

A History of Saint Joseph Parish, DuBois, Pa.

The beginning of the 20th century saw an unprecedented arrival of European immigrants to the shores of America. DuBois, because of its industries and productive farm lands, became a haven for a large number of people from Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia.

Father Adam Szymkiewicz

The present Saint Joseph Parish was founded under the name of Saint Mary in September of 1893 by Father Adam Szymkiewicz to serve primarily the spiritual needs of the Lithuanians. Father Szymkiewicz had been assistant at Punxsutawney—DeLancey for three months prior to taking on the assignment to begin Saint Joseph Parish. He erected the original church and rectory for Saint Joseph Parish in 1894, one year following his ordination to the priesthood for the Diocese of Erie. The first Mass was held on May 3, 1894. The relic in the main altar is of St. Felix.

Born in Lithuania on September 27, 1859, Father Adam Szymkiewicz had received his first education from his mother who was of noble birth. His father had died when Father Szymkiewicz was two years old. At the age of 14, after the complete destruction of their home by the Moscovites, Father Szymkiewicz worked his own way through education with the Jesuit Fathers at Szavle, Lithuania until his arrival in the United States to study at St. Bonaventure University in 1886. He was ordained for the Diocese of Erie at Saint Patrick Pro-Cathedral in Erie by Bishop Tobias Mullen, D.D. on July 23, 1893.

Because of the language ability of Father Szymkiewicz, the Poles and Slavs were also invited to belong to Saint Joseph Parish by the direction of Bishop Fitzmaurice, then Bishop of the Erie Diocese. The pastor, a child of a Polish parent and a Lithuanian parent, was accused of treating the Poles well while belittling the Lithuanians. Also, his financial dealings caused concern. He allegedly collected \$16,000 from 1894 to 1900 to pay for the new church, yet the mortgage was never paid and the bank foreclosed and put the building up for sale.

Father Szymkiewicz also founded the Parish of Saint Anthony at Helvetia in 1900. Cared for independently by a resident pastor, Fr. Andrew Jurcak, Saint Anthony's was a prosperous parish of 200 families while coal mining operations were very active. Most families moved to other locations when the coal mining bottomed out. The parish became a mission that was run by Father Abromaitis while he served at Sykesville. Later, Fr. Lorenc from Tyler, Pa. served the parish until it was attached to Saint Joseph Parish, DuBois under the direction of Fr. Urbonas.

Saint Anthony Parish was destroyed by fire in 1955. Most of the families in Helvetia joined Saint Joseph Parish and, in fact, became residents of DuBois.

After many quarrels between pastor and congregation, seventy-five members of the parish broke away, under the title of the Sacred Heart, arranging for temporary services at the local Swedish church until they could build their own church. They invited a freelance

clergyman, Fr. Petras Urbonas from Chicago to handle priestly duties. Eight months later, it was discovered that Urbonas was not a validly ordained priest and that he had a wife and children back in Chicago whom he intended to bring to DuBois, requiring the parishioners to support the entire family. The parishioners expelled him on July 1, 1904 and returned to St. Joseph's parish.

Matters worsened when Fr. Szymkiewicz got into territorial disputes with Fr. Bernard McGivney over accusations of renting pews and performing any priestly duties for St. Joseph parishioners. Fed up with the accusations, McGivney ceased any assistance to St. Joseph's. Then the Poles at St. Joseph's requested and received permission from Bishop Fitzmaurice to start their own parish. Fr. Szymkiewicz accused Bishop Fitzmaurice of violating church law. The bishop agreed to a canonical trial, but stated that it would be held in DuBois where all the priest's faults as pastor would be revealed. This threat stopped Fr. Szymkiewicz from demanding the trial.

To escape, Fr. Szymkiewicz attempted to trade places with a priest in the archdiocese of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Erie bishop Fitzmaurice denied permission. Fr. Szymkiewicz then received permission to switch with a priest, Fr. Ignatius Abromaitis, in the diocese of Pittsburgh if the Erie bishop would agree. Bishop Fitzmaurice consented, wondering who got the best of the bargain.

Father Szymkiewicz joined the Diocese of Pittsburgh in June 1909. He was then assigned as Pastor of Ascension Church, North Side, Pittsburgh, Pa., where he served from 1910 to 1935 when he was disabled by cerebral hemorrhage.

