

Blessed Virgin of Pompeii
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Blessed Virgin of Pompeii also Connects to

- St. Rita's
- St. John's Cathedral
- St. Mary's
- Holy Trinity Catholic Church
- Mission of Sacred Heart of Jesus

Historical Overview

In his *History of Milwaukee*, John C. Gregory estimated that by 1888 some 400 Italians lived in Milwaukee. Census records indicate that by 1900 about 726 Italians resided in the city. This was a small number compared to other industrial midwestern cities such as Chicago at the time, which counted a total of 16,000 Italian residents in the same year. Despite this relatively small urban population, Italians in Milwaukee made their presence known in the city's Third Ward. This former hub of Irish immigrants offered Italians the same basic opportunities that attracted other ethnic groups to American urban areas at the time, steady employment and affordable housing. According to Milwaukee's unofficial historian of Italian Immigration Mario Carini, unskilled labor positions were the most plentiful jobs available to Third Ward Italians at the time. But the 1900 City Directory also lists a number of other occupations held by Italian Immigrants including fruit peddlers, tradesmen, musicians, sculptors, teachers, physicians, and priests.

Central to the development of Milwaukee's *Little Italy* was the sense of kinship and shared Catholicism that was brought over from the Old World. Earliest accounts of Italian immigrants attending mass in Milwaukee come from the records of non-Italian Catholic congregations including the German Holy Trinity Catholic Church (S. 4th & Bruce St.) and St. John's Cathedral (812 N. Jackson St.). As the immigration to Milwaukee from Italy swelled toward the turn of the century, the Catholic community in the city helped renovate an old tavern at 189 N. Huron into a permanent Italian Mission called the Mission of Sacred Heart of Jesus. This coincided with the arrival of Father Rosario Nasca, a priest who would be integral in the development of the first Roman Catholic congregation in Milwaukee. On December 8, 1899, the fledgling congregation took the name Blessed Virgin of Pompeii and announced plans for building a new church in the Third Ward shortly thereafter. On October 9th, 1904 the cornerstone for the Blessed Virgin of Pompeii Church was laid on 419 N. Jackson Street. As the structure took shape and was eventually completed, the light pink exterior brick came to be its most notable feature, leading to the church's most famous nickname, "The Little Pink Church."

From the onset Blessed Virgin of Pompeii was a community center. The basement operated as a hall for social functions, society meetings, family functions, weddings, and a day care conducted by the Carmelite sisters. Blessed Virgin of Pompeii continued to grow, reaching as high as 1,180

families by 1930. Among some of the more notable families of the congregation were the Balistreri's, Alioto's, Carini's, and the Groppi's. James Groppi would later become famous as the priest who participated in the 1967 Housing Marches in Milwaukee while he served as priest of St. Boniface's Church. The 1930's and 1940's were the era when Blessed Virgin of Pompeii was at its height in both attendance and community involvement. The church societies that were affiliated with Blessed Virgin of Pompeii were a prime example of this. Societies such as the Young Ladies Sodality, La Lume society, the Holy Crucifix Society, the Saint Rocco's Society, and the Holy Name Society (later changed to the Pompeii Men's Club) worked as charitable organizations that, in addition to being involved in religious education, held fundraisers and social services for the Italian community in Milwaukee and organized festivals. In 1933 the Sisters of Charity of St. Joan Antida arrived in Milwaukee and assumed responsibility from the Carmelite Sisters for religious instruction of children of the Parish. Other changes were happening in the congregation at this time as well. Starting in 1936 the size of the congregation warranted a study by members to assess the feasibility of expanding to a new church. In 1937, St. Rita's Church held its first mass a year before its building was completed. Shortly after in 1941, the parishes officially split. While this split would be a harbinger to the decline of Blessed Virgin of Pompeii, this era was vibrant for the church, its societies, and the community.

