

St. Casimir Church site of Our Lady of Divine Providence Parish (Milwaukee, WI)

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Connects to:

- St. Hedwig Church is the “mother” church to St. Casimir
- St. Mary of Czestochowa Church was an offshoot or “daughter” church of St. Casimir Church, it later merged with St. Casimir to form Our Lady of Divine Providence Parish.

Historical Overview

St. Casimir's parish began on the 11th of November, 1893. At the time, the Riverwest neighborhood was home to a vibrant and growing Polish community, which had been drawn to the region due to the number of tanneries then active there. The neighborhood was so large, in fact, that the Archdiocese of Milwaukee decided that its main church St. Hedwig's was far too small to meet the needs of the community. Many families had to walk miles to attend one of a number of crowded Sunday services. Even worse, St. Hedwig's school was filled to capacity and many children were unable to attend. This was a very real problem, as the Catholic Church had recently declared that each parish in the United States should have a parochial school attached, and strongly encouraged parents to send their children to one of these catholic schools, rather than attend a public school. The Church, and many parents, feared that public schools were then being used as a way to indoctrinate students in the dominant protestant faith of the United States. Even more damning, for some, was the fact that public schools might force their children to learn English and lose their Polish identity. This later view was only confirmed just a few years prior, in 1889, when Wisconsin passed the hated Bennett Law which had sought to make the language of instruction in all schools – both public and private – English.

Because of this overcrowding, a new school was needed. And because a new school was needed, this also meant that a new parish church was needed as well. Archbishop Frederick X. Katzner made the decision to cut off the northwestern corner of St. Hedwig's to create the new parish, which was to be called Saint Casimir's after the great Polish royal saint. He also appointed Father Tarasiewicz to oversee the building of the new parish church for the 300 families that would make up the first generation of the congregation. The new church began construction in July of 1893 and by November 11 the building – now known as St. Casimir School – had been completed at a cost of \$6,300. The top floor would act as the initial church until a true church building could be constructed, while the other two floors were to house the school as well as rooms for the Teaching Sisters of Notre Dame who had agreed to take over management of the school.

Religious and social life are important to St. Casimir's parish today, just as they have been since the founding of the parish in 1893. The early years of parish life were marked with an emphasis on Sodalities and Rosary devotional groups which lasted from the 1890s through the 1920s and which were individual and emotional. Even the schools began with a devotional mass. The schools also served a way for the church's rules and morals, produce future priests and members of religious communities, and reinforce the Polish character of the congregation. The efforts of Fr. Tarasiewicz and the congregation were so successful that within the first year, the number of families enrolled at St. Casimir had doubled to 600. A new church building was needed.

Ground was broke for the second, and final, church for St. Casimir's parish on September 16, of 1899. The neo-gothic structure was designed and built by the E. Brielmaier and Sons architecture firm. The cornerstone of the church – dutifully blessed by Archbishop Katzer - would be laid on December 10 of that same year. The unfinished church would host its first wedding on January 9 of 1901, witnessing the union of Joseph Peplinski and Mary Odyja. It would finally be completed later that year, in the Fall. As a final act of devotion to his community, Fr. Taraseiwicz would petition the Vatican for a privileged altar which granted indulgences to members of the congregation – living and dead. Then, having set the foundations for the parish and overseen its first years, Fr. Taraseiwicz passed away suddenly on the 18th of January, 1903. He left behind a church which was ethnically Polish and devotional in character.

The 1920s through the 1940s brought a number of stresses to the congregation. During the years following the Great War, Poles and other ethnic communities across the United States saw their loyalty being called into question – especially when they sought to maintain their own culture and not fully 'Americanize.' Then, during the 1930s, the Great Depression struck, particularly impacting the many blue collar families in the parish. Finally, the 1930s and 40s and witnessed the outbreak of the Second World War and Poland's fall under Nazi and, later, Soviet occupation. St. Casimir's would play an important role in helping its members navigate through these difficult times. During the 1920s, the church sought to maintain the Polish culture of its congregants, but also to instill an American identity. Fundraising events began to feature the exploits of George Washington alongside Polish heroes. Then during the 1930s, Fr. Keiplinski, the parish priest, emerged as an important figure in the neighborhood, helping to secure jobs for parish members. He also rose to the challenge during the Second World War, by smuggling letters of parish members back to their friends and family in Nazi occupied Poland. These efforts on behalf of his community, would see Father Keilpinski honored by the church with the title of Monsignor as well as wide acclaim throughout the city of Milwaukee.

