

The History of Old St. Joseph Church and St. Norbert College Parish

Early, Humble Beginnings

The first structure located where Old St. Joseph Church now stands was a small chapel erected in 1676 by Rev. Charles Albanel, a building that stood for almost 200 years. Green Bay Bishop Joseph Melcher established the parish in 1870 to serve French Canadian settlers who were employed in area lumber mills. The land for the parish was donated by Jane Dousman and blessed by Bishop Melcher on Christmas Day, 1870. The first pastor of the parish was Rev. Vemare.

In 1889, the original building was destroyed after being struck by lightning; a new church was dedicated in September 1890. Due to the lack of financial resources of the parishioners, Rev. Joseph Durin received permission from Bishop Sebastian Messmer to seek funds for the reconstruction from people throughout the country. This campaign developed into the Archconfraternity of St. Joseph. Members of the national archconfraternity were asked to fund the construction of St. Joseph Parish of De Pere.

In addition to leading the construction of the present building, Rev. Durin is remembered for his strong devotion to St. Joseph. He established the Association of St. Joseph in 1888. By 1892, by decree of Pope Leo XIII, the parish was the site for the National Shrine of St. Joseph. The statue of St. Joseph was imported from Munich and crowned with jewels collected from Joseph devotees from throughout the country. The church would remain the site of the National Shrine until 1969, when the shrine was moved to St. Norbert Abbey on De Pere's east side in light of the 1969 renovation.

The Arrival of the Norbertines

Locally, the church was referred to as the "French Church." This was in reference to the French Canadian ethnic origin of the parish majority. There were, at that time, three

other Catholic churches in the city: St. Boniface (Dutch), St. Mary (Dutch) and St. Francis Xavier (Irish).

Shortly after Rev. Bernard Pennings, O. Praem., arrived in De Pere on Sept. 28, 1898, he was able to acquire the financially troubled church from the Catholic Diocese of Green Bay and the church was placed under the sponsorship of the Norbertine community. The parish was staffed by Norbertine pastors until a new model was implemented in 2016 and a pastoral leader along with a Norbertine priest moderator were named.

The Norbertine order used St. Joseph Church and its grade school as grounds to start St. Norbert High School and St. Norbert College. Thus, a small piece of land on the west bank of the Fox River in West De Pere that started out as a Catholic parish to serve the French Canadian mill workers grew into a parish, a shrine, a grade school, a high school and finally a college. The parish grade school was staffed by the Sisters of the Incarnate Word of Texas and later the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet of St. Louis, Mo.

In 1925, the Norbertine foundation in De Pere became an abbey; hence, St. Joseph Church tripled as a parish church, a national shrine and the abbey church for the first permanent Norbertine foundation in the United States. As an abbey church, it was the site for Norbertine vestitions, professions and funerals.

In the Spirit of Vatican II

The 1960s were a decade of change in the parish, as it was in all of Roman Catholicism due to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. During this time Rev. Blaise Peters, O. Praem., pastor of St. Joseph, began a plan to move the parish to the far west side of the city on what would become Lourdes Avenue.

By 1963, the parish's school and convent were built on the new property; by 1976, New St. Joseph Church was built on Lourdes Avenue in De Pere, while the original St. Joseph Church building took the name of Old St. Joseph Church and maintained the location on the campus of St. Norbert College.

The leadership structure of the parish also began to change in the 1960s. Rev. Peters remained pastor but a separate structure evolved to serve the needs of the college

community. The college of chaplains was a union of Norbertine priests who lived on the campus, many of whom resided in residence halls. The college of chaplains originated in 1966 as an attempt by Norbertine priests/educators to further integrate the residential, spiritual and educational aspects of the St. Norbert College student's lives. Rev. Joel Garner, O. Praem., was the first Norbertine priest to be assigned to "campus ministry" on a near full-time basis.

With the fervor of the 1960s came a change in the mood of the parish, especially as the college community became more involved with the parish. In 1969, the church was designated "Church at St. Norbert College." It formally became the first college parish in the United States and was placed under the patronage of St. Norbert. Rev. Garner was named administrator of the parish (April 1969) and Rev. Benjamin Mackin, O. Praem., was the first pastor of the church at St. Norbert College (August 1969).

In addition to the new name came a major renovation. In 1968, planning began to convert the interior from the original style of the church to a more modern style. Rev. Garner led the renovation, which by 1969 included the removal of much of the statuary and the paintings, the Stations of the Cross, and the National Shrine of St. Joseph, which was moved from the parish to St. Norbert Abbey because it was believed that the environment and surrounding of the Abbey were more conducive to the shrine than the renovated church at St. Norbert. The "devotional" atmosphere of the Abbey was deemed more appropriate for the shrine than the refurbished college parish, which deemphasized religious art and personal piety in its environment.

A rededication liturgy was celebrated on Sept. 20, 1969. The new worship space represented a modernization and simplification of the former space, with an emphasis on the altar. The interior was changed by removing paintings from the walls and ceiling and replacing them with sand-colored walls, a blue-green carpet, burnt-orange cushions on curved, walnut-backed pews, and a six-foot-diameter stone altar trimmed in walnut that were added to replace the former pews and altar.