By the church's 60th anniversary in 1964, however, a dark cloud loomed over the building. Despite Father Salvatore Tagliavia's assertion that the 60th anniversary banquet held in the Church Hall was "the most wonderful evening in the history of the Church," many families in the congregation had left the neighborhood by May of 1959. Threatening the size of the congregation was the Federal legislation at the time which promoted expanding the housing market to the suburbs, particularly for white families. Re-development in the Third Ward was also becoming a serious threat to the longevity of the Church. The former epicenter of Milwaukee's Italian community was being transformed into the City's new vision for updated buildings that could accommodate more commercial ventures and the expanding the downtown. Moreover, the wave of redevelopment that hit the Third Ward starting in the 1950's was coming to head with the county's plan to construct a new freeway. By 1967, last ditch efforts to save the church from destruction had failed, including a designation as the city's first official landmark, and the wrecking ball began breaking down the famous pink brick. As the majority of the congregation moved to St. Rita's following the church's destruction, it looked like the story of Blessed Virgin of Pompeii was over. In 1977, The Pompeii Men's Club approached county executives in hopes of turning the vacant lot adjacent to the former site of the Blessed Virgin of Pompeii Church into a park. The proposal was passed, and the Pompeii Men's Club was able to erect a small concrete monument that stands to this day. More than 50 years has passed since demolition began, but the memory of the Church and its importance to Milwaukee's Italian community have lived on thanks to efforts by Festa Italiana and the Italian Community Center. At the time of this writing, plans to remodel the St. Rita's campus include a proposal to have the newly built church on the property constructed to be an exact replica of the famous "Little Pink Church", an homage to the strength of its memory in the minds of Milwaukee's Catholic community.

Timeline

1898- Converted tavern becomes first chapel for Italian emigrants, located on East Clybourn Street between Van Buren and Jackson Streets, named Mission of Sacred Heart of Jesus.

1899- Reverend Rosario Nasca arrives from Monte Maggiore, Sicily; becomes first resident Pastor.

1899- June 25th Maria Caterina Lucia Polozzatio is first to be baptized in the new Chapel.

1899- July 6th first wedding in new Chapel between Cologero Congo and Maria Comello.

1903- Reverend Dominic Leone arrives and begins a long pastorate.

1903- Committee formed for building of new Church; consists of Vincent Catalano, Mercurio D'Amore, Frank Spicuzza, Joseph Puccinelli and Nicola Romano.

1903- Property purchased on North Jackson Street as plans progress for the building of a new Church.

1904- Building completed and Church named Blessed Virgin of Pompeii.

1905- January 1st first baptism in the new Church - Salvatore Purpero.

1905- January 17th first wedding, between Salvatore Dentice and Lauren Busalacchi.

1905- Carmelite Sisters come to Milwaukee, assisted the parishioners for five years through 1910.

1915- New Pastor arrives, Father Enrico Fadanelli.

1916- Catholic Instruction League begins in the Parish.

1925- Archbishop Messimer places Administration of Parish to the Pious Society of St. Charles (Scalabrini Fathers) a Missionary order delivered to assisting Italian emigrants around the globe.

1925- Father Carlo Celotto, P.S.S.C. arrives as new Pastor.

1925- Father Anthony Bainoti P.S.S.C. appointed Pastor, begins ten-year tenure.

1925- Mr. Cannizzaro, Mr. Barone, Mr. Salvatore Catalano elected as Church Trustees.

1927- Holy Name Society organized, First President, Cosmas Catalano.

1929- The Young Ladies Sodality is founded.

1930- Church enrollment swells to 1,180 families.

1930- Mr. Romano and Mr. Cannizzaro elected Church Trustees.

1930- St. Vincent de Paul Society founded by Frank Gardetto, Pietro Corrao, Julian Giuntoli, and Vito Marchese.

1933- Sisters of Charity of St. Joan Antida arrives to assume responsibilities for religious instruction of children of the Parish.

1935- New Pastor arrives, Father Hugo Cavicchi, P.S.S.C.

1935- Vito Marchese and John Cianciolo elected new Church Trustees.

1936- Growing congregation prompted lay group appointed to study feasibility of expanding to a new Church and School on North Cass and East Pleasant Streets. (Start of St. Rita's)

1937- Basement completed at St. Rita's.

1937- First Mass offered at St. Rita's Church.

1937- Father Gregory Zanoni, P.S.S.C. succeeds as Pastor.

1937- Father Joseph Bolzan, P.S.S.C. takes charge of Our Lady of Pompeii as Father Gregory guides new Parish of St. Rita.

1938- St. Rita's building completed.

1939- Father Louis Donanzan, P.S.S.C. takes charge of Pompeii.

1940- Father Louis Riello, P.S.S.C. arrives as Assistant Pastor.

1941- Father Francis Balistreri celebrates his First Mass.

1941- Blessed Virgin of Pompeii and St. Rita's parishes officially divided.

1941- Father Louis Riello, P.S.S.C. appointed Pastor of Blessed Virgin of Pompeii Church.

1942- Rectory bought on North Jackson Street.

