

ST. THOMAS CHURCH HISTORY FROM 1901 – 1976

St. Thomas Parish was founded at a time when new coal mines were being opened in Fayette County. The early settlers, joined by many immigrants, sought to earn a livelihood in the mines. Many of these who were Catholics realized the need of a place of worship. A new parish was formed and building of a new church began in May, 1901. The H.C. Frick Coke Co. granted a ninety-nine year lease on the property on which the church now stands.

The Most Rev. Bishop Richard Phelan appointed Rev. John Jaskovits as the first pastor. The first Mass of the parish was celebrated on Sunday, May 13, 1901 in one of the Frick Company houses. Immediately the men and women organized to begin the work of building a church. The zeal and enthusiasm of these early parishioners became apparent in the success of St. Thomas. The foundation of the first church, a frame building, was erected under the supervision of Father Jaskovits. The cornerstone was blessed July 4, 1903 and services were conducted in the basement. Father Jaskovits was transferred to Homestead, PA.

Father Michael Orzechowski was appointed to succeed Father Jaskovits. He completed the church and it was dedicated on July 4, 1905 by the late Most Reverend Bishop Paul Rhode, Bishop of Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Father Ignatius Ostaszewski followed as pastor from 1905 to 1909. He erected a frame rectory in July, 1906 and opened the school and convent a little later that year. Father Ostaszewski, with the parish's first assistant Father Andrew Bejenkowski, succeeded in organizing the following mission Churches: St. Mary's, Cardale, from December 6, 1908 to July 4, 1915; St. Hedwig's, Brier Hill, from December 14, 1906 to September 9, 1909; St. Casimer's, Keisterville, from August 9, 1906 to October 9, 1909. These missions later became separate parishes and are still in existence.

In 1909 the Most Reverend Regis Canevin appointed Father John Kopera as pastor. He served as pastor for the next eight years. He continued the progressive work of his predecessors.

On Sunday afternoon, November 17, 1909 a tragedy struck St. Thomas Church. The church so loved by its parishioners was destroyed by a fire whose origin was undetermined. Their faith undaunted, the people conducted services for a time in the school as plans were made to erect a larger, more substantial Church.

The work of building the foundation progressed so rapidly that the cornerstone was laid and blessed by the Very Reverend Michael A. Lambing on Sunday, July 17, 1910. The new church was built in a Romanesque style and constructed of buff brick with a red Spanish tile

roof. The church contained beautiful stained glass windows. It was dedicated by a missionary priest, the Rev. Charles Janowski, S.J. on Sunday, August 9, 1911. Temporary altars were erected and the present pews installed. The church was a beautiful monument to the memory of Father Kopera who was transferred in 1917.

By this time Father Bejenkowski was made pastor of the missions at Keister and Brier Hill. Father John Wojciechowski and Father Stanley Zmijewski served as assistants under Father Kopera.

Father Anthony Baron succeeded Father Kopera as pastor from 1917 to 1925. The present altars, a used boiler to heat the church and a used electric organ were installed with the aid of loans from the Chancery and the Polish American Beneficial Society. St. Thomas church was assessed \$6,580 for the Educational Fund. St. Thomas School was closed but the parish began a school fund hoping to build a new school. Father Baron was transferred in April, 1925 to St. Mary's, New Kensington, PA.

Father John Robacrewski was pastor from 1925 to 1927.

Father Leo Buza, one of the two living former pastors, took charge of the parish from 1927 to 1939. The depression years and general unemployment brought difficulties to the parish. Father Buza found it necessary to obtain a loan from Joseph Slowik, a parishioner. Social and entertainment were kept alive to help the financial situation. In spite of financial difficulties, the parish spiritual growth expanded. St. Thomas parish enjoyed an active Holy Name Society, Sodality, Holy Rosary Society and Choir. During 1938, with the aid of Father Adam Jurczyk, a temporary Assistant, Father Buza succeeded to have the interior of the church painted and new flooring installed in the church aisles. Father Ladislaus Kolakowski also served as assistant pastor. Time for a change though and Father Buza was transferred to St. Hyacinth Church, Pittsburgh, PA, leaving the parish with a \$12,000 debt. Father Buza, now 88 years old, is living at the Vincentian Home, Pittsburgh, PA.

Father Stanley Gawronski became pastor in August 1939. During his pastorate, loans amounting to \$5,200 were paid off, the Educational Fund assessment of \$6,382 was paid in full, the church interior was repainted, all exterior woodwork was painted, stained glass windows were repaired, a rubber tile flooring was installed in the sanctuary, electric lighting fixtures were installed, including 14 pendant lanterns, cushioned kneelers were installed, and two rooms added to the school building. During this time St. Teresa's Guild took an active part in church activities.

Father Gawronski did much in a financial way to guard the future interests of the parish. After serving the parish for 18 years, he was transferred to All Saints Church, East Vandergrift, PA.

Father Walter Iwaniski was the next pastor to serve St. Thomas. He became pastor in 1957. His first interest was to reopen the school. He used every effort to get teaching nuns, but to no avail. Teaching religion to our young people, first through twelfth grade, became his primary concern. With the help of the Trinitarian Nuns and in cooperation with the Diocesan Program, the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine was organized and interested lay teachers took over the teaching. A new roof was put on the school and the interior remodeled to better serve teaching religion. The St. Thomas Social Center was built. A hardtop surface for the parking lot was started but not completed.

It was during Father Iwaniski's pastorate that the changes in the church began. It was a smooth transition. The altar of sacrifice, facing the congregation was used for the first time. Lectors were trained and congregational participation began, including singing.

Father Leonard Knuth, present pastor, succeeded Father Iwaniski in 1968. Father Knuth completed hardtopping the church parking lot, paid off the debt on the Social Center, which approximated \$40,000, installed stainless steel steeples, installed a new tile roof and copper gutters on the church, installed new furnaces in the church and school buildings, made improvements on the church cemetery, had repairs made to the church organ, installed a new public address system in the church, installed new concrete steps from the church to the highway including iron safety railings, installed protective roof over church entrance, installed a concrete walk from the church to the rectory and completed the building of a new rectory.

St. Thomas parish is grateful that it was blessed with pastors and assistant pastors who contributed much to physical and spiritual growth of the parish. All, except Father Knuth, went on to new parishes to continue their priestly work, yet always continued a warm relationship with our parishioners.

However, much credit is due to the great number of parishioners for their hard work and voluntary contributions. It is impossible to list the names and accomplishments of each. Time and space does not permit it. There are so many who have sacrificed and given of themselves. Only by the grace of God could all this happen. So we say: Deo Gratias – Thanks be to God – Bogu Dzieki.

St. Thomas School

Like every parish, St. Thomas boasted a parish school. Classes were held in the old church basement. Later on, a frame building was erected. The first floor was used for socials and meetings while the second floor was used for classrooms. Later the building was dismantled and the school closed in 1921. St. Thomas had no school until ten years later when a two-room building was built. Father Gawronski had two rooms added during his pastorate.

The Bernadine nuns were the first to teach at St. Thomas followed by the Holy Ghost nuns and finally the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Soon teaching nuns were withdrawn and since no nuns were available the school was closed permanently.

However, religious instruction continues on a regular basis with lay teachers instructing grade school children and Father Capo assisting with the high school students.

St. Thomas Cemetery

St. Thomas parish obtained the first four acres of land to be used for burials as a donation from the H.C. Frick Coke Co. It is located within walking distance from the church.

On July 10, 1947, Father Gawronski purchased an adjoining 4 acres from Mr. and Mrs. Marion Kurzantkowski, enlarging the cemetery to its present size.

The large crucifix, which had been at the entrance, was removed and a crucifix placed in the new section. It was plated with stainless steel as a donation in memory of Charles Marshall, a lifetime parishioner.

The Pieta was installed near the entrance.

The driveways have been greatly improved and many shrubs and evergreens planted. The cemetery is at its best due to the special interest Father Knuth has shown. He has encouraged this work contributed by our good parishioners.

