

# *Parish History*



## **Organizing the parish in Belmont, Michigan**

In 1912 and 1913 Catholic farmers in the Belmont area began to plan, with the authorization of Bishop Henry Richter, for a parish of their own. The Bishop saw the need for a parish in Belmont because the people were too far from St. Adalbert's in Grand Rapids to be cared for properly. Rev. Kazimierz Skory, pastor of St. Adalbert's, called the first meeting on July 27, 1913, at the home of Mr. Gryka in Belmont. At this meeting it was decided by a majority vote to build a church. It was also decided to purchase the old wooden St. Adalbert's Church in Grand Rapids and reassemble it in Belmont. A committee was formed consisting of Edward Olbinski, Vincent Prawdzik, Waclaw Szulc, and Joseph Polega.

On August 10, 1913, Rev. Skory called a second meeting at the home of Mr. Olbinski in Belmont. At this meeting he announced the good news that the parishioners of St. Adalbert's Church had unanimously voted to donate their old church to the newly formed parish in Belmont. Also at this meeting, a list of families that would comprise the Belmont parish was organized. It showed that there would be about fifty families of Polish and Irish decent.

On August 12, 1913, Charles and Clara Smith donated one acre of the land for the newly formed parish. On August 14, 1913, a contract to dismantle the old church for \$545 was

given to Mr. Majchrzak. Dismantling of the old church started on August 18, 1913. Excavation for the new church foundation began on December 5, 1913.

The firm of Henry and Rice from Belmont was contracted to provide labor for the setting of the foundation (\$445) and construction of the new church (\$1,100) on April 8, 1914. The parish furnished the materials. On April 13, 1914, the setting of the foundation began and on April 14, 1914, church construction began according to the plans developed by Mr. Vierheilig, an architect from Grand Rapids.

In a letter dated May 21, 1914, Bishop Richter approved that this parish would be named in honor of Mary, and would be called "*Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*". The members of the Parish Church Committee (see page 10) were then officially appointed and earnestly set to work on the plans for the new church building.

The dedication and laying of the cornerstone was performed by the Vicar General, Rev. M. J. Gallagher on May 31, 1914. The homily was given in Polish by Rev. J. Kaminski, pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Grand Rapids, and in English by Rev. Gallagher.

Rev. S. Narloch, assistant pastor of St. Adalbert's, together with Mr. Olbinski and Mr. Szulc, visited all parishioners twice, soliciting contributions for the new church. The total amount collected was \$747.25. The gifts ranged from 25 cents to \$100. The following is a list of the original parishioners who donated money to the church.

Samual Van Antwerp	Mrs. E. W. Henry & Family	Jospeh Polega
Peter Babka	Donated Statue of the B.V.M.	John Rappleyea
Henry Bloom	Leon Kopanski	Gregory Rice
Elizabeth Cordes	Leon Kiecal (Ketchel)	Glen Thome
Thomas Cebunia	Julianna Kiecal (Ketchel)	Robert Wheeler
Alexander Cebunia	Andrew Lasko	Peter Zielinski
Albert Dutmer	John Kuligowski	A. Zelazny and son
Archie Engersoll	John and Mary Anna Modzeleski	Vincent Prawdzik
Mrs. L. Eggleston	P. H. Milanowski	William Prawdzik
Rose Fryska	Stanley Maksimowski	Waclaw Szulc
Fred Fix	Alexander Maksimowski	Stanley Szulc
George Fix	Ludwig Malinowski	W. J. Stout
William Fix	Frank Polasik	Adelbert Wlodarek
John Fink	Lawrence Maciejewski	Vincent Wierzcholsk
Jospeh Gryka	Antoinette Oblinski	Anastasia Zielinski
Gregory Gryka	Anthony Pelasik	
Hunting Family	Joseph Pelasik	

*The above information was taken from the translation of a Polish document found in the cornerstone of the original Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church. The mother of Tom Bobrowski, who was a Polish-English translator for the Polish Roman Catholic Union Insurance Company, translated the document.*

Vincent Prawdzik, along with others from Belmont (*Ernie Post, Wallace Obetts, Stanley Maksimowski, Walter Schmitz, Joe Milanowski, Ali Kiecal (Ketchel) and Peter Zielinski*), brought the stained glass windows to the construction site on a separate horse drawn wagon. Not one window was damaged and they were awarded a gallon of cider for their trouble.

