
A History of St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church Wilmington, Delaware

***"Ukrainians once built citadels against the enemy.
Now Ukrainians build citadels for Christ."***

(The Most Rev. Archbishop Metropolitan Ambrose Senyshyn, O.S.B.M., D.D., speaking at the St. Nicholas Blessing of Grounds Ceremony, March 16, 1968.)

The dedication today of St. Nicholas Church marks a milestone in the 61-year history of the parish.

Six decades ago, Ukrainian immigrants in Wilmington had a strong desire to practice their Catholic Faith and Byzantine-Slavonic Rite in a Church of their own. They bought property and established a tiny chapel at 4th and Pine Streets in Wilmington.

Next came the church and school-hall at 610 South Heald Street that sustained the parish's needs for over 40 years. Five years ago, the parishioners, realizing the need for newer and more adequate quarters and feeling the pinch from urban blight, launched another new church campaign.

St. Nicholas today offers another "citadel for Christ." For, although there still are projects to be completed, today's dedication of a \$350,000.00 church is another chapter in the ancient-born story of Ukrainian dedication to Christ.

It all started in 1905 when pioneer families started St. Michael's Ruthenian Greek Catholic Chapel at the northwest corner of 4th and Pine Streets. Families who established themselves in that era were those of: Levitsky, Hirnyk, Kachmar, Kozyr, Wozny, Surma, Lazarchuk, Slusar, Kosowsky, Tyrawsky, Tur, Iwasko, Podola, Shewda, Turko, Matwey, Hawrylshyn, Budnyk, Malhowsky, Kudra, Timko, Trush, Machko, Kazio, Hychka, Kressa and Figun.

According to Delaware Church Historian, Frank Zebley, St. Michael's was incorporated April 10, 1905, and the church site was purchased January 8, 1906.

The first pastor was The Rev. Constantine Mykolayewich in 1908. He had jurisdiction of Chester, Penna., Baltimore and Curtis Bay, Md., as well as

Wilmington. There were conflicts in Ukrainian national views among the immigrants and this schism resulted in Father Mykolayewich leaving Wilmington and returning to Europe.

The chapel became inadequate and the parish purchased the property at South Heald and Pearl Streets. In the fall of 1908, the late Most Rev. Bishop Stephen (Soter) Ortynsky assigned the Rev. Alexander Lawlak to Wilmington. The bishop ordered that the 4th and Pine Streets chapel and the South Heald Street property be deeded in the name of the newly organized Ukrainian Catholic Diocese.

The parish voted against the bishop's request and Father Pawlak was transferred and the parish split into two groups.

The bishop's followers were headed by Constantine Levitsky, Wasyl Hirnyk, and Timothy Kolody. They received permission from the Revs. Mealy, pastor and Edward McKenna, of St. Mary's Latin Rite Church, 6th and Pine Streets, to celebrate Mass in St. Mary's Basement. Thus on December 25, 1909, they had their first Divine Liturgy with Rev. Zachary Orun, celebrant. St. Basil the Great was adopted patron saint and Father Orun served the parish from Philadelphia. Mr. Stichka and Mr. Kostyky organized the first band in 1909 and other activities of a social nature, in order to keep the parishioners together and sharing a common bond and cultural interest. This also made for harmony.

The independent segment of the split broke ground for the South Heald Street Church in July 1909 and eventually built it. As time passed, more of the independent group's parishioners were returning to St. Michael's services in St. Mary's Hall. When only a few families remained at South Heald Street, the church was put up for sheriff's sale in 1911.

Records available show the second and fourth baptism recorded were of a woman and man who are still active members of our parish today: Mary (Kachmar) Medykiewicz was baptized April 27, 1908. Ivan Timko was baptized on May 30, 1908. The first recorded baptism was John Ivashko on April 8, 1908, son of Michael and Katherine (Cycyk) Ivashko. Godparents were Semen Natoysky and Mary Kasian.

The first two weddings were on May 2, 1908. Michael Timko, son of Andrew and Catherine (Smylick) Timko of 330 Townsend Street, and Mary Hets, daughter of Nicholas and Catherine (Mylian) Hets, were married by Father Mykolayewich. Witnesses were Gregory Chuchola, the parish cantor, and Filimon Hets. Nicholas Tysovsky, son of Paul and Katherine Tysovsky, married Anna Timko, daughter of Theodore and Anna Timko. Witnesses were Basil Doleba and John Kazio. All of the newlyweds, as it seems most of the parishioners, were born in Dobromyl.

It was in 1911 that St. Nicholas, as it exists today, came into being. Members of St. Basil's and some families from St. Michael's got a \$2,000.00 loan from The Rev. John Gulcz, pastor of St. Hedwig's (Polish) Catholic Church. Collateral used was a \$500.00 piece of property on New Castle Avenue and B Street, and another \$500.00 from Constantine Levitsky, Mary Surma and Wasyl Hirnyk. Father Orun suggested the new parish select another name—St. Nicholas. Bishop Ortynsky purchased the South Heald Street property on November 11, 1911.