Fr. Juozas Krasnickas

In between pastor changes, Fr. Juozas Krasnickas was sent to the parish in late 1908. This led to problems.

Fr. Krasnickas had purchased an altar stone for a few dollars but billed the trustees \$100. When denied, he berated the parish trustees for not paying his wages a few days earlier than the agreed upon fifteenth of the month. He refused to offer Mass and then dismissed the parish board and forged several parishioner names on the annual diocesan report without their consent of having seen the report. The Lithuanian Independent Club, who still held the legal title for the property, kicked him out and locked the church.

In a fit of anger at a parish meeting, he assaulted a parishioner with his fists and a club. The victim filed charges and the pastor had to pay court costs and, in the presence of the judge, ask pardon from his victim.

His displays of temper continued and with the advice of neighboring priests, Lithuanian delegates wrote up a seven-point complaint demanding the removal of Fr. Krasnickas. At the same time, the pastor wrote to the bishop, accusing the trustees of not making weekly deposits of church revenue or giving him the bank book. He then forged the names of two trustees, not knowing that they had really signed the complaint that very day.

Father Ignatius Abromaitis

Fifteen years after founding Saint Joseph Parish, Father Szymkiewicz was succeeded as pastor of Saint Joseph by Father Ignatius Abromaitis.

Father Abromaitis had served in Pittsburgh for five years prior to his coming to DuBois. He arrived as pastor in August 1909 and remained as pastor of Saint Joseph Parish until July 1914, at which time he was appointed to be pastor of Big Soldier and Sykesville where he remained until 1917 or 1918. Father Abromaitis died on February 6, 1924.

The arrival of Fr. Abromaitis was difficult. He tried to create unity among the parishioners, yet told his Socialist parishioners to stay away from church. At the time, there was a debate as to whether one could be a Catholic and a Socialist at the same time.

By 1911, the Polish and Slovak people were numerous enough to build a church of their own and built their own parish church. Permission granted, Saint Michael Church was begun in 1912 under the pastorate of Father Joseph Rajs. Father Edward Pawlikowski finished the original structure in 1917.

The behavior of Fr. Abromaitis created a scandal. He spent much time managing a farm where he bred and raised pigeons and hogs, selling them to hotels and businesses. He converted a house owned by the parish into a pigeon pen. After Sunday Mass, he would go to his farm rather than offer children's catechism lessons, christening, and traditional afternoon Vespers. A beer drinker, he often appeared intoxicated in public. He also traveled house to house on a beer wagon, handing out kegs and cases of beer to the voters in his congregation.

The parishioners complained to Bishop Fitzmaurice, demanding he either replace the pastor or close the parish. The bishop chose the latter.

The bishop sent Fr. Abromaitis to St. Anthony's, a Polish parish in Helvetia. Those parishioners were suffering from the debt caused by their former pastor. The change in scenery didn't help Fr. Abromaitis, who overstayed at a christening party and smashed his vehicle in the early morning of October 17, 1915.

Father Abromaitis eventually returned to Pittsburgh in 1915. Saint Joseph Parish, in the meanwhile, was closed in 1914 and remained closed for almost two years. Hearing of a Lithuanian seminarian soon to be ordained, Bishop Fitzmaurice obtained permission from the Cincinnati Diocese for Michael J. Urbonas to be assigned to Saint Joseph Parish, DuBois.

Father Michael J. Urbonas

Father Michael J. Urbonas was born at Panemune, Lithuania on September 26, 1886. He studied at public schools in Thomas, West Virginia and at St. Vincent College in

Beatty, Pennsylvania. Philosophy and Theology were studied at Mount Saint Mary Seminary, Cincinnati, Ohio. Father Urbonas was ordained at Saint Peter Cathedral, Erie, Pa., by Bishop Fitzmaurice on December 18, 1915, and on the same day, he was assigned to be the third pastor of Saint Joseph Parish. He celebrated his First Mass in St. Thomas Church, his home parish, in Thomas, West Virginia. European immigrants tended to settle in areas that resembled their homelands and life styles. The town of Thomas, West Virginia had mining and timber, drawing European immigrants who left similar areas. Fr. Urbonas arrived in DuBois on December 24, 1915 to find the doors of the church and rectory still locked, and no parish members to meet him, to welcome him, or unlock the doors for him. He offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at St. Joseph on Christmas morning.