Post-WWII many young adults in their 20s moved out of the neighborhoods as newly constructed suburban homes were less expensive due to the Redlining practices in the mortgage industry. They moved mostly to Milwaukee's Northwest side or western and northern suburbs. Urban Renewal tore down many housing areas on the northern edge of downtown to make room for street widenings, freeways, and new building developments. Many of the African-American residents who were evicted chose to move into the neighborhoods west of the parish and Puerto Ricans moved into the southwestern corner of the parish. This proved a difficult challenge to many of St. Casimir's parish members, and even its clergy, as they still saw the parish as ethnically Polish in character .

To a large degree St. Casimir had mixed feelings about reaching out to non-white Catholics into the parish. One priest instructed an assistant to tell any African-American families that the school had reached its capacity and wouldn't be able to accept any more students – a lie that, apparently, rarely had to be told, as the neighborhood's African-American communities showed a preference for the public school system. Efforts to invite Puerto Rican families into the congregation was also met with contention among some members of the leadership. However they did reach out to the community as a whole through festivals and Bingo nights. Despite these efforts to maintain a Polish, working-class, identity for the parish, change was afoot. Although it remained a working-class parish, the Polish language lost its cherished place by the 1950s as shown in parish budgets and other documents.. The parish also changed in the 1950s with the average age getting much older as adults in their 20s moving out of the neighborhood. Then in the 60s through the 80s a shift to the church as a social institution with the organizations for youth such as CYO and Scout Troops, patriotic displays (Blue Star Mothers), and then church festivals, card groups, and bingo.

In 1967, race riots swept many urban centers, including Milwaukee's North Side, when black teenagers destroyed property in the north side's downtown along N. 3rd Street. The same year, white bigotry showed in Milwaukee's Polish Southside during the Fair Housing Marches led by Fr. James Groppi of St. Boniface,

In this context of the city's history, the summer afterwards, Fr. Jerry Hudziak led the youth of St. Casimir's CYO to organize the church's first festival called the "Corn Roast." Though the goal was to raise money for the kids' athletics and activities, it brought to the community an opportunity to get out into their urban life, to celebrate their existence with each other during a time of fear and uncertainty that beleaguered the city, offering hope to the community. A major recession in the early 80s closed factories around the neighborhood. Layoffs affected many parishioners and others in the neighborhood.

By the late 1980s, St. Casimir's strong Polish roots began to wane, epitomized with the last Polish-language mass being held in 1987. The demographic change brought upon by deindustrialization and generational relocations to the suburbs also produced the first discussions to merge St. Casimir's with St. Mary of Czestochowa, due to declining parishioner membership and available priests to administer the various Catholic churches in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Such dire straits eventually led to the closing of St. Casimir's convent, school, and rectory. In 2003, both parishes officially merged to form Our Lady of Divine Providence, but chose to rotate masses at both sites with such practices coming to a halt in 2012 when excessive building repairs officially closed the St. Mary of Czestochowa site.

