



Saint Hedwig Church History

Saint Hedwig Church Celebrating Ninety Years,
Wilmington, DE. CAP at Orchard Lake.

The earliest Polish immigrants of our city came mostly from the Prussian partition of Poland. Arriving in Wilmington in the later part of the nineteenth century, they were attracted to Sacred Heart Parish that was staffed by the German Benedictines. These priests realized the need to minister full time to the Polish in their native tongue and thus purchased two plots of land at the intersection of Linden & Harrison Streets. The new parish was founded in October of 1890 and placed under the patronage of Saint Hedwig (Sw. Jadwiga) the thirteenth century Duchess of Poland & Patroness of Silesia. Father Richard Aust O.S.B. was the first pastor. The original building that served as the church & school was soon too small for the swelling crowds that were immigrating to this area.

Taking over from the Benedictine administration, Rev. John S. Gulcz appointed a committee on June 30, 1899 for raising money to erect a new church. On November 9, 1899, plans were added to erect a new parsonage (rectory) at the same time. A then staggering amount of \$90,000 was needed to complete the church & rectory. Soon, a collection of donations began with monthly door-to-door canvassing throughout the neighborhood. The area was divided into several districts and the smallest acceptable donation was one dollar a month. A total of \$30,000 was collected and a loan was taken from the Equitable Guarantee and Trust Company in the amount of \$60,000 and was paid in full on the eve of the Great Stock Crash, October 15, 1929.

Admiring a newly built church in Brooklyn, Father Gulcz hired the same architect, Brilmaier & Sons of Milwaukee, to design his church & rectory. Mr. Brilmaier was a schoolmate of Father Gulcz. Both men desired to advertise his architectural abilities in this area by allowing this church to serve as a model. The church & rectory were constructed by the John E. Healy Construction Company, then located on South Broom Street. The cornerstone laying ceremony was on Sunday, July 3, 1904 at 3:30 P.M. Visitors from Chester & Philadelphia were met at the wharf of the Wilmington Steamboat Company by the various Church societies. A large parade was formed and marched to the bishop's home at 3rd & Jackson Streets, proceeding to the old church on Linden Street, then to the site of the present church. The cornerstone was blessed and laid by Bishop John J. Monaghan and assisted by Father Gulcz.

The church is neo-Gothic in style. Massive granite forms the foundation, while the walls are of gray brick. Trimmings are of cut Bedford stone and galvanized iron, while Bangor quarry slate covered the roof. Its twin towers rise to a height of 135 feet, and a third steeple, smaller in size, was erected above the transept. It is the only church in the Diocese of Wilmington and the State of Delaware

with twin towers. The interior has supportive columns that divide the nave of the church while holding the three vaulted ceiling. The dimensions are 138 feet by 60 feet, while at the transept, the width is 70 feet. The original interior included gas lighting, wooden altars and an ornate Gothic pulpit. The pews, confessionals & woodwork reflected the Gothic motif, with pointed arches and tall, slender spindles. There were also two matching Baptismal fonts. The older plaster statues, including the Stations of the Cross, were made in Chicago by Daprato Studios. Some were made by The Bernardini Studios of New York.

Paintings of religious themes adorned the walls next to the stained glass windows. All the original windows were made in the U.S.A. of pine framing and with various colored Kokomo Glass, typical of the turn-of-the century period. Most likely, the frames and windows were crafted on site. The North transept Rose window shows Our Lady of Mount Carmel presenting a scapular, and the souls being saved from the fires of purgatory. The South transept window shows the Holy Trinity surrounding Our Lady. The facade Rose window (behind the organ) contains an image of our patroness Saint Hedwig in the center. The North wall windows depict Christ in Gethsemane and Our Risen Lord with St. Mary Magdalene at the tomb. The South wall includes the Holy Family and the Annunciation.

