

The History of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church De Pere, Wisconsin

Our story actually begins in 1676 when a small wooden chapel was built by a missionary priest on the banks of the Fox river near the present site of Old St. Joseph Church. Almost a century later, two Jesuit missionaries were murdered in an ambush near the site of the chapel. This forms the contention that the City of De Pere received its name from the French phrase, “Deus Peres” meaning “Two Fathers.” In 1870, under the supervision of Fr. Vemere, French speaking residents of De Pere formed a new parish on the banks of the Fox and dedicated it to St. Joseph. The name was chosen to honor Pope Pius IX (the ninth) decree of that year making St. Joseph the Patron of the Universal Church. In 1889, the church was struck by lightning and destroyed. The people of the parish, however, lost no time in building a new one which was dedicated in 1890. Since most of the parishioners were French-speaking, it came to be known as the “French Church.” Around the same time a few blocks away, the “Dutch” church was coming into being. Eighty (80) Holland and German speaking families, tired of crossing the Fox River for Sunday mass, petitioned the Bishop of Green Bay (Bishop Krautbauer) for their own church and on June 5, 1882, the Feast of St. Boniface, ground was broken for the new church, appropriately named St. Boniface. In January of 1884, these same families assembled on what is now the corner of Grant and Fourth Streets and celebrated Mass together for the first time with Father Adolph Smitz of the Netherlands being the first pastor.



From the beginning members of both parishes cherished the belief that a church needs to give glory and honor to God and be a worthy dwelling place for the Son of God. In the 1933 history annals of St. Boniface, the following was written: “(The people) let no chance go by to make the Lord’s house beautiful.” Thus many of the members of the two congregations took an active part in the erection of their churches and pledged their time, talent, and money to insure that the Catholic Church would always be an honored presence in De Pere. This daily commitment for the welfare of the church is one of the great legacies given to their descendants who make up Our Lady of Lourdes Parish.

Another legacy of the parishes was concern for the youth. From the beginning, the two parishes entered the arena of education. At St. Boniface, the first school room was located in the rear of the new church building. Six months after the completion of the church, the first school was built across the street. The Franciscan Sisters of Bay Settlement were invited to be the first religious order to teach in the school, an apostolate they held for one hundred years. The kindness of the Bay Settlement sisters and their good influence are still felt today.

In the meantime, over at the “French” church, the diocese turned St. Joseph over to the Norbertine Fathers with Fr. Broens as first pastor. He was succeeded by a young priest named Fr. Bernard Pennings, who would later become Abbot Pennings, one of the most celebrated and influential citizens in De Pere history. In 1898, the future abbot began teaching Latin in the

priory kitchen to a young neighborhood boy named Frank VanDyk and three buddies, Aloysius Vissers, Vincent Savageau and Willie Marchant.

Thus, St. Norbert College was born. Two years later, in 1900, Abbot Pennings re-opened an abandoned grade school. Both he and the community he led, the Norbertines, were interested in providing Catholic education for all ages. In 1916, a new brick school was built across from the church and this served as the parish school until 1961.



The Carondelet Sisters from St. Louis were asked to join the Norbertines in educating the young. They stayed with the parish well over seventy years and provided a positive spiritual life, especially for the young. They also fostered many vocations from the parish.

Throughout the decades, the many young men and women who formed the school and religion classes of St. Boniface and St. Joseph were taught the traditional 4 R's of all Catholic schools: Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, and Religion. Much change occurred over the years, especially in fashion, but amidst the change and turbulence of the decades, the solid faith and support of the parishes and their families remained steadfast. The prayer life of the church was always evident as was the sacramental life. Many young men and women looked forward to the day they would be married in their beloved churches by priests they had come to know, respect and love.

At the same time vocations to the priesthood and religious life flourished. Indeed, West De Pere was fertile ground for those who desired to serve God more closely. Both parishes had many women who entered into religious life and became professed sisters. Many young men studied for the priesthood and after ordination, returned to their home parish to celebrate their first mass. Supported by loving and faith-filled families and inspired by priests and sisters who they admired, both parishes produced sons and daughters who made and continue to make significant contributions to the universal church.

The people would always find comfort and unity in the Eucharist especially during hard times. The war years were difficult and during those years, the parishes held special prayer services each week ... always remembering those who fought for freedom and their families back home. This was typical of the love and concern shown to all people. As it was during times of crisis so it was throughout all decades. The Catholic parishes in West De Pere would come together ... in worship, in service, in love, in learning and in community.

By the 1950's, some of the facilities had outgrown themselves or were in need of repair. At St. Boniface, the school was inadequate and the pastor, Fr. Joseph Jansen, was advised about the need for a larger school and a much larger one was built and dedicated in 1958. At the end of the decade, St. Norbert College had grown extensively and it became necessary for St. Joseph Church to relocate. In 1959, after many parish meetings and under the guidance of Norbertine pastor, Fr. Blaise Peeters, the parish purchased a 40-acre farm on what was then considered the city's far west side.