Yet a silver-lining to the loss of such spatial entities that spanned almost two consecutive decades would come about with the women's drug and alcohol rehabilitation organization META House purchasing the vacant sites in 1988 (the convent), 1997 (the rectory), and 2003 (the school). Yet already in 1979, St. Casimir's mission of providing relief to those in need outside of the parish was realized when the parish agreed to house the East Side Housing Action Committee's Riverwest Food Pantry project, in partnership with a sister site at the Milwaukee Public Schools Gaenslen Elementary School. Since then, hundreds of parishioners have donated their resources and or time to supporting hunger, clothing, and care relief to the Riverwest neighborhood, with occasional support from surrounding parishes and even distant ones such as St. Cecilia-Lumen Christi of Cedarburg. Examples of such community outreach continued with further initiatives and partnerships such as with the Riverwest Artists Association (RAA). From 2007 to 2014, the St. Casimir site would become a stop for the public to visit during the RAA's annual ArtWalk, a showcase for local artists' work and access to some of the neighborhood's prized examples of art such as the parish itself. An extension of the social parish was that the church would meet the needs of the wider community and region as what E. Brooks Holifield would call an "institutional church". This is seen most recently with the church pantry, concerts, and festivals. The church even made efforts in the 1990s to reach out to the Hispanic immigrant population through masses and hymns in Spanish. Also, to a degree, this includes selling and leasing its buildings to Meta House.

Despite a prolonged hiatus in the 1990s and early 2000s, the parish festival, the marquee event came back creating a social gathering between the church and the community has lasted to the present day, when the Parish Festival reemerged in 2004 with Lakefront Brewing Company hosting the event, and later its current home being at the Falcons Bowl since 2014.

James Wind would label St. Casimir church as a "dominant" church due to it being the oldest church in the neighborhood - and certainly the largest and ornate. It looms over the neighborhood and, with its tall gothic steeples, tall vaulted ceiling, columns, balconies, organ and main altar, creates a sense of it being the center of the community; a feeling that must have only been stronger when the neighborhood was still ethnic Polish. The church building is even on beer labels. After St. Casimir merged with St. Mary's to form Our Lady of Divine Providence, the grandeur of the building influenced the decision to keep the St. Casimir church site and sell St. Mary's to Messmer School.

If St. Casimir's original mission was to serve and help Polish immigrants and their subsequent generations become one with the city of Milwaukee and the Riverwest neighborhood, then one can surely redefine its 21st century transformation as being that of serving the needs of those beyond a single ethnic identity or

place. While holding no direct connections to non-profits like META House or Riverwest Food Pantry, St. Casimir's has provided a home for newer, modern institutions that seek to provide or instill a sense of community. While their approach may be from a non-religious aspect, it is the coordination and assistance that the parish and its parishioners have provided them with that has effectively created a unique bond that transcends any boundaries and makes St. Casimir's a home for all as it nears its 125th anniversary.

Timeline

EARLY YEARS 1894-1950s

- 10/11/1893 Founding of St. Casimir – The decision was made at St. Hedwig Church to to split off the northwest corner of their parish to form St. Casimir's because its school was overcrowded. The United States Panic of 1893 recession began earlier in the year.
- 1894 The school was built with the church on 3rd floor on land purchased from John Schramka at the corner of Weil and Clarke Streets. The School Sisters of Notre Dame were invited to begin teaching at the school and took up the responsibility.
- 1894-1904 School attendance numbers continue to grow during this time. In 1894 there were 274 children. By 1895 512 pupils regularly attended St. Casimir school. 1899 had 635 pupils while by the next year 720 children were being taught there; 1904 saw 972 students, and one class alone consisted of 128 boys.
- 1895 The t Three bells for church were bought and hung on scaffolding outside school. These were named: St. John Aegidius (first name of Fr. Tarasiewicz, pastor at the time), Sancta Maria, and Casimir.
- 1899 Ground was broken for the new church building. The architect firm hired was E. Brielmaier and Sons; while the masonry contractor was John Schramka, and the John Kosecki was the carpenter.
- Dec 1901 The new church building was completed.
- 1/18/1903 Fr. Tarasiewicz's passed away, leading to an extended period of mourning for the parish.
- 1905 St. Casimir's School's enrollment reached more than 1,000 pupils for the first time.
- 1907-08 Due to overcrowding at St. Casimir's school, St. Mary's Czestochowa Parish formed.
- 1910 An addition to the school was built. That same year saw only six graduating 8th graders.