The mother of Dolores (*Rappleyea*) Creveling, who passed away in 2003 at the age of 103, made baked goods, which Dolores sold door to door to raise money for the church. The document later found in the cornerstone of the original church listed her father, John Rappleyea, as donating \$35 (quite a tidy sum in those days) to the church construction fund in 1914.

Our neighbors at Belmont Baptist Church had begun holding services in a home on their current site in 1907 and constructed their first church in 1909. A vacant church was dismantled into sections and brought down from Lisbon, Michigan (a small town five miles Southeast of Sparta). Their church was also donated. They were able to raise \$300 in donations to complete the project. Horse drawn wagons were used to bring the church to the construction site next to the current Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in much the same way St. Adalbert's Church was brought to Belmont in 1914. Since many of the Catholics from Belmont had volunteered and helped with the construction of the first Belmont Baptist Church in 1911 (most notably Edward Olbinski), the Baptists returned the favor to their Catholic friends in 1914. That spirit of cooperation endures to this day.

Members of Belmont Baptist Church gave a great deal of critical help in the construction of the first Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church. Ernie Post, of Belmont Baptist, borrowed a team of horses and a wagon from his father to help haul sections of the dismantled St. Adalbert's Church from Grand Rapids. It was moved North on Davis and Muskegon Avenues and eventually to the building site in Belmont. The Polish document lists Wallace Obetts, Rean Ecklesdaffer, and J. Van Dusin, Harvey Brownell, A. Harington, Ed Filkins, Ernie Post, and Orin Roberts as members of Belmont Baptist Church helping in the transportation of the materials and digging of the foundation.

While much of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church was transported to Belmont by horse and wagon some of the larger beams and sections were labeled "Polish Church Belmont" and placed on flat cars, which were then brought to Belmont by rail along what is now known as the White Pine Trail.

In the 1920's and 30's a group of ten to twelve women in the parish went to area stores accepting donated goods, which they raffled off to raise money for the church. These items were raffled at chicken dinners where bingo was played. Parishioners brought as many as one hundred live chickens to the church where they were killed, cleaned, and cooked on the spot. Left over live chickens, turkeys, ducks, and geese were also raffled off at these chicken dinners.

St. Adalbert's priests served Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish until 1925 when Bishop Edward D. Kelly appointed Rev. Casimir Szyper as the first pastor.

In 1928 the Rev. James Czachorski, who enlarged the rectory, succeeded Rev. Szyper. Rev. Czachorski remained as pastor at Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary until December 1937, when the Rev. Adalbert S. Radawski temporarily succeeded him.

On May 10, 1938, Rev. Anthony P. Arszulowicz, then a professor at St. Joseph's Seminary, was assigned to Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish as administrator while continuing his teaching and residence at the seminary. This arrangement continued for several years. Rev. Arszulowicz went to work vigorously to renovate and redecorate the church and rectory. In September 1941 Bishop Plagens made Rev. Arszulowicz pastor of the Belmont parish and vice-chancellor of the diocese. His Holiness Pope Pius XII made Rev. Arszulowicz a Monsignor in 1948. He continued his work at the chancery office while working at the parish each weekend.

Rev. Joseph Godzisz was made administrator of the parish in June 1950 and later Bishop Hass appointed him pastor. In an excellent state of repair throughout, the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was a picturesque country church with a congregation of over one hundred families.

While Rev. Godzisz was pastor, discussion began about the need for a school. To acquire the funds needed to make the school a reality, the parish held festivals, raffles, and dinners for several years.

Monsignor Joseph Podhajski succeeded Rev. Joseph Godzisz in 1953. The building boom for the parish started when Monsignor Podhajski became pastor. Monsignor Podhajski, who saw the need to get the plans underway to build a new school, convent, and social center, was the driving force in the community. In 1958 a campaign was launched to raise the remaining funds needed to start construction of not only four classrooms and a multi-purpose room, but also an attached convent, which would house the Consolata Missionary Sisters from Italy. Under his leadership, the parish welcomed the first community of the Consolata Missionary Sisters to the newly built convent on August 29, 1958. Monsignor Joseph J. Podhajski had dreams of having the Sisters staff the school. This was fulfilled when the Consolata Missionary Sisters granted his wish with the start of the school year in September 1959.

In 1970 Rev. James Cusack succeeded Monsignor Podhajski as pastor with Rev. Louis L. Anderson in residence at the rectory until July 1971. After a short period of time, Rev. Cusack requested a co-pastor. In September of 1970 Bishop Joseph Breitenbeck appointed Rev. John F. Porter to fill Rev. Cusack's request. Rev. Porter left the parish for other duties in June of 1971. During the spring of 1972 Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish and the Rockford Annex of Our Lady of Consolation separated into two parishes.