1944- In May, Father Salvatore Tagliavia celebrates his First Mass.

1944- Interior of Church and hall remodeled and redecorated.

1947- Church cleaned and redecorated.

1948- Father Daniel Zanon, P.S.S.C. appointed Pastor of Pompeii.

1948- Tuck-pointing and remodeling of Church exterior completed.

1949- New pews and kneelers installed, new organ purchased.

1952- Giuseppe Lo Coco and Cologero Santoro appointed Trustees.

1954- Reverend Anthony Cogo, P.S.S.C., Pompeii's last Pastor arrives.

1954- Golden Jubilee Celebration held, Archbishop Albert G. Meyer celebrates Mass, followed by religious procession through the streets of the Third Ward. Seven hundred attend the Golden Jubilee Banquet held at the Pfister Hotel.

1956- June; Father John Corrao, P.S.S.C. ordained and celebrates First Mass.

1956- After stormy public hearings, Father Cogo is successful in having Church remain in lower Third Ward redevelopment project.

1959- Father Cogo assigned to a new Post.

- 1959- Father Salvino Zanon, P.S.S.C. Pastor of St. Rita's is appointed as Administrator of Blessed Virgin of Pompeii.
- 1962- Under the supervision of Father Zanon's assistant, Father Joseph Civentini, P.S.S.C. and the men of the Holy Name Society, The Church Hall is remodeled and becomes the scene of a series of very successful Holy Name Smokers.
- 1963- Cologero Santoro and Joseph Catalano elected Trustees of Pompeii.
- 1963- Father Italo Scola, P.S.S.C. succeeds as Pastor of St. Rita and Administrator of Pompeii.
- 1964- Sixtieth Anniversary celebration held in the Church Hall. Program's main speaker, Father Salvatore Tagliavia, consensus of opinion, "the most wonderful evening in the history of the Church."
- 1967- Church designated as Milwaukee's first official landmark. Civic luncheon held at Milwaukee Athletic Club, attended by a broad cross section of Milwaukee's Political, labor, business, religious and cultural leaders.
- 1967- Concerted efforts of Church and civic groups to preserve the Church fail as advancing free-ways makes demolition of Church inevitable.
- 1967- Last Wedding- November 26, 1966, John L. Bottoni and Jean Michalovitz.
Last Baptism- February 12, 1967, Jeffrey Joseph Colla.
Last Funeral- June 25, 1967- Josephine Carino.
- 1967- On July 29, 1967, the Parish held a farewell dinner at which old acquaintances were renewed and old and happy times relived. Civic and religious leaders praised the spirit of the Church's people and the contribution to the history and rich heritage of Milwaukee.
- 1967- On July 30, 1967, the sorrow of losing the Church was visible as a tremendous crowd partook in the las Solemn High Mass and procession, their numbers, a tribute to the many priests and lay people who for 64 years had done God's work in the Third Ward.
- 1967- October 9, 1967, Blessed Virgin of Pompeii Church demolished.

Annotated Bibliography

Blessed Virgin of Pompeii Church, Box 1, Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives.

Contains fifteen folders including, "Anniversary Books, 1954," "Articles of Incorporation, 1899," "Bulletins, 1953-1956," "Church Newspaper, 1937-1941," "Correspondence, 1933-1995," "Events, 1954, 1967," "Friends of our Lady of Pompeii, Inc., Undated," "History, Mario A. Carini Research, 1980, 1997," "Membership Records 1927-1937," "Miscellaneous, undated," "Property Records, 1903-1966," "Newspaper Clippings, 1967-1990," "Reports, 1903-1966," "Sister Irene's Music, undated." This box also contained Church History Books published after the demolition of the Church which were invaluable to our research as they laid out a timeline of important events in Blessed Virgin of Pompeii's history.

Carini, Mario A., Box 1, Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives.

Contains numerous reports on the history of Milwaukee's Italian community including: demographic information, an overview of Italians in the Milwaukee City Directory, as well as statistics concerning Milwaukee's Italian labor force. The contents of this box were valuable of gaining insight into the scope and development of Milwaukee's Italian community.

Carini, Mario A. *Milwaukee's Italians: The Early Years*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: The Italian Community Center of Milwaukee, 1999.

This book tells the early history of Milwaukee's Italian community with special attention paid to the importance of Roman Catholicism in solidifying and organizing community. An entire chapter is dedicated to the "Little Pink Church," Blessed Virgin of Pompeii.