The window nearest the Blessed Mother altar depicted St. John baptizing Christ, and across on the Sacred Heart side was the top section of a window (never a full window) with the image of Czestochowa & the Sacred Heart. Beneath this window is the large painting of Mater Admirabilis (Matki Boskiej Przedziwnej) donated by the members of a mutual aid society by that name, formed in 1904. The oil on canvas portrays the Virgin Mary in holy repose while in the midst of spindling. She is entitled "Mother Most Admirable". It was surrounded with red & white light bulbs, which were lit whenever Mass was offered for one of their members.

An article that appeared in the April 3, 1905 edition of The Journal Every Evening read, "Thousands Witness Dedication of Church". The dedication of St. Hedwig Church began with a solemn procession from the rectory to the new church. The congregation circled the building as Bishop Monaghan sprinkled the walls with holy water. Once inside, the interior walls and the sanctuary were blessed & consecrated. The dedication was followed by High Mass and then by Forty Hours Devotion. A full orchestra accompanied the choir of 50 voices, selected from several Catholic choirs throughout the city.

St. Hedwig Church is proud to have four real bells which are located in the South tower. Each bell bears the name of a saint; the largest is Maria (2000 lbs.), then Hedwig (800 lbs.) then John (600 lbs.) and finally Stanislaus (100 lbs.). The bells were cast by the McShane Bell Foundry in Baltimore, MD and dedicated in 1905. The original pipe organ was installed on July 27, 1912. It was made and installed by the Estay Organ Co. of Battleboro, Vermont. The original organ cost \$3,000 and Andrew Carnegie donated \$1,500 toward its purchase. The rest of the cost was paid by \$1,000 in cash and a note for \$500, bearing interest at 6% due December 8, 1912. The original organ received automatic electrically powered bellows in the 1950's and was completely rebuilt with a new console in the Autumn of 1973 at the cost of \$12,500 by the Mungdler-Hunter Pipe Organ Co. of Philadelphia. The original organ had 688 pipes, and presently has 905 pipes. The large ornamental pipes were lowered in 1989 after the front Rose window was restored. This allowed the window to be viewed from inside the church.

October of 1939 took on special significance as the parish celebrated its Golden Jubilee. Renovations were underway, as Father Gulcz had contracted the Felix Lorenzoni Ecclesiastical Marble Studios of Pietrasana, Italy to replace the original wooden altars, pulpit & altar rail. Because the ship transporting it was held up by the British at Gibraltar, the new high altar was delayed in coming. In May of 1940 the high altar was consecrated by Bishop Edmond FitzMaurice. Adorned with spires, it stood 28 feet high and 15 feet wide, with a blue Venetian Mosaic background for a Calvary grouping, which includes the crucified Christ, the Blessed Mother, St. Mary Magdalene & St. John the Beloved. The statues on either side of the altar in niches are those of our patroness St. Hedwig and St. Stanislaus Kostka. A white marble overlay looks like the tracery of a stained glass window, laid over light brown marble. Six mosaics along the top depict symbols from the crucifixion: pillar & whip, seamless garment; Pilate's ewer & basin; a draped cross & urn; Veronicas veil; the cock that crowed three times; & hammer and tongs. This altar was given by Our Holy Rosary Society and Maryanna & Sr Antoni Kwiatkowski.

The matching altar of the Sacred Heart was erected in memory of Walenty & Ewa Dobek. Its four mosaics depict symbols of Christ: Chalice & Host; the cross, ladder, lance & sponge from His crucifixion; The Sacred Heart; & the crown of thorns & nails. Our Blessed Virgin Mary Sodality donated the present Immaculate Conception altar. Its mosaic depicts that of Mary: a pure white flower; a red mystical rose; the snake & apple of the first Eve; & the twelve stars from Revelation. The three new altars were complimented by a white marble ambo & altar rail. The design mirrored the window tracery style.

Sometimes between the erection of the church and 1940, paintings had been added in the two bays directly above the original wooden high altar. On the left was St. Wojciech (Adalbert) preaching to King Mieszko I, & on the right was our patroness, St. Hedwig blessing her son who was going out into battle against the Tartars. It was probably during the 1939-40 renovations of the church that the two historical paintings were moved to the side bays (over the sacristy doors) closing and covering the two upper chancery windows.