It was in this period that the first Ukrainian Amateur Theatrical Group was formed and in 1912 Professor Bukata organized the first parish choir. These social and religious activities further strengthened and knitted the newly formed parish together with such solidarity, that evidence of this effort on the part of the parish cantor still exists.

The Rev. Anthony Strocky was pastor in 1912 and succeeded by the Rev. Bernacky in 1913, and later the same year, by The Rev. Vladimir Lotowych.

On August 2, 1913, St. Nicholas received its charter. In 1914, the Rev. Volodimir Derzeruka became pastor. He and Professor Theodore Yaworsky established the first parish school in the church basement.

Father Derzeruka stayed for eight years until succeeded in 1922 by The Rev. Anthony Lotowych who administered until 1925.

During Father Anthony Lotowych's pastorship, the school-hall was built at South Heald Street in 1924 and dedicated September 27, 1925, by His Excellency Constantine Bohachevsky. Church Officers at the time were: Theodore Marushchak, vice-president; Timothy Kolody, secretary; Basil Hirnyk, treasurer; and Peter Starobransky and Harry Kosowsky, trustees.

From 1928 until 1932, the parish went through turmoil over the deeding of church property. A court ruling decided the deeding should be made to the Ukrainian Catholic Diocese. The opposing faction left St. Nicholas and organized SS. Peter and Paul Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

The Rev. Dr. Stephen Chehansky took over St. Nicholas in 1932 and the following year the Sacred Heart of the Apostleship of Prayer was organized. It was also in 1933 that St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Club was organized.

In 1936, Father Chehansky was transferred to Detroit and succeeding pastors were: The Revs. Joseph Boyarchuk, Jacob DeBoer, M. Leschynsky, and Myron Plekon.

The year 1940 realized the burning of the parish mortgage. The parish repaid Father Gulcz \$7,300.00 of the \$7,800.00 borrowed from him, and Father Gulcz donated the remaining \$500.00 difference. We might add in passing, that to this very day, St. Hedwig's and its clergy have always been a true and loyal friend to St. Nicholas Church—even, to the extent of covering for the clergy of St. Nicholas when unavailable and whenever in need of assistance and help.

The parish received its first resident pastor, The Rev. Bohdan Osidach, in 1948 and a rectory was established at 608 South Claymont Street. Father Osidach was replaced in 1949 by The Rev. Alexander Ulitsky who served the parish for the next eight years—until his death on March 26, 1960. Father Alexander Ulitsky, as far as we know, is the only Ukrainian Catholic priest buried in Wilmington: at All Saints Cemetery on the Kirkwood Highway. Father was responsible for the organizing of the Ukrainian Catholic Youth League (known today as the League of Ukrainian Catholics); the increased membership in St. Olga's Providence Society and for obtaining, for the first time, Sisters of St. Basil the Great, to teach religion and catechism in the summer of 1957.

Father Ulitsky already in 1957 saw the need for the future of St. Nicholas to expand and relocate. Toward this end, he introduced the Special-Red-Envelope, as it was called, in order to prepare for that time when a formal Building Fund and Project would be launched. His foresight and forethought in behalf of the welfare of St. Nicholas proved to be very solid and rewarding.

In December of 1957, The Rev. Stephen Hotra became the administrator of St. Nicholas, and automatically assumed full pastorship in 1960 at the decease of Fr. Ulitsky. He served the parish until October 29, 1965. During Father Hotra's pastorship, the church observed its 50th Anniversary (1958), and it was at that time that the first formal announcement was made that a New Church was planned in the immediate future.

At this point in **THE HISTORY** it would be well to make some observations concerning some important changes and developments in the parish. It seems there are two distinct periods or a new era which began at St. Nicholas after the year 1945. As one chapter closed in the parish, another immediately unfolded, much to the advancement and growth of the St. Nicholas Parish as we know it today.

In the late 1890's and early 1900's, there was an exodus of Ukrainian people from the fatherland to the United States. The arrival of the early pioneers is what gave birth to St. Nicholas Parish in its final existing stages on South Heald Street.

Urban renewal projects, inter-marriages, and a matter of geographical re-location of many of these early pioneers and their families and children moved away from the immediate confines and once closely-knitted community in East Wilmington. In the middle 1940's, there were less than 15 actual families sustaining the parish.