- 1910 By edict of the archbishop, the church may have had to donate money to pay for St. Josaphat Cathedral's due to the mounting debt taken on by the archdiocese.
- 1916 Fr. Kieplinski began his tenure as pastor of St. Casimir's. He was a powerbroker within and outside the parish. Connected to the city power players, he obtained jobs and public works contracts for his parishioners and connected Poles to family in Poland during WWII.
- 1917-18 United States entered WWI and Poland gained its independence. Nationalistic Patriots pushed for English language instruction in Milwaukee's factories, while the 25th Jubilee Book, printed in 1919, was almost all in Polish.
- 1922 Enrollment in school was 646 boys, 684 girls, with 150 turned away. 300 parishioners were in the public schools.
- 1924 Congress passes the Immigration Act of 1924, restricting immigration from Poland and most of Eastern and Southern Europe.
- 1924 The current convent was built with furnishings paid for by a fundraising play entitled "The Seal of Confession."
- 1925 St. Casimir's School enrollment reached its historical high of 1,340 students.
- 1926 Two bishops from Poland were guests of Fr. Kieplinski.
- 1929-1941 Great Depression
- 1935 Redlining created. The Federal Home Loan Bank Board (FHLBB) hired the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to make maps of desirable and undesirable neighborhoods for lending practices. Those that were shaded red, like St. Casimir's Parish, were more easily denied a mortgage loans or were granted at high borrowing costs.
- 1940s - Barracks built, a building used for community activities, scouts, and CYO (Catholic Youth Organization). It was torn down in the 1970s to enlarge playground and was a fire hazard.
- 1940-1960 School enrollment was between 800 and 900.
- 1941-45 United States enters WWII that started in 1939 with the German invasion of Poland.
- 1946 50th Jubilee Book printed. Its tone was mostly about promoting the school.
- 1948 School sisters stopped teaching Polish in the school.

- 1950s Post-WWII many young adults in their 20s moved out of the neighborhoods as newly constructed suburban homes were less expensive due to the Redlining practices in the mortgage industry. They moved mostly to Milwaukee's Northwest side or western and northern suburbs.
- 1952 A shortage of teaching sisters caused the first hiring of lay teachers.
- 1953 Fr. Kielpinski passed away, after serving 38 years as pastor.
- 1950s-60s Urban Renewal tore down many housing areas on the northern edge of downtown to make room for street widenings, freeways, and new building developments. Residents evicted were mainly African-Americans, who moved into the neighborhoods west of the parish and Puerto Ricans, who moved into the southwestern corner of the parish.

DECLINE IN ATTENDENCE AND NEIGHBORHOOD POPULATION 1960s-1980s

- 1962-1970 Fr. Leo Kowalski served as pastor of the church.
- 1962-1965 2nd Vatican Council (Vatican II)
- 1965-1980 Altar adjustments were made according to Vatican II. The original against the back wall was renamed the Altar of the Eucharist and the new marble one located at the communion rail was called the "Altar of the Sacrifice."
- 1960s Church buildings were modernized, the school basement was remodeled with a kitchen, a gymnasium was added to 3rd floor of the school, and properties were bought to the north for parking and a garden was added for the school sisters.
- 1967 "Long Hot Summer of 1967" – Race riots in Milwaukee's North Side occurred as a result of decades of discrimination in hiring, retail, and housing.
- 1967-1968 Fair Housing Marches led by Father James Groppi and efforts by Alderwoman Vel Phillips led to the passage of the Federal Fair Housing Act all in attempts to end practices that contributed to wealth inequality for the black population, many of whom lived around the borders of the parish.
- 1968 The first church festival, the "Corn Roast" was organized by the kids in the CYO and Fr. Jerry Hudziak to raise money for the kids' athletics and activities.
- 1969 75th Jubilee was printed with its tone dominated by the need to claim Polish identity.
- 1972 Fr. Kowalski transferred Fr. Donald Sass out of Parish because he didn't approve of Fr. Sass's saying mass in Spanish and reaching out to Puerto Ricans.