Celebrating three Christmas Masses on the 25th, Father Urbonas received six men for the first Mass, more for the second and more men and women for the third Mass. Mr. Christopher Voisiet served all three low Masses with light of only two wax candles on the altar of the cold, heatless church. Altar breads and wine were obtained from Fr. McGivney at St. Catherine's. There were no confessions and no Holy Communions, just a Christmas collection of \$14.00, seven dollars for the poor pastor and seven dollars for the poor parish. With this meager beginning, Fr. Urbonas celebrated his first Christmas as a priest with a handful of parishioners who gathered with prayerful hope, though few resources. The following Easter, his mother, brother, and sister came to live with him.

Father Urbonas reportedly found 305 families who eventually claimed membership at Saint Joseph Parish, 200 of whose members lacked church-going habits. Due to the financial mishandling by the previous pastors, the parishioners were unwilling to give money to the parish. Through much time and effort, he rebuilt the parish spirit and allegiance that resulted in an orderly group of devoted Catholics and a core group of dedicated, ethnically oriented folk who worked together to develop a stable community of faith. Father Urbonas gave his homilies in both Lithuanian and English at masses.

Father Urbonas petitioned and was received into the Third Order of St. Francis in 1919 and made his profession on October 4, 1920. He gave countless retreats and missions, traveling many miles to convert persons to greater faith and received over 1000 new members in the Third Order of Saint Francis during several of these missions. Father Urbonas spent his vacations time each year giving these missions to parishes and groups which requested him.

The present church structure was completed under the leadership of Father Urbonas in 1924 at a cost of \$150,000. On November 6, 1925, the church opened for worship. From 1931 to 1937, the basement of the present church was used as classroom space divided by temporary partitions. A relic of St. Felix is in the main altar table.

Laying the cornerstone for the new church was a widely hailed community event. A procession to the church by all of the parishioners took place. As many as 100 priests too part in the event. Monsignor M. Krusa from Chicago, Illinois was the principal celebrant. The hollow cornerstone was fitted with a special box that holds memorabilia of the day: names of relevant clergy, civic leaders, and newspapers of the day.

Since Fr. Urbonas was the only priest in the Erie diocese who spoke Lithuanian, in 1925, he was invited to Helvetia to hear Easter confessions. The priest who had taken care of that mission church had ceased coming, so the bishop shifted the mission's duties to Urbonas. In 1935, Fr. Urbonas asked the diocese for approval to build a two-room schoolhouse in Helvetia. The local mining company donated land, material that could be bought at cost, with labor furnished mostly by parishioners.

The former church in DuBois became the parish grammar school in 1930, receiving 140 students. A high school was added in 1931, with both schools staffed by the Sisters of Saint Francis of Mount Providence Motherhouse from Pittsburgh. In 1957, because of financial strain on the parish, the high school had to be closed. The grade school was discontinued with its final graduation class in 1971.

In 1937, the cramped school facilities required expansion. Despite the perils of the Great Depression, Fr. Urbonas promised he would pay for the renovation to the old church building with picnics and bazaars. To this, he added \$500 he had won the previous fall in a local newspaper contest and promised to add his yearly salary of \$1,200.

In most churches, the statue of St. Joseph is on the right side and Mary is on the left. For weddings, the bride's family and guests sit on the side of Mary and the groom's on the side of Joseph. In St. Joseph's parish, the statues are in reverse. This may be due to the fact that the Marian windows (for example, St. Anne, mother of Mary) are on the side where the statue of Mary resides.

Likewise, the Stations of the Cross begin on the upper right, near the altar of Mary, whereas they start on the opposite side in other churches. The Priest's sacristy is on the Mary side so that could be the reason. The priest and servers would not have to cross in front of the sanctuary, but rather go directly from the sacristy to the first station.

The desire of the people of the community to give their children a Catholic school education encouraged development of Saint Catherine grade school and the consolidated parish high school which was dedicated in 1961 as Central Christian High School, which many St. Joseph youth attended.