However, due to the German invasion of Ukraine and the Communistic oppression of our people in the late 1930's and early 1940's, there was a tremendous influx of refugees and immigrants arriving to the United States between the years 1947 and 1955, from Germany and other Eastern countries, where they temporarily re-located because of such Red oppression and aggression. This search for freedom; this search for religious liberty; this seeking for the land of "milk and honey" was found mostly in the United States—for the German invasion began, and the Russian occupation finished and emptied Ukraine as "the bread basket of Europe." This political impasse and religious persecution drove the freedom-loving Ukrainians to seek other places to live in tranquility and peace.

The situation had a tremendous impact upon the Ukrainian community and at St. Nicholas in Wilmington. Since the "second" immigration arrived during the late 1940's and early 1950's, the parish more than tripled its membership. Today, roughly 75% of the parish consists of families from this "second immigration" of New Arrivals. Now, 20 years later, most of the original new immigrant families are still with St. Nicholas, of whom John and Catherine Kostyshyn were the first. This situation created a much needed breath of life in the parish; it created the impulse to search out a place for newer and larger location to accommodate the spiritual, national and parochial needs of the enlarged parish. Initially the parish was able to contain this second immigration. But, as the families began to grow, as children began to increase the membership of St. Nicholas, and as the New Arrivals began to successfully develop their social and domestic relationships in Wilmington, the geographical boundaries of the parish expanded widely.

Coincidentally, at the time that Ukraine was supplying the much needed increased membership to St. Nicholas parish in order that it survive as a congregation on its own, another exodus of the first and second American-born generation of Ukrainians from the "Coal-Regions" of Pennsylvania were also arriving in Wilmington area, searching for better working conditions, more lucrative jobs, and a better and more comfortable way of life. At this time, the mines of the Coal Regions were closing, and there began to come about the so-called depressed areas of Northeast Pennsylvania, which offered almost nothing to a young, ambitious or energetic person beyond the existing plight of his parents and grandparents. As opportunities were explored and discovered here in metropolitan Wilmington area, particularly among the larger industrial companies, more and more of an influx from "up-State" Pennsylvania began to arrive and settle down in the Wilmington area and join St. Nicholas. Again, in the same last 20 years, we have here in Wilmington, a group of people re-located, thus giving another thrust of more solid and active existence for the future of St. Nicholas Parish.

There were three forces, apparently, in the late 1940's and early 1950's which contributed to the actual survival of St. Nicholas: that is, for the need of a new parish complex, a more centrally located parish church. Firstly, the old pioneers and their families and children moved away in large number from the immediate confines of the East Side; the influx of the new immigrants from Europe; and the arrival of so many of our people from the "coal-regions" of Pennsylvania. Ironically enough, it was to this area of Pennsylvania where most of the early pioneers in the late 1890's first went. St. Michael's Church (Father St. Hotra is presently pastor there) in Shenandoah, Penna., is the first Ukrainian Catholic Church established in the U.S. Today, that area has supplied St. Nicholas with a substantial number of their off-spring in the personages of 1st and 2nd generation Ukrainians.

Curiously, today, St. Nicholas is a combination and result of a span of time for almost 75 years, spreading over three or four generations of families coming from various geographical areas of the U.S. and Europe. This unusual situation and circumstance has given rise to refer to St. Nicholas Church as entering since the late 1950's as the "second period" (doba) or chapter of its history. This year of 1969 seems to be a culmination of Ukraine's tradition, customs and culture to the United States through her sons and daughters.

St. Nicholas Complex, in its present status, consists of some of the oldest and founding member-families in the original Ukrainian community; a majority of middle-aged working families who were born either in Ukraine, Germany or the U.S.; and those whose children came from a continental span of East-

ern and Western Europe, Pennsylvania and Delaware. Intermixed also is a fair number of people from other faiths, rites and nationalities through a combination of marriage or proximity of the Church. St. Nicholas has a continental air about its make-up, and definitely offers the ingredients of being national and international.

On October 3, 1964, Father Hotra announced a \$150,000.00 New Church Fund Drive and the purchase of a \$30,000.00 piece of property, the site of today's St. Nicholas. In March the following year, Father had lead the congregation to collecting \$25,000.00 of its drive and on December 11, 1965, Building Chairman, Mr. Myron Harwanko, announced the first building plans. It was also during this period that the Official Church Building Committee was formed, and on April 24, 1964, when Myron Harwanko officially became the Chairman of said committee, various architects were engaged to submit renderings, plans, etc. In the meantime, the Committee itself had done research, and even made tours of various Ukrainian Churches in the area such as Bristol, Penna., and Trenton, N. J., etc.

Following Father Hotra as pastors of our parish were: The Rev. Anthony Radchuk and The Very Rev. Augustine Molodowitz. Each of these two priests were here less than one year tenure. However, during their pastorships, they continued working with the Parish Building Committee, furthering the building project cause in behalf of the parish. Construction Funds increased, sketches were prepared, and drawings submitted by the various architects whose services were engaged for this end. Fathers Radchuk and Molodowitz very successfully continued and increