

## **The History of St. Joseph's Church, Everson Pennsylvania 1887-2022**

Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, Everson remains rich in the tradition that began August 21, 1887 with the first mass, celebrated by a young priest by the name of Fr. Szmigiel. The parish was then officially established on September 15<sup>th</sup>.

From the church's inception, Bishop Phelan of the Pittsburgh Diocese appointed Fr. Szmigiel, a newly ordained priest, as St. Joseph's first pastor. Fr. Szmigiel had served as an assistant at St. John the Baptist parish in Scottdale just prior to his appointment. Fr. Szmigiel was educated in Poland, in Rome, and at the seminary in Louvain in Belgium. He completed his studies for the priesthood in Beatty (now Latrobe), Pennsylvania and was ordained at Saint Vincent's Seminary. He served at St. Joseph's for 14 years until he died in 1901 at the age of 39. The young Polish priest is recognized as the founding father of St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church.

Saint Joseph Church has the distinction of being the oldest Polish parish in the Diocese of Greensburg and the third oldest in Western Pennsylvania. A Polish church had been the goal of the many Polish people who had come to settle along Jacob's Creek and earn their livelihood in the 1800's. These people lived a rather solitary life at first, not organized to any ethnic affiliation and not understanding nor being understood at the English-speaking parish they had to attend. Slowly, however, these Poles began to get acquainted, and they organized various lodges and societies, the first under the patronage of St. Joseph. With the thought of starting their own church, these groups purchased several lots and a wooden building in the area of Vance and Painter Streets in Everson where today stands St. Joseph's Church.

The parish currently consists of the Church, former School and rectory. The first church was the 40x20 wooden frame structure purchased in 1887 to satisfy the needs of the non-English speaking Polish families. Originally known as Major Knapp's Episcopalian Chapel, it also served as Saint John the Baptist Roman Catholic Church until 1882 when St. John's Congregation purchased property in Scottdale.

Less than a month after the parish of Saint Joseph celebrated its first mass in the little church. Thomas Stochowiak had the honor of being the first person baptized. This historic event took place on September 11, 1887. The next day, Michael Baran and Elizabeth Behrin became the first couple united in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony at St. Joseph's.

After just one year, the small church building was becoming increasingly inadequate for a parish that had grown from 87 families to include over a hundred families. The church was then converted to a parish school and a larger wooden church was built. Soon other Slavic nationalities, in addition to the Polish people of Everson, began attending St. Joseph's and the second church, like the first one became too small. While some of the people went on to attend new churches in the surrounding communities of Uniontown, Connellsville, Mount Pleasant, Mammoth, and Footdale, St. Joseph's still needed a larger church.

In 1892, five years after its founding, St. Joseph's received the good news that a new and larger church was to be built. At a cost of \$8000, the red brick building, which presently serves the parish, was erected. The cornerstone was laid on July 31, 1892 by the Rt. Rev. R. Phelan., D.D., Bishop of Pittsburgh. The

church was dedicated on May 14, 1893 by the Very Rev. Regis Canevin, subsequently named Bishop of the Pittsburgh Diocese.

The new church, built in the Gothic style similar to those in Poland, was constructed in the shape of a cross 112 feet long and 44 feet wide. The original steeple reached 156 feet into the sky, but after being damaged by lightning, it was dismantled and reduced to the present 115 foot high steeple.

The building that had served for four years as the church was converted into a four-classroom school. Saint Joseph's School started in 1888, one year after the parish formed. From 1888-1898 the school was staffed by lay teachers. Then in 1898, the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth assumed charge until 1920. In 1924 the 3 story school was built. From 1920 until the closure of the school in 1990 the Sisters of the Holy Spirit (formerly the Sisters of the Holy Ghost) had been teaching at the school.

A convent for the sisters had been built in 1897.

The first rectory for the pastor was built in 1889, was damaged by fire on May 17, 1921; it was rebuilt the same year.

The church itself has undergone two major renovations: the first in 1937 in celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> jubilee and the second in 1969. The most notable change in the appearance of the church came with second renovation. At that time, the sanctuary was renovated to allow the altar to face the congregation and to meet other requirements necessitated by the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council; other extensive work was done to the church interior and to the exterior as well.

For the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary several projects were undertaken to improve both the interior and exterior of the church. St. Joseph's continued to improve, preserve and beautify the church. The church masonry has been repaired and pointed. New furnaces were installed in the church. The church roof was replaced in 2011.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 2012 Bishop Brandt of the Greensburg Roman Catholic diocese led the people in a Concelebrated Mass of Thanksgiving on the occasion of the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St. Joseph's church. Bishop Lawrence E. Brandt delivered the homily. The concelebrant was Benedictine Archabbot Douglas R. Nowicki of Saint Vincent Archabbey, who was a parishioner of St. Joseph Parish and a student in its former parochial school.

Projects completed during the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary year included: a walkway above the ceiling, complete interior patching and painting, and installation of an air condition system.

St. Joseph's was partnered with St. John the Baptist by the diocese of Greensburg on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2013.

Some of the projects completed leading up to the 135<sup>th</sup> anniversary year included at least; adding a 12-space parking lot in place of the Convent, replacing walls around the large parking lot as well as along the church, replacing concrete sidewalks, adding new church signage, replacing heating systems, replacing windows in the school, installing a new bathroom on the altar level of the church and repairing the steps leading up to the school from the church level.

Over the years many vocations to both the priesthood and religious life were nourished within this faith community. The most famous perhaps, was Father Justin Figas, founder of the Father Justin Rosary Hour,

or Godzina Rozanchow Ojca Justyna, heard weekly throughout the U.S.A. and Canada from Buffalo, New York. Presently Father Justin is in consideration for sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church.