- 5/6/1976 A fire at the school damaging the top floors. Fundraising occurred with major support from Walter J Lazynski, a construction contractor. The gym was named in his honor.
- Late 1970s Riverwest Food Pantry opened at St. Casimir.
- Late 1970s-80s Major recession caused plant closures and layoffs that affected many parishioners and others in the neighborhood. American Motors, a major employer, and other factories located around the parish were hit hard.
- 1980 Altar moved forward with pews in front turned at the sides. The pulpit was donated by Mr. Ben and Mrs. Helen Andrycyk. Parish Council was formed.
- 1987 Last polish mass celebrated. The server's sacristy to the right of main altar was turned into a chapel to conserve on the heating bill.
- 1988-1992 Fr. Michael Barrett served as pastor of the church.
- 1988 The convent was sold to Meta House.
- 1991 School was closed.

RECENT ERA 1990s-2018

- 1994 100th Jubilee book was printed and a \$104,000 renovation of church took place. The tone of the book is to reminisce about the "old neighborhood."
- 1995-2001 St. Casimir's and St. Mary's shared priests and combined masses, with Saturday evening mass at St. Mary's and Sunday mornings at St. Casimir's.
- 1997 The rectory was sold to Meta House.
- 2002 St. Casimir's and St. Mary's merged to form Our Lady of Divine Providence Parish. The name was part of the Archdioceses' plan to attract the Hispanic population from St. Francis Church (4th and Brown Streets) to make up for the decline attendance at the two churches.
- 2003 Meta House leased the school building for offices, counseling, computer labs, and recreation facilities.
- c.2004 The parish festival was reinitiated and held at Lakefront Brewery. The goal was to raise money for the church roof repairs.
- 2010s St. Mary's closes due to plumbing and steps repairs. Building had been sold to Messmer School.

2014 -Present Parish festival at Falcon Bowl.

Annotated Bibliography

25th Jubilee Book

Located in the Milwaukee Archdiocese Archives. It is mainly in Polish

50th Jubilee Book

Located in the Milwaukee Archdiocese Archives. Many advertisers and church donor's. Small history of parish.

75th Jubilee Book

Located in the Milwaukee Archdiocese Archives. More detailed history than the 50th. Great color photos of church interior and gymnasium murals that were destroyed 7 years later in the fire.

100th Jubilee Book

Located in the Milwaukee Archdiocese Archives. Mostly the same history as in the 75th, but more on church organizations, several of which were created in the 1970s and 80s.

The Catholic Citizen January 24, 1903, p. 3 (Milwaukee Archdiocese Archives)

Single article on the death of first pastor Fr. Tarasiewicz.

The Milwaukee Journal

Several articles on the church's dedication and construction. 1976 article on church fire.

Teaching Sisters of Notre Dame. *Saint Casimir School Chronicle Volume 1. 1894-1954*. Chronicle. Mount Mary University Archives, Milwaukee, WI, April 2018.

St. Casimir School Chronicle, compiled by the Teaching Sisters of Notra Dame, in two volumes. The First volume covers the formation of the school and parish, until the 1950s. The Second volume covers the 1950s until the 1970s. Hand written, in English. Currently held at Mount Mary University Archives.

Steven M. Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth: A History of the Arhdiocese of Milwaukee, 1843-1958* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002).

Detailed history of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and its relationship to the national and international Catholic Church. This book also delves deep into the ethnic cooperation and strife which marked the history of the archdiocese during its first century of existence.

Thomas L. Tolan, *Riverwest: A Community History* (Past Press 2003)

Detailed history of neighborhood included several events of the parish and interviews on parish life.

St. Casimir's Parish Collection. Archdiocese of Milwaukee Archives, Milwaukee, WI.

Has church budget books, school attendance books, class photographs, weekly buletines (50s-70s),

Rosary Sodality dues books and materials (1952-97), parish council meeting minutes 1979-1996, architectural drawings (later years), and events and programs (1936-1995).