Monsignor Urbonas remained as pastor of Saint Joseph Parish for the entire 53 years of his priesthood. He was elevated to the title of Very Reverend Monsignor by Pope Pius XII on November 24, 1953. He received the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from St. Vincent College, Latrobe, Pa., on May 17, 1955. He was appointed Rural Dean of the third Diocesan district by Most Reverend Archbishop John Mark Gannon on January 24, 1958. He was named Domestic Prelate with the title of Right Reverend Monsignor by Pope Paul VI on October 8, 1965. Monsignor retired his pastorate on September 1, 1968 and remained in the parish until his death on November 18, 1976, at Christ the King Manor.

Father Boles Liubauskas served as assistant pastor to Monsignor Urbonas. He was in resident at St. Joseph he was assigned on September 28, 1955. Born in Lithuania on

February 8, 1905, he was ordained May 26, 1934 at the University of Kaunas, Lithuania. He retired in 1965 and died on October 18, 1976. He spoke mainly Lithuanian and had a difficult time with the English language. His hobby was pottery and the former money counting room upstairs in the rectory was his pottery studio. His picture was once in the Courier-Express displaying a rosary he made using golf balls for beads.

Father Joseph John Barr

Father Joseph John Barr was appointed pastor of Saint Joseph parish on September 15, 1968. He was born on January 1, 1915, and was ordained in Telsiai, Lithuania, on June 6, 1937. He served at Fordham University from 1939 to 1942. He was assistant pastor at Saint Joseph Parish in Waterbury, Connecticut, from 1942 to 1946. He taught at Duquesne University and Loyola from 1946 to 1950. He taught at Gannon College from 1950 until his assignment as pastor of Saint Joseph Parish, DuBois, in September of 1968. He died in February 1970 as a result of complications from an automobile accident.

Father Thomas Snyderwine served from February to June 1970 as administrator prior to Father John DeSanti's appointment.

Father John DeSanti

Father John DeSanti was pastor from 1970 to 1979. Declining enrollment, rising costs, and the availability of fewer sisters required the closing of Saint Joseph School in 1971. Father DeSanti died of cancer in June 1979. He enjoyed tropical fish. One of the unused rectory bedrooms was lined with dozens of aquariums.

Father Gregory Leopold

Father Gregory Leopold, born September 12, 1947, ordained May 11, 1972, was a resident at St. Joseph's from 1972 through 1984. A native of Erie, Pa, in addition to teaching math, physics, social studies and religion at Central Christian High School, he was Chaplin for the Knights of Columbus and the Knights of Lithuania, advisor for the Explorers Club and Youth Hostel and acted as Spiritual Director of the Legion of Mary. He was also active with Troop 30 of the Boy Scouts of America and many other youth organizations. Fr. Leopold was an active long distance runner who participated in many area races and marathons. Fr. Leopold was killed in an automobile accident January 8, 1984, on his way to conduct mass at St. Dominic's Church in Sigel when he lost control of his car on the icy winter roads.

Father William Cici

Father William Cici was appointed administrator of Saint Joseph Parish in October 1979, during Father DeSanti's illness. The first parish council was installed in January 1980. Under the guidance of this council and Father Cici, serious repairs were initiated and completed within the parish church. The major part of the \$90,000 repairs were received from individual members of the parish through pledges and donations. The roof

was repaired, windows reinforced and painted, attic insulated, and plaster repaired and interior of the church painted. New lighting, appropriate to liturgical and devotional actions was installed, pews refinished and carpeting installed. The parking lot was paved and exterior lighting installed.

Father Alex Amico

During the spring of 1983, Father Alex Amico was appointed to replace Father Cici. In the spring of 1984, Father Amico was replaced by Father Pudlo who was assigned as pastor to Saint Joseph.

Father Robert Pudlo
Father Tom Smith
Father Tom Suppa

The parish's joyful celebration of its ninetieth anniversary as a parish and the sixtieth anniversary of the church building in 1984 was under the administration of Fr. Tom Smith who assisted while Fr. Robert Pudlo was ill with initial bouts of cancer. Father Tom Suppa served as administrator during Father Pudlo's later stages of illness and following Father Pudlo's death in July of 1986 until Father Jim Kennelley's assignment as Parochial Administrator in September 1986.

