

Church of the Precious Blood

Introduction to Part One: A Parish Building Up

Bishop Michael Gallagher empowered Father William Hermes to found and lead a parish. He handed over the care of a small group of Catholic people and 10 acres of land. Then the Bishop blessed the priest and the people and their joint efforts.

The people numbered 94. The land was at Schaefer Road and Grove Avenue. From these, Precious Blood Church was born. With a wonderful measure of divine favor, some inspired planning and leadership, generous cooperation, honest hard work, the Parish grew.

There were troubles, difficulties and disappointments, but the Parish grew to become one of the finest in the Church of Detroit.

Part One: A Parish Building Up

On July 1, 1929, only a sign marked the site of the newly established Church of the Precious Blood:

Church of the Precious Blood
Rev. Wm. L. Hermes, Pastor
Rectory, 16596 Tracey Avenue
Telephone HO-5971

That summer, Father William Hermes and 94 parishioners began worshipping in the Schultze Elementary School. Times were perilous. The U.S. stock market crashed on October 29. In November, the church moved into two store buildings at Puritan and Lesure, where the newly formed choir sang the first Christmas Day Mass. Father Hermes also organized the parish Rosary Altar Society. This group of women raised funds through a variety of social functions, including bake sales, parish card parties and lawn socials.

On April 11, 1930, ground was broken for the first permanent building the western wing of the present school building. Bishop Gallagher laid the cornerstone of the structure, which had a chapel on the first floor for parish worship and a five-room school on the second floor. By August the chapel was ready for use. The new school, staffed by five Adrian Dominican Sisters, enrolled 150 children in September.

In 1938, in order to provide space for the nearly 1,200 families of the parish, a new chapel and parish hall were begun. The eastern wing of the school welcomed 1,239 families for Masses in January 1939. The western wing was converted for school use.

By April 1940, a bit more than a year later, the parish membership had increased to 1,400 families. On July 1, 1941, work on the permanent convent was begun. Five months later, in early December, a U.S. Naval Base in Hawaii named Pearl Harbor was attacked by Japan and this country entered World War II. Over the next five years, 11 parishioners lost their lives in the armed services. As a result of the war, civilian construction came to an abrupt halt.

Less than seven years later, the parish's building campaign was back on track. A connecting section of the school was added, joining the two wings together and providing much-needed classroom space.

March 19, 1949, the Feast of St. Joseph, was set for the start of building a permanent church. However, because of limited funds, the project had to be delayed for a year. On March 19, 1950, Bishop Stephen Wosnicki, Auxiliary to Cardinal Edward Mooney laid the cornerstone of the church. There were nearly 1,900 families of the parish.

On July 1, 1951, the permanent church was solemnly blessed. Father Hermes and two assistant priests served 2,000 families and 24 Sisters taught in the school. The last building constructed was the permanent rectory, which was completed in July 1954. The parish had grown mightily from its beginnings.

Introduction to Part Two: A Parish Changing

A long development in Scripture studies, theological investigation and interpretation, human experience and human sciences, and pastoral concern culminated in Pope John XXIII's decision,

announced January 25, 1959, to convene an ecumenical council of Roman Catholic Bishops. The Second Vatican Council propelled the Catholic Church in all its constituent parts forward in a process of rapid ecclesiastical reappraisal, reform and renewal.

At the same time, the neighborhoods of Northwest Detroit felt the tremors of radical and profound social change. As black people who were not members of Catholic churches moved in, fears and unresolved hostility, property concerns and real estate, insurance and banking manipulation converged to unalterably change our Parish.

Part Two: A Parish Changing

When the Second Vatican Council began in Rome, 19 Dominican Sisters and five lay teachers in the parish school were educating 1143 students. The congregation numbered between 2800 and 3000 families.

The effects of the Council began to appear in the parish church with the Masses with English hymns in Fall 1964 and leading to all-English Masses on the first Sunday of Advent 1965. New sanctuary furniture for Mass facing the people was in place by mid-1966 and articles appeared from time to time in the church publication presenting and explaining the changes in the rites of worship.

Though nearly nothing at all was written in the parish paper, northwest Detroit - like many areas of the city - was undergoing a difficult transition, as black families moved in among the white families. Personal stories told by some of the then "newcomers" make it clear they were not welcomed to the area or to the church.

In April 1966, September 1966, and later in June 1967, notes of welcome appear in the parish paper. At the same time, however, real and deep concern and resistance were being expressed over the change in the neighborhoods and in the parish. And people were moving away from Precious Blood in increasing numbers. On January 10, 1968, Monsignor Hermes retired and took the title "Pastor Emeritus", and Reverend Marvin A. Young became the second pastor of the parish.

The priests and people of the Parish continued and intensified their efforts to reform their lives according to the direction of the Second Vatican Council. Lay members became more involved in the affairs of their parish, first through committees of Christian service, worship, formation and administration, and then through a 21-member Parish Council, elected February 1, 1970. Renewed efforts were made to relate the Parish to the black people of the area through the school, a meeting between black and white teens, and involvement in a program named "Black Catholics in Action."

On November 10, 1969, Monsignor Hermes flew to Florida because of his declining health. He died on July 4, 1971, and was buried from the church he had loved so much and served so well.

Part Three: A Parish Lives On

Father Young continued his service to the parish until 1974, when he retired as pastor. On August 29, 1974, co-pastors were named: Father Donald M. Clark and Father Leo J. Priemer. Father Clark, an African American priest not yet 40, and Father Priemer, his younger, white counterpart, formed a spiritually energetic "dynamic duo" with two very distinct, yet complimentary, styles. They began their joint tenure by forming a pastoral staff with four religious sisters. In conjunction with the Parish Council and its commissions, the parish team worked to restore confidence and stability to the membership. Religious sisters on Precious Blood's staff at the time included Srs. Mary Ann Przybysz, RSM, religious education coordinator; and Linda Werthman, RSM, and Mary Chen, HVM, Christian service moderators. Later team members included Victory Noll Sisters Janet Thill and Patricia Heaney. At that time, the Parish roles listed about 900 households. The grade school enrollment was not quite 250 children. In the late 1970s, Sr. Mary Louise Watkins, RSM, became the principal.

Although the Parish was losing members, Precious Blood regained a sense of purpose and reveled in a new energy during this period. Through the dedication of the Pastoral staff, dynamic Parish Council and commission members, and an energetic, diverse and multi-generational parish membership - composed of older members who had remained and young families who chose to join - the parish enjoyed a lively resurgence. In 1978, Father Priemer left Precious Blood to become pastor of Our Lady Gate of Heaven. For the next four years, Father Clark led the congregation as pastor.

In July 1979, as the parish celebrated its 50th Anniversary, the congregation had leveled off to 535 households, Precious Blood Grade School enrollment had risen, however, from 383 in 1977 to 420 a year later. The hope that summer was to have 450 students enrolled for the 1979-80 school year. As Father Clark wrote in the 50th Anniversary booklet, "We have prepared for this day of celebration with real optimism and joy. We do not believe that we are any less than a Parish living on."

Part Four: A Community of Faith, living and Thriving

In June 1982, Father Ronald Kurzawa succeeded Father Clark, who was sent for graduate studies in theology to the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

In 1985, despite the valiant efforts of a gifted faculty led by lay principal Ms. Cathy Myszka to boost enrollment, the school closed after 55 years of service. The school, which at one time had nearly 2,000 students, had only 68 students enrolled for the following fall semester when it's closing was announced that spring.

The building, in which thousands of children were taught for more than five decades, would continue as a symbol of Catholic educational excellence. In 1991, after an impressive renovation, it became the home of St. Martin de Porres High School. Founded in 1967, St. Martin de Porres had a rich history of academic - as well as athletic - success, which continued across the street from the church Monsignor Hermes built. St. Martin de Porres closed in 2005. The building is now Lincoln-King Academy – a Cornerstone School.

Bishop Moses B. Anderson, SSE, became pastor of the Church of the Precious Blood in 1992. A member of the Society of St. Edmund, Bishop Anderson was appointed the first African American auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Detroit in 1982. At the same time he was Precious Blood's pastor, he also served as the auxiliary bishop for 10 vicariates - which included the cities of Detroit, Highland Park, Hamtramck, Grosse Pointe and Harper Woods.

In 2001, just as the millennium dawned, the parish welcomed Rev. Mr. Wyatt L. Jones, Jr., a lay deacon, as its pastoral administrator. Married to DeBorah and the father of four children, ages 10-23, Deacon Jones brought with him more than 20 years' experience in the Archdiocese, including the directorship of the Office of Black Catholic Affairs and several pastoral leadership positions.

"Precious Blood Church has weathered the storms of change and is rising to the challenges that will 'secure its future'," Deacon Jones wrote in a reflection on the occasion of the parish's 75th milestone anniversary. "Through our outreach and collaboration with the people and groups of our community, we are seeing positive growth and fully expect to prosper over the *next* 75 years." "We, who are the present community of the Church of the Precious Blood, will work tirelessly to continue the work begun by the generations of parishioners who came before us."

While Deacon Jones' vision continues, changing demographics and financial challenges necessitated a new approach – to combine resources with a neighboring, like-minded parish – St. Francis de Sales. The result was the merger in 2005, forming the new St. Peter Claver Catholic Community.

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