Rev. Charles F. Antekeier succeeded Rev. Cusack as pastor from 1972 until 1977. Rev. Joseph L. Battersby was appointed pastor in 1977. The parish, which was rapidly growing, was challenged to look into the future. The parish was faced with an important decision; either renovate the church building to accommodate the growth or begin construction on

an entirely new structure. On May 13, 1983, as this important decision was being considered, the parish was shocked by the death of Rev. Battersby. The ushers dedicated the daily Mass Chapel in the present church to his memory.

In July 1983 Rev. Porter was re-assigned as pastor of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish. His challenges were that of guiding an uncertain community through the maze of renovation or of building a new church. After many meetings, parish surveys, and an existing building evaluation, the decision to build a new church was approved. KDA Architects were chosen to design our new church. Ground breaking took place on Thanksgiving Day, November 27, 1986. A mild winter saw the building take shape very quickly. With mixed feelings, the parishioners could see the end was near for the old church.

The decision to demolish the old church was based on a few major problems: the fire marshall shut down the choir loft, the foundation was crumbling and rocks were falling out of the walls, jacks were needed to support the floor joists in order to hold the church up, the church walls were bowing out because there was no buttressing, and half inch steel cable was placed between the inside walls to keep them from falling outward.

The windows were removed from the original church before demolition in 1987. The windows that were behind the altar were placed in the chapel of the new church. Also one of the two large side windows was placed in the narthex of the new church. The other large side window was sold to a person in Reed City for \$2,000. All other windows were auctioned off anywhere from \$100 to \$500. The bell and statues were saved from the old church and placed in the new church. Jim Wisnewski repainted the statues.

In addition to the Polish documents found in the cornerstone of the old church, there was also a small rusty metal box which contained four coins: a 1912 Lincoln Penny, a 1913 Buffalo Nickel, a 1899 Liberty Nickel, and a 1904 Liberty Dime. It is thought that the coins were placed in a time capsule, which was positioned in the wall under the stairwell at the back of the new church.

*Pete Prądziak (son of Vincent Prądziak), Paul Morrissey (member of the building committee in 1986), Tom Bobrowski (Chairman of the building committee in 1986), Lois Bobrowski, Jim Wisnewski, Jeanette Post (daughter in law of Ernie Post), and Kurt Kigar (current pastor of Belmont Baptist Church) provided information for this history. Documentation of this information is stored in the Rectory of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church Rectory along with the original Polish document which was treated and preserved in plastic by the Grand Rapids Public Library along with its English translation and documentation on the formation of Belmont Baptist Church as furnished by Pastor Kigar.*

To help parishioners accept the loss of the old church and embrace worshipping in the new, Rev. Porter had the foresight to request a parish mission. It helped many parishioners deal with feelings of having to leave this “home” and go to an unfamiliar place to worship. On October 30, 1987, the last Mass was celebrated in the picturesque country church. Rev. Porter removed the Blessed Sacrament at the end of Mass. On October 31, 1987, the parish family gathered in the lower level of the new church building for the first Mass.

The groundbreaking for three new classrooms took place on November 2, 1987. On Wednesday, November 11, 1987, at 8:52 a.m., the wrecking ball started the demolition of the old church. Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish began the next step in history by celebrating Mass in the church proper, December 12, 1987. The joyful dedication, conducted by Bishop Joseph



Breitenbeck, took place on February 2, 1988, with a glorious reception following in the lower level. As we look around this church, we reflect on the tradition carried forward from the old church.

### **Building Anew While Preserving Tradition**



*“Building anew while preserving tradition”* was the banner under which this church was built, and it must have been a factor in the building of the original church as well. In both cases old materials were integrated into the new building, and also in both cases volunteers played an important part of the process. This seems to define the character of this parish.

Rev. James M. Bozung succeeded Rev. Porter in 1993 and became pastor. In 1996 Assumption Parish again looked to expand to meet its growing needs.

On July 24, 1996, Rev. Bozung, Mike Sochacki, Jim Gelderbloom, and Robin Tuttle from the Finance Council represented Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish at a meeting with Rev. Richard Lawie from the Diocese to discuss the need for the parish to develop a long-range plan for future expansion. As a result, a core group of approximately thirty parishioners was recruited to lead this planning process. The “Forward in Faith” committee was born at Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in 1997.

