as guests of the parish, the Consul-General of Poland in Chicago, Dr. Charles Ripa, and General Ladislaus Sikorski of the Polish Army, who later died in a plane crash in Lisbon, Portugal, while returning to the Polish government in exile in London, England. In 1942, Father Prusinski (1939-1942) was transferred to the Mission Band to continue strengthening and confirming the people of Polish descent in their love of both Poland and the United States during the terrible years of World War II.

After a brief interim pastorate by Father Leonard Long, C.R., Father John Grabowski, C.R. was named to the pastorate (1942-1951). Young and energetic (he was then only 35 years of age) and completely imbued with a love and zeal reminiscent of true pioneer priests, Father Jack was the ideal choice for pastor in the difficult days ahead. With the end of the war some three years in the offing and with much of the youth of the parish away at war or busily engaged in Red Cross work, Father Jack began preparations for the observance of the Golden Jubilee of the parish. This proved to be an occasion of great emotional trial for many of the older parishioners.

What had been a great and large parish on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee in 1918— now in 1943—it was in the throes of regression, not spiritual but statistical. At that time, the parish numbered about 23,000 souls and had 2,300 pupils in its school. Now—in 1943—it had only 376 students in its classrooms. This statistic alone should be enough to describe the ravages that time and change can wreak even on the best of works. Rather than become discouraged, Father Jack redoubled his efforts and together with the generous parishioners even managed to rebuild the high stair approach to the church and to add a bit of green to Carpenter Street to the right and left of the new stairs. The new stairs featured conveniently spaced hand rails which made ascending and descending the stairs much more comfortable and safe for the older members of the parish. With the war at an end, the environs of the parish began to change even more rapidly. The youth, upon marriage, moved to the newer areas of the city or to the suburbs, while the area of St. John Cantius began to fill with newcomers to the city from the southern states, Puerto Rico and the displaced people from areas that were being rehabilitated. Soon, what once had been a solid Polish region could hardly be recognized as such—except for the very few oldtimers who remained despite all changes. Father Jack continued to struggle despite all odds and—in 1951—he was appointed pastor of St. Mary of the Angels parish, where he built a very modern convent for the Sisters. From 1958 to 1964, Father Grabowski was Provincial Superior of the Fathers of the Resurrection and it was during this tenure in that office that the new novitiate of the Resurrectionist Fathers was built in Ridgefield, near Woodstock, Illinois, as well as the new Gordon Technical High School at California and Addison.

Father Stanislaus Duda (1951-1957), who was an assistant pastor under Father Grabowski since 1942, was named the next pastor. Father Duda, imitating the zeal and energy of his tutor, literally spent himself and his health in the pastorate of St. John Cantius. Probably, the most cruel blow which he received during his pastorate was the cutting and constructing of the Kennedy Expressway, which demolished thousands of homes and forced thousands of people to move from the area. However cruel this blow to the parish, still it was a necessary step in the growth of the city and the immediate suburbs. The post World War II industrial boom, the unbelievable increase in the number of automobiles after the war, the almost countless numbers of people travelling

to work by car—all of these worked together to make new and faster arteries an absolute necessity, if the city were to continue its growth and development. The pity of it is that a beautiful and well-maintained parish complex— like that of St. John Cantius—had to be squarely in the middle of these developments. Father Stanley Duda was transferred in 1957 to the assistant pastorate at St. Hedwig church, where he died an untimely death on April 10, 1960, at 48 years of age.

Father John Wojcik, C.R. (1957-1963), tried everything that was possible to stem the unrelenting tide of the parish in reverse. The area which now was fast developing into a dismal "ghetto" type brought about the organization of various neighborhood coun which deliberated on redevelopment of the area but, so far, little—if anything—constructive was decided. Despite many long meetings and deliberations in both the neighborhood and the city council, nothing of a concrete nature has been begun. And the downward trend of the parish has not been stemmed. In 1963, Father Wojcik was appointed superior of the novitiate of the Fathers of the Resurrection and he was succeeded in the pastorate by the Rev. John Pawelczak, C.R. Father John, like his immediate predecessors in the pastorate, is not wonting in courage and zeal. Untiring, he planned the observance of the Diamond Jubilee of the parish on October 20, 1968. He lives with a hope and a prayer that someday St. John Cantius will again reflect actually its former glory in growth and development. Meanwhile, he has readied the church in such a way that the exterior and the interior have almost never looked better. The parish school which was closed as a parochial school in June, 1967, houses, today, the experimental Montessori Method school and the Head Start program. The large convent—which once hosted more than 30 teachers of the School Sisters of Notre Dame— today is the official headquarters of the Archdiocesan Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. The good Sisters who began teaching at St. John Cantius in November, 1893, would have been observing their Diamond Jubilee of teaching simultaneously with the parish. They will be sorely missed by all the parishioners of St. John Cantius on this occasion. Yet, their countless spiritual sons and daughters, scattered now throughout the country, shall never forget that it was they who opened their young minds to a knowledge of God and who taught them to lead a good life in whatever walk of life God and destiny have meant for them. These spiritual sons and daughters—the good Sisters can feel—are even now continuing their good and holy work as they teach their children and their children's children. The fruits of the work the Sisters did at St. John Cantius can never die and are only being widened and multiplied with each new generation.

These, then, are some of the reflections— In Retrospect—on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee of the parish. And it will be a glorious and heartfelt "Te Deum Laudamus..." that will be chanted again by all of the People of God at St. John's. All—the priests, living and dead, who served or are serving in the parish—the Sisters, who have toiled so hard for 74 years—the parishioners, from the founding fathers through all the generations until now—are united spiritually today as never before with the thought that only God can know the wondrous deeds, the wondrous good, and all else that have been wrought at St. John Cantius to His Greater Honor and Glory during the past three-quarters of a century.

Rev. Louis Tusiński C.R., Editor