At this time, artisans richly painted (oil on canvas) the upper portion of the sanctuary. From the molded pivotal figure of the Holy Spirit flows a heavenly appearance. First, two emblems: on the left is the symbol of the great Jagiellonian Dynasty of Poland; the other is the Papal Coat of Arms of Pope Benedict XV, who reigned from 1914 to 1922. These are followed by ten standing angels holding symbols relevant to the Catholic Church, including the seven sacraments. From the left is an angel wearing a priestly stole and offering prayers. The second angel holds a cross and gives a blessing of penance & absolution. The next angel holds a pillow with a wedding ring and the following two angels hold Eucharistic symbols of the Body & Blood of Christ. The sixth angel holds the Baptismal shell. The following wears a priestly stole and holds the anointing oil of the sick. The eighth angel holds the keys to the Kingdom of God while the following angel holds the sweet Chrism of Confirmation. The last angel holds the lily of innocence.

Under these ten erect angels were painted ten additional angels in circular design (these were removed in the 1960 renovation). Three large paintings were added on the walls directly behind the main altar. These too are angelic. Two are sacrificial themes: on the left is the Lamb of God. In the middle are painted 12 "puti" winged angel heads just above the high altar (the third, single head on

the right side is that of Father Joseph Delikat who was responsible for the paintings). On the right is upheld the cross of salvation. Also at this time, the angel with the cross and the angel with the lamb were painted over the side altars. At the very center of the transept ceiling were painted the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke & John.

In March of 1959 Father Edward Wisniewski, as administrator, embarked on an ambitious renovation project. A \$150,000 face lift began that May with replacing all the slate on the church roof & towers, installing new gutters, placing brick corbelling to replace the copper cornices, and steam cleaning & pointing the exterior brickwork. In 1960 the church interior was decorated by Richard Panzironi of New York. Panzironi removed from the sanctuary ceiling the ten angels in circular design and replaced them with the present symbols from the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Painted on a blue background are ten Marian titles. From the left: Mother of God, Mystical Rose, Queen of the Apostles, Queen Conceived without Original Sin, Arc of the Covenant, Seat of Wisdom, Queen of the Most Holy Rosary, Mother of Divine Grace, Mother of Our Savior & Mother Most Pure. Panzironi added a gold leaf border around the paintings of the four evangelists on the ceiling. Stars were added to the vaults above the wings of the transepts. The Stations of the Cross were neutralized in color. Very popular in church art at the time, the walls were painted an olive green and the sanctuary walls a dark rose color.

Next to the BVM altar, the window depicting Christ's Baptism was replaced by a new one, depicting the same theme and was in memory of the 70th Priesthood Anniversary of Rt. Rev. Msgr. John S. Gulcz. The price was \$3,000. The small window above the painting of Matki Boskiej Przedziwnej was also replaced. The new window included a Pelican (Eucharistic symbol), and the Sacred & Immaculate Hearts. The two smaller windows behind the high altar were also replaced. One window portrays St. Peter, the other portrays St. Paul. After the church's wood & tile floor had been replaced with terrazzo during the summer of 1960 by Arthur Pavoni Co. of Wilmington, Baird Seating Co. of Baltimore replaced the dark, original pews with new light oak pews. A plaque in the church's vestibule lists donors to the new pew fund. New oaken wainscoting was installed along the side walls and across the entire sanctuary and new matching confessionals were installed. During these renovations, the upper church was closed and worship was held in the lower level. The renovations were completed in early 1961.

After a potentially devastating fire was quickly controlled (which started by a votive candle), the walls of the church received a fresh coat of paint in 1971, when the color was changed to a pastel green and the sanctuary to a rose color. In the early 1980's the building was added on the National Register Places in the State of Delaware. It was at this time that the building began to show its true age. Stress cracks were visible on the walls, the roof leaked in a few areas, some of the stained glass was fading and/or cracking, the South transept wall had moved a few inches away from the roof, and the ceilings were soiled with remnants of everyday dirt and the carbon from the candles.

Most of the preliminary leg-work started in the late 1980's. Inspections were conducted, experts were called to estimate the various jobs and committees were beginning to form to plan for what would be the biggest restoration of the church in over 30 years. The first major task was to secure the transept walls from moving further from the roof. High above the church, in the huge but dangerous attic, project engineer Greddell & Associates and general contractor, Tim O'Connell & Sons,

fastened the walls with steel reinforcements, an unseen safety feature that cost over \$90,000. At the same time, a major campaign called "Project 2000" was underway to secure the funds needed to overhaul a building of this size and age. A total of \$850,000 was pledged by many devoted parishioners and friends to renovate the church and also in the future to renovate the school and convent.

The next major danger was found in the two large transept Rose windows. Since their placement in 1904, the lead holding's were greatly weakened because of oxidation but especially due to span & weight. More so, the pine frames were greatly rotted. Two new frames and reloading of glass were advised as most prudent by experts. To keep with the original design of things, new steel reinforced redwood frames were meticulously constructed from the original design and the original glass cleaned and reloaded in place. Each transept Rose window cost approximately \$90,000 (the original cost to build the church & rectory in 1904). With the exception of the four large windows in the towers that also received large frame reconstruction, all other windows in the church were in sound condition and thus cleaned, repaired where needed, and also given exterior protection by the Willet Stained Glass Studios of Philadelphia.

For three months, until the reopening of the church on Palm Sunday 1994, Masses, Baptisms & funerals were celebrated in the temporary worship space in the basement of the church. Massive scaffolding was erected in January 1994 for Emmanuel Utti & Co. of Philadelphia who was awarded the painting & artistic contract. In dialogue with the committees, he did not want to disturb any of the historical treasures of the church but rather clean f; and refurbish them. His intent was to brighten the interior and bring it back, as close as possible, to its original grandeur. Light hues of beige, bone and gray were used to open and give height to the interior.

The Stations of the Cross were once again painted in natural colors. The murals were all cleaned, touched-up & regilded in synthetic gold leaf. The only exception was the removal of the Sts. Adalbert & Hedwig murals that were found to be crumbling and thus put into the archives. This allowed for the original chancery windows to be reopened for needed repairs and to give natural lighting within the sanctuary. In lieu of these, Mr. Utti painted a mural under the choir as a welcome for all who enter. It depicts our patroness, Saint Hedwig holding our church and giving us her blessing. Around her are saints relevant to our parish. To her left are three martyrs: St. Adalbert who preached the Gospel & converted thousands in Poland is directly in back while St. Stanislaus, Bishop of Cracow (Patron of Poland), is in the middle of the trio. Of this century is St. Maximilian Kolbe, the Franciscan priest who was held prisoner & killed in Auschwitz during World War II. To the right of our patroness are two holy people who greatly influenced our parochial education. St. John Neumann founded the Catholic School System in America and was our bishop when Wilmington was under the Diocese of Philadelphia. Lastly, is Blessed Mary Angela Truszkowska who founded the Felician Sisters who while in her lifetime begun to staff our school & continue the apostolate today.

To keep with our pious tradition of candles but also to prudently protect the interior from carbon, a votive area was created in the side vestibule near the rectory. Here, the original wrought iron frame holds candles that venerate the revered icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa. Lighting was re-engineered to save utility costs and also to create proper highlighting. Of most emphasis is

the Altar of Sacrifice that originally was placed in 1955 in the convent chapel and brought to the sanctuary of the church in 1993 to commemorate the centennial of the founding of its donor - The Holy Rosary Society. This white marble & mosaic altar depicts the Lamb of God and has a band of grapes on the top. Two angels keep watch for the Coming of the Lord in Glory.

Compiled by Rev. Joseph Piekarski & Edward A. Lipka. Research by Rev. Joseph Piekarski, Edward A. Lipka & Thomas I. Phillips III. Sources: The Journal Every Evening (News Journal); The Wilmington Library Microfilm, The Historical Society of Delaware. Adam Rosiak. Wiadomości. "40 Lat Kapłaństwa Ks. Jana S. Gulcz" 1930. Photographer was John Rucinski.