On Oct. 10, 1976, the building was rededicated and formally received the name Old St. Joseph Church with the community retaining the name St. Norbert College Parish. The

building was named Old St. Joseph due to the devotion of St. Joseph by the Norbertine community. Because there was a new St. Joseph Parish on Lourdes Avenue in De Pere, the College chose the adjective “old” to be part of the official name. Rev. Garner was pastor of the parish at that time, and Chancellor Emeritus Rev. Dennis Burke, O. Praem., was one of the leading advocates of the name choice.

Re-visioning the Church

In 1990, the parish began a five-year plan to improve the structure of the church building. Jeff Kanzelberger of the college administration led the repair work. The parish decided to adhere to the college’s minimum maintenance plan. The college and Norbertine order would contribute \$30,000 a year each for the next six years.

The church’s porto chair (canopy over the front entrance) and roof would be repaired, the building would be tuck-pointed, windows would be sealed, there would be masonry work on the brick, the interior would be painted, the church would receive new church doors, the bell tower would be illuminated, etc. These projects were not seen as a renovation, but rather measures to prevent further deterioration of the building. These structural improvements still left the parish with an inadequate gathering space, sound system and lighting system.

The church still had too few seats for many liturgies, and it had inadequate support facilities (bathrooms, air conditioning); also, the current worship space did not reflect contemporary liturgical understanding and practices in current environment and art documents. Under the administration of Rev. John Bostwick, O. Praem., a parish committee was formed to address the building issue more thoroughly. It was the work of this committee under the pastorate of Rev. Gery Meehan, O. Praem., that led to the hiring of a liturgical consultant to help address the issue of the church building more thoroughly.

Rev. Richard Vosko was hired as a liturgical consultant in the summer of 1996, and on July 12, 1998 ground was broken to begin the construction phase of the project. The renovation of Old St. Joe’s Church added an atrium gathering area, lounge, oratory chapel, sacristy, bathrooms and a basement to house classrooms, heating and air

conditioning facilities. The plaster walls in the church were removed to reveal the original masonry and beams.

Hardwood floors completed the natural feeling of the environment. New windows allowed for more natural lighting and highlighted the original stained glass windows. New artwork included the font, the stations of the cross, the altar and ambo, the processional cross and a statue of Joseph and Mary. The renovated church also included state-of-the-art lighting and sound systems and a custom Rodgers organ.

Old St. Joseph Church remains a house of worship wherein worshipers offer their full and active participation at each liturgical experience. Today, nearly 400 families, 2,200 students and any number of guests are welcome at morning and evening Sunday Masses and liturgical and prayerful experiences throughout the week.

The above information is from the 1999 program entitled "Re-Dedication and Blessing Celebration of Old Saint Joseph Church." Within this document credit was given to the St. Norbert College 1898-1998 Centennial Newsletter.

Campus Pastors & Administrators

1. 1968-1969 Rev. Joel Garner, O. Praem.
2. 1969-1972 Rev. Benjamin Mackin, O. Praem.
3. 1972-1973 Rev. Mel Wigman, O. Praem.
4. 1973-1978 Rev. Joel Garner, O. Praem.
5. 1978-1982 Rev. Gene Gries, O. Praem.
6. 1982-1989 Rev. Conrad Kratz, O. Praem.
7. 1989-1991 J. Stein
8. 1991-1993 Rev. John Bostwick, O. Praem.
9. 1993-2001 Rev. Gery Meehan, O. Praem.
10. 2001-2002 Rev. Dane Radecki, O. Praem.
11. 2002-2004 Rev. Brian Prunty, O. Praem.
12. 2004-2012 Rev. James Baraniak, O. Praem.

13. 2012 Rev. Salvatore Cuccia, O. Praem.
14. 2012-2015 Rev. John Tourangeau, O. Praem.
15. 2015-2016 Rev. James P. Neilson, O. Praem.
16. 2016-Present Rev. Mr. Kevin DeCleene, Pastoral Leader
 - a. 2016-2019 Rev. Jay Fostner, O. Praem., Priest Moderator
 - b. 2019 to present Rev. Michael Brennan, O. Praem., Priest Moderator

RESOURCES

- [Supporting documents and further detail](#)
- Land [acknowledgement](#) statement
- Our Lady of Lourdes foundation is from St Joseph and St Boneface. [Link to YouTube history document](#) which has information on the beginning of St. Joseph:
- [De Pere naming source](#). Not from two fathers, rather, from rapids of the fathers..
- [St Norbert College Parish and Old St Joe's History](#) (this document, revised 6/2020)
- [SNC Parish @ OSJ history from the Diocese of GB 150 year book published 2017](#)
- The historical document above the listing of pastors, is from the 1999 program entitled "Re-Dedication and Blessing Celebration of Old Saint Joseph Church." Within this document credit was given to the St. Norbert College 1898-1998 Centennial Newsletter.