Father Pudlo deepened the religious sensitivity of many parish members. His personal spirituality and convictions of the power of God's love working through human agents affected the lives of many. Scripture became the focus of healthy spiritual growth for a large number of parish members. Expressive sensitivity to the Eastern spirituality, icons, and liturgical celebration enhanced Father Pudlo's personality and spiritual leadership of Saint Joseph Parish.

Father Joseph Kalinowski

Father Joseph Kalinowski was a resident at St. Joseph's from July 19, 1984 through January 19, 1985. During that time, he assisted with masses while teaching at Central Christian High School.

Fr. James Kennelley

Fr. James Kennelley, a native of Bradford, PA ordained May 7, 1970, was assigned Parochial Administrator to St. Joseph's from 1986 to 1987, at which time he was appointed pastor. He later relocated to a parish in Mercer.

During his time as pastor, many parish projects were completed. The heated sidewalk was installed and the basement gymnasium was remodeled into the church hall, including expanding the hall kitchen. Storm windows were added to the church to protect the stained glass windows and heating bills. After the storm windows, air conditioning was installed to make summer weather bearable.

A small shrine to St. Joseph was added next to the church. The front of the church was renovated and a new baptismal font built. In the parish cemetery, Fr. Kennelley carved

the Mysteries of the Rosary and installed them and the Stations of the Cross along the cemetery walkway, and built a grotto, nicknamed the “Rosary Walk.”

In 1999, due to the shortage of priests in the diocese, St. Joseph parish began sharing the pastor of St. Catherine a block away, Fr. Richard Siefer (Ordained May 16, 1975), the pastor of St. Catherine’s. Their religious education programs combined in 2003. Priests from that parish who assisted with sacraments at St. Joseph included: Fr. Ed Walk, Fr. Bill Calabrese, Fr. Zab Amar and Fr. Tom Hoderney. In 2007 the rectory was sold off. The connecting passageway from the rectory money counting room to the hallway behind the altar was removed. Money received for the sale of the rectory covered parish assessments that were delinquent for several years.

St. Joseph Cemetery

Although St. Joseph’s parish didn’t own the cemetery grounds until 1912, people were buried there as far back as 1910. Before St. Joseph’s had their own cemetery, parishioners were buried at St. Catherine’s Cemetery. During Fr. James Kennelley’s time as pastor, the cemetery mapping was improved. He added the Stations of the Cross and a grotto. Three large crosses were installed by the Knights of Lithuania. There used to be figures on the crosses but they were wooden and broke apart. In 1997 attempts were made to repair them but this wasn’t possible.

When entering the cemetery from the Long Avenue side, there is a small plot of graves on the left side of the road. It had been assumed that these were graves of people who had committed suicide as they were not buried on blessed ground. Upon updating the burial records, it was discovered that this was once called the ‘angel section’ where babies had been buried.

Pastors and Administrators:

1893-1909

Father Adam Szymkiewicz

1910-1914

Father Ignatius Abromaitis

1915-1968

Msgr. Michael J. Urbonas

1968-1970

Father Joseph John Barr

1970

Father Thomas Snyderwine

1970-1980

Father John DeSanti

1979-1983

Father William Cici

1983-1984

Father Alex Amico

1984-1986

Father Robert Pudlo

1984

Father Thomas Smith

1986

Father Thomas Suppa

1986-1999

Father Jim Kennelley

1999-

Msgr. Richard Siefer

Priests in Residence:

1972-1984

Father Gregory Leopold

1984-1985

Father Joseph Kalinowski

2001-

Fr. Ed Walk

(Ordained August 11, 1979)

1999-2001

Fr. Bill Calabrese

2001-

Fr. Zab Amar

(Ordained May 28, 19??)

Fr. Tom Hoderney

2008-

Prayer to Saint Joseph

O Blessed Saint Joseph, we consecrate ourselves to your honor. We give ourselves wholly to you that you may ever be our Father, our Patron, and our Guide in the way of salvation. Obtain for us, we ask, a great purity of heart and a fervent love of the interior life.

Help us in accord with your example to do all our actions for the greater glory of God, in union with the Divine Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Finally, pray for us that we may share in the peace and joy of your holy protection and finally, a peaceful death.

Amen.

-written by Fr. James Kennelley
-revised by Gene M. Aravich, 2006