

## St. Francis de Sales Church

St. Francis came into being towards the end of the third decade of the twentieth century. The northwest section of Detroit was sparsely settled then, but the Archdiocese, probably aware of the potential of the fledgling automotive industry, decided to found a parish there. The Bishop placed Reverend Vincent G. Griffin in charge of the project in April, 1927. It was established as a territorial parish and its boundaries were not fixed.

The first Masses were offered on an impromptu altar - two sawhorses and a length of lumber - set up in the nearby Edgar A. Guest Public School through the courtesy of the Detroit Board of Education.

The founding parishioners raised the funds to establish the parish by sponsoring a roast beef dinner and bazaar in July in an open field on Meyers Road. It was well attended, attracting many people from neighboring parishes. By December, the first permanent structure, a combination school and chapel was opened. The first rectory was a rented house on Griggs Street, north of Fenkell.

Educating the children in the principles of the Faith was a primary concern to pastors, and Father Griffin lost no time in making arrangements to open the school as soon as possible. Three Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, arrived in January, 1928, enrolled eighteen children in eight grades, and began classes the following month. The nuns were Sisters Teresita, Rose Patricia, and James Patricia. By June, fifty-nine children had been prepared for receiving their First Holy Communion. In the following year, the staff doubled. Grades nine and ten were added in 1930, and the first high school commencement exercises were held in 1932.

After the stock market collapsed on Black Friday in October of 1929, American hopes and dreams were aborted by a decade-long Depression. No longer in demand in a stand-still economy, skilled labor became readily available. A new convent for St. Francis de Sales, begun in September, 1932, was completed by the end of the year, and ready for occupancy in January. That year, the first I.H.M. Superior, Mother Marie Assumpta, arrived to take charge.

Although in those first few years, the parish grew slowly as home building was held down, parish enrollment began to pick up in the mid-thirties. The school had eighteen students in 1927, and five hundred and thirty-five children registered by 1935, with a staff of ten Sisters and one lay teacher. Another eighty-seven children came in 1936, and work was begun on the third and last unit of the school building. In that year, overcrowding had reached the point where third grade students attended for half a day; the boys in the morning, and the girls in the afternoon. School enrollment reached eight hundred and twenty-six in 1941, a year that ended with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It was a day, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt told the American people, that would "live in infamy."

The Second World War had begun for Americans on an island thousands of miles away in the Pacific, but its effects touched every American life. Food rationing curtailed the use of meats, butter, and other high demand items for which the armed services now held priority. The menu at the Senior Breakfast reflected the cutback. Air-raid drills became a feature of school life as authorities feared the possibility Detroit might be bombed. First Aid courses were added to the curriculum.

And life went on. The Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) sponsored a Senior Prom, and Lola Park was the scene of family and class outings and picnics. Memories of these events would go with some of the forty-seven high school graduates when they enlisted in the armed forces.

While the Depression had meant an oversupply of workers, the war meant an undersupply as the draft depleted their numbers. In 1942, when a temporary church for the parish was constructed, its opening had to be postponed as the pews had not been delivered on time. The standard excuse for the period was, "Don't you know there's a war on?"

As the country engaged in war overseas, those at home sought some escape in entertainment. The class of 1942's contribution was a comedy called *Spring Fever*. Military service was claiming more of the parish's young men — two hundred and eighty-nine by 1944. The parish newspaper reminded its readers to donate to the Red Cross and to write to the boys overseas. By the time the war ended in 1945, ten young men from the parish had given their lives in defense of their country.

During the mid-1940's, the basketball team captured the Westside championship, the two houses of the convent were renovated and joined into one residence, the Dominican Fathers gave a parish mission, and in 1949, you could play sixteen bingo games for seventy-five cents at St. Francis.

The post-war building boom brought an increase in parish membership, and construction of a

permanent church began. By 1952, there were fifteen hundred families in the parish, with one thousand children in the grade and high school. It was also the year for the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the parish and of the pastor's service at St. Francis. The celebration culminated in the fall, when Bishop Alexander Zaleski blessed the marble altar on October 30 having enclosed in it the relics of St. Theophilus and St. Pacificus.

## **The New Church**

Of Gothic design, the imposing structure featured carved Indiana limestone trim on the front elevation of the church building, up to a niche forty feet above ground containing a life size statue of St. Francis de Sales. The rest of the exterior was in varicolored brick as were the other parish buildings.