St. Thomas Choir

From the very beginning St. Thomas Parish organized a Choir. The first organist was Professor Stanley Godlewski. He trained a mixed choir of young men and women and also a children's choir.

At that time teaching nuns arrived at St. Thomas, a nun organist was also provided and the church choir consisted of young women and school children. Later, loss of the nuns due to closing of the school created a need for a lay organist.

Miss Dorothy Kovalik served the parish from 1927-1939. With help of the pastor, Father Buza, she trained a young women's choir. But when the Bishop ordered women off the choir loft, she training a men and boys' choir.

Mrs. Evelyn Hovanec Macar served from 1944-1956. She was a very talented and accomplished musician. By this time women were permitted in the choir loft again and she trained a mixed choir. Mrs. Macar was an excellent singer. She had substitute helpers in Helen Hovanec and Walter Fronczek who played the first Mass on Sunday for many years.

Mrs. Carletta Kois Fronczek is the present organist. She is small but has a powerful personality. She has many accomplishments to her credit and the determination to succeed as a good organist. She is ably assisted by her mother, Mrs. Leona Kois. We wish them well.

St. Theresa's Guild

St. Theresa's Guild was organized through the efforts of Miss Martha Washlefsky and Sister M. Fridoline as a group of parish women to work and raise funds for miscellaneous needs of the convent and rectory. Later is expanded to include many needs of the parish.

The ladies of the Guild proved to be willing and able workers who provided assistance in many ways through the years. They deserve much credit for the many projects planned and completed.

Other Parish Organizations/Groups

Other parish organizations/groups include: Holy Name Society, Altar Boys, Commentators, Church Ushers, and Diamond Jubilee Committee.

St. Thomas Pastors

Rev. J. Jaskovits	1901 – 1902
Rev. M.J. Orzechowski	1902 – 1904
Rev. J. Januschak	1904 – 1905
Rev. Ignatius Ostaszewski	1905 – 1909
Rev. John Kopera	1909 – 1917
Rev. Anthony Baron	1917 – 1925
Rev. John Robaczewski	1925 – 1927
Rev. Leo Buza	1927 – 1939
Rev. Stanley A. Gawronski	1939 – 1957
Rev. Walter Iwaniski	1957 – 1968
Rev. Leonard A. Knuth	1968 – 1977
Rev. Sebastian Pajdzik	1977 – 1987
Rev. Lawrence Hoppe	1987 – 1988
Rev. Walter Bratus	1988 – 1994
Rev. James Popochock	1994 – 2007 (Administrator)
Rev. Peter J. Peretti	2007 – June 25, 2013 (Administrator)

Assistant Priests

Rev. Andrew Bejenkowski
Rev. John Adamowski
Rev. John Wojciechowski
Rev. Stanley Zmijewski
Rev. Ladislaus Kolakowski

Priests and Religious from St. Thomas

Rev. Stanley Fronczek
Rev. Walter (Joseph) Molek, O.F.M.
Rev. August Sulik
Rev. Leonard Bealko
Brother Joseph Czajka, S.J.
Rev. Charles Kobylarz
Sister M. Genevieve Javorsky
Sister M. Regina Krulak

May They Rest in Peace

These gallant members of St. Thomas Parish have paid the supreme sacrifice of their lives in World War II and the Korean War.

Three hundred and ten members of Saint Thomas Parish were in the service during these wars.

Frank Paluch	Charles Velosky
John Sabala	Andrew Koha
Joseph Sabala	John Molek, Jr.
John Gewak	Albert Servenak
Joseph Gush	Joseph D. Czajka

We beg you, Lord
to help and defend us.
Deliver the oppressed,
pity and insignificant,
raise the fallen,
Show yourself to the needy,
heal the sick,
bring back those of your people
who have gone astray,
feed the hungry,
lift up the weak,
take off the prisoner's chains.
May every nation come to know
that you alone are God,
that Jesus Christ is your Child,
that we are your people,
the sheep that you pasture.

Clement of Rome