A series of town hall meetings were held and a detailed survey was sent to every family registered at Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish. By May of 1997, the survey and town hall meeting results were tabulated and the need for a Family Life Center was identified as a priority.

A “Site Development” committee was formed in December 1998 to develop a long-range master plan for future site development and building expansion. Architects, Cox, Mendendorp, and Olson (CMO), developed three master plans that were presented to the parish in March 2000. The plan endorsed by the parish showed all future expansion would be on the East side of Belmont Road.

During the summer of 2000 the building committee, a diverse group of twenty-two parishioners, led by co-chairs Mary Panek and Mike Sochacki, was formed and worked with CMO to develop a schematic design for the building of the Family Life Center.

In the fall of 2000 the parish engaged the Breton Group, a fundraising organization, to coordinate the Capital Stewardship Campaign. Mary Panek took on the position of stewardship director, and on January 22, 2001, Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish had an advance commitment reception where almost \$1 million was pledged to the capital campaign. The “Building Faith and Family” campaign was launched in February of 2001 and the fundraising effort resulted in 540 families pledging over \$1.5 million.

The “Building Faith and Family” project could not have been successful without prayer. Rev. Bozung wrote a prayer that was read after all Masses during the capital campaign:

*Lord God, we thank You for Your loving and provident care for us. Every day You call us to continue the work of creation, as we use the resources of our world.*

*We have been especially favored at Assumption parish with spiritual and material blessings over these more than eight decades as a faith community.*

*We thank You, dear Father, and seek Your wisdom in the work that lies ahead of us. May we build for the future and strive to emulate Your generous goodness in our endeavors.*

*May we ever seek inspiration from our beloved patroness Mary, the Mother of Jesus. This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*Reverend James M. Bozung*

During 2001 CMO completed the design development phase of the project. That fall, the building committee interviewed four general contractors. Owen-Ames-Kimball, (OAK), was selected to be the construction manager for the project.

Rev. Peter G. Vu succeeded Rev. Bozung in 2001 and administered the completion of the Family Life Center.

The one-year anniversary of the “Building Faith and Family” campaign was celebrated with a “Mystery Dinner” on February 1, 2002, that was organized by Gerilyn May. The “sold-out” event was held in the Church Activity Center. During the first year almost \$650,000 in pledges were collected.

During the summer and fall of 2002 the Rose Garden was relocated to its current location to the South of the Church. Bette O'Connor Rogers spearheaded this project, and with the help of many parishioners created this beautiful memorial, which was dedicated on October 6, 2002, to Our Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In February of 2003 the parish celebrated the second year of the capital campaign with a "Thanks a Million Dinner" with the picture of our new pastor, Rev. Vu, on a "Million Dollar Buck". The Parish had collected over \$1 million in pledges, and the project went out to bid in February of 2003 to various contractors within the Grand Rapids area. Due to the poor economy in early 2003, the bids came back from the contractors lower than projected. This allowed the building committee to add a raised platform, sound system, and a hardwood floor to the project and still come in at a total cost of \$2.5 million, substantially less than the \$2.7 million maximum target established in 2001.

The groundbreaking ceremony was held on Sunday, March 30, 2003, to start the construction of the project. An "International Dinner" was held in the school gym in February of 2004 to celebrate the third anniversary of the "Building Faith and Family" capital campaign. The occupancy permit for the Family Life Center was received in April 2004.



A dedication ceremony was held Sunday, May 23, 2004, which also coincided with the 90th Anniversary of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish. Dave Lehman, the music director, prepared a play entitled "Celebrate The Vision" which ran that weekend and showcased the many talents of the parishioners, as well as the raised platform, lighting, and sound systems in the Family Life Center. Rev. Vu led the dedication ceremony with over four hundred people in attendance at this marvelous event.

*Mike Sochacki and Mary Panek were co-chairmen for the project of the beautiful Family Life Center. They spent countless hours meeting with the building contractors, architects and many other businesses that a building of this magnitude requires.*

*The theme of the "Building Faith and Family" campaign was sharing of time, talents and treasures; not equal gifts but equal sacrifice. Mary and Mike captured the spirit well and went above and beyond what it takes for sacrificial giving. We thank them for their generosity and dedication.*



# Construction of the new Family Life Center





The design for the center of the athletic court incorporates the Cross and the Fleur-de-Lis. The Fleur-de-Lis is a symbol of the Holy Trinity and is also a symbol of the purity of the Blessed Virgin, because of its derivation from the Madonna's lily. The Fleur-de-Lis pattern is present in the stained glass in the church.