The nave was rectangular in plan with a seating capacity of more than one thousand persons. Buff-colored Travertine marble was used for the main and side aisles. Pews were stained oak, as was the wood paneling which extended above the red cedar Tavernelle wainscoting.

The following April the solemn blessing of the new church was held with Edward Cardinal Mooney officiating. The ceremony was attended by one hundred and twenty Monsignori and priests and one hundred religious Sisters. The temporary church, put up ten years earlier, became the parish gym.

Parish registration peaked in 1966 at two thousand, one hundred families – but change was in the wind. For the country, Vietnam became a controversial issue, cautiously debated at first, then heatedly protested. The young went on to question the American way of life, with the resultant Generation Gap and atmosphere of permissiveness. For the Church, the liturgical changes calling for congregational participation, the introduction of the Mass in the vernacular, with some services accompanied by folk music, caused problems. Not all parishioners either welcomed or understood the new ways. The parish paper provided information and guidance about Vatican II pronouncements to help their parishioners through the transition. The pastor, Father Griffin, fighting ill health and age, and unable to contribute fully to the problems of a troubled period, retired in 1966. Reverend Ralph Kowalski became pastor.

The Guest Community Council was formed to help promote a harmonious and productive community. Reverend Thomas J. Finnigan, who came to the parish in 1965, earned a reputation as a "whirlwind" for his efforts to foster a Christian community. By the end of the decade, ecumenism was demonstrated in a social center for teens under joint sponsorship with Grace Presbyterian Church and St. Olaf's Lutheran Church. An ecumenical Thanksgiving Service was held with United Presbyterian Church, St. Olaf's, Redeemer United Church of Christ, and Puritan Heights Lutheran Church. The choirs of four of the churches joined together for the music. Recalling their Jewish heritage, a number of parishioners planned the first parish Seder Meal to precede the Holy Thursday liturgy.

The seventies offered many challenges to the survival of the parish. The urban sprawl picked up pace as the war in Vietnam was phased out and families took advantage of the vast opportunities in new housing west and north of the city. Although the influx of new families was significantly slower than the exiting of old families, the parish was adopted by a new group of diverse cultures that has endured adversity to the present day. The combination of the recession of the seventies and declining revenue from Sunday offerings imposed an enormous burden on the St. Francis Community. The determination to survive was explicit in the relentless fund raising activities orchestrated by Fr. Bob McGrath and the parish family.

Volunteerism by dedicated parishioners was the spirit that replaced the void left by declining membership and resources. Mike Porter, the then president of the parish council, was a key contributor to the upkeep of the church and adjoining facilities, giving thirty years of service in varying capacities to curb the ever growing operating expenses. Hattie Przystawski, Sylvia Baker, Roy Bumphers, Harold Moore and John Luckett managed the St. Vincent De Paul Outreach Program beginning in the early seventies, providing the St. Francis Community with food, clothing, and other vital support. William Tidwell was a key organizer of the athletic program that offered the gymnasium to the neighborhood children and adults for basketball competition after school and on weekends. The council 299 chapter of the Knights of St. Peter Claver and Ladies Auxiliary was established in 1988, Harold Moore serving as Grand Knight. The council was one of the more active chapters in southeastern Michigan.

The high school and convent were leased out to various entities, such as: a Montessori School, a rehabilitation program run by the State of Michigan, and finally, in the nineties, a joint venture between the Archdiocese of Detroit and the Jesuit Province – a Jesuit High School.

In the beginning of the nineties decade, the parish family and the Jesuit/ Archdiocese team contracted a plan that provided the community with a Catholic High School and preserved the worship community of St. Francis de Sales. In 1993, after a five-year assignment in Toledo, Fr. James O'Reilly, S.J. joined the faculty staff at Loyola High School. His duties were expanded to Pastor of St. Francis de Sales in 1994.

Further planning, based on perceived success in original planning, yielded a new agreement between St. Francis de Sales and the Jesuit/Archdiocese team to convert the Fenkell St. Francis de Sales Church to a gymnasium and reconvert the existing gymnasium back to the church.

The new plan was an inspiring triumph over many adversities associated with the school's need for growth in a particular area and the St. Francis de Sales need for establishing financial health and maintaining its unique identity as it pursues its mission of evangelization and community outreach.

Despite these efforts, as was true for many churches in the City, changing demographics and financial pressures continued to challenge the parish, requiring a new approach – combine resources with a neighboring, like-minded parish – Precious Blood. The merger was completed in 2005, resulting in St. Peter Claver Catholic Community.

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