In May of 1961, construction of the present school began. Masses continued to be offered in Old St. Joe's Church and in the Auditorium-Gym of the new school until April of 1969 when all parish masses were held at the new site. Again with the help of lay leadership, construction began for a church to be added to the existing school structure. That church became known as New St. Joe's and was dedicated on May 2, 1976.



During the 60's and 70's dramatic changes had occurred in both society and church. The liturgical reforms of Vatican II necessitated the renovation of the interiors of many Catholic churches. In the meantime, world events were shaping a new history that would have powerful effect in the years to come.

These events impacted on the life of the parish and school as well. Enrollments were at an all time high in the 1960's but within ten years class sizes dropped dramatically. By the 1980's, declining enrollments and fiscal responsibility dictated the consolidation of the two schools and the religious education programs of both parishes. Again the parishes strived to do what they believed were in the best interests of the people, especially our children. Thus, Marquette School was formed using both school buildings until 1993 when it became one campus on Lourdes Avenue.

It was in the early 90's that the growing priest shortage caused dioceses across the country to institute serious planning for the future of its parishes. On December 14, 1993, the Diocese requested an official parish study of the De Pere parishes.

In January, 1994, both St. Boniface and St. Joseph began the necessary groundwork with their respective councils and committees. Within a month, a combined long range planning committee was formed with membership from both parishes. On March 24, 1994, the first joint parish Open Forum was held at the St. Boniface site. It was at this meeting that the two parishes accepted in principle, consolidation. It was also at this meeting that the Planning Committee received its new name, The CORE Consolidation Committee. It would take another full year of work in assessing the needs and establishing goals as well as the continued parish open forums before the work was complete. The Consolidation Committee was a highly successful committee because it listened to the people and believed that positive change comes from the grassroots up and not from the top down. After much consultation, discussion and prayer, a recommendation to become one parish under a new name was made on March 23, 1995, almost one year to the date of the first parish open forum.

Many names were suggested for the new parish. But none more popular than Our Lady of Lourdes, due in part to the deep devotion both parishes had to the rosary and to the Blessed Mother. Thus, while presiding at the Holy Day Mass on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Bishop Robert Banks announced that the new parish would become on as of July 1, 1996 and, henceforth, would be known as Our Lady of Lourdes.

Given the long standing relationship between the Norbertine Fathers and West De Pere, the new parish was entrusted to the Norbertine Community with Fr. Conrad J. Kratz, being named first pastor. Also on July 1, 1996,



Fr. Jim Baraniak was named part-time associate pastor with Robin Cribb, Laurie Albers and Carol Wilda as the first pastoral staff of the new parish.

The people adapted quite well to the changes that had occurred and on October 13, 1996, a Mass of Unity and Thanksgiving was held with over 600 parishioners in attendance. The numbers were so large that the mass was held at St. Norbert Abbey. Like their ancestors before them, it was in the Eucharist that the people would find their greatest unity. Because there were now two church sites, weekend masses were able to be offered every hour on the half-hour. The new parish continued to grow rapidly often with overflowing crowds at both sites. But it wasn't just at Mass that people came together. Other parish activities flourished and, as in the past, the people of Our Lady of Lourdes took good care of one another. They would come together in learning, in celebration, in service, in times of need and in the building up of the community.



Even with two church sites it soon became apparent that neither site would be large enough, especially for future needs. Thus, a CORE Building Committee was formed and it operated under the same principles as the Consolidation Committee. "Listen to the people, for it is in their faith that we will find the work of God's Holy Spirit." The CORE Building Committee quickly began its work and discovered there was great openness and enthusiasm to build a new church. Rather than purchasing land, it was decided that the new church would be built at the existing school site.

As with consolidation, once again many long hours were put in by the members of this committee and their sub-committees. As always, all parishioners were asked to participate in the decisions. Bus tours were arranged to see other churches, parish open forums were held and the committees worked hard at keeping communication lines open. And again, always there would be prayers.

The estimated cost of the new church was \$5.7 million dollars and within the first six months \$5.1 million dollars had been pledged or given.

With such successful backing, ground was broken for the New Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church on February 22, 1998. Abbot E. Thomas DeWayne, Abbot of St. Norbert Abbey presided.

It was at groundbreaking that it became apparent how much had been accomplished in so short a time. Truly God had blest the work of the people. Demographics had changed and the city of West De Pere had many new faces added to it as well as familiar ones. For those who had always lived in West De Pere, the lessons of their parents and grandparents before had not been lost on them. Like their ancestors, many of them also wanted to build for their children a worthy dwelling place for God.



Likewise for the many people who were new to De Pere, similar lessons had been learned ... “let us build a church which will give glory and honor to God and be for Him and for His people, a worthy dwelling place.”



Thus, throughout the building process, there was the realization that Our Lady of Lourdes was being built for all God's people ... the young and the old; the rich and the poor; for the single or the married; the divorced or the widowed; for those with family and those without.

It was being built for those with faith and for those who entertained doubt. It was to be a place where even the most discriminated against would find welcome. For after all ... it was built to be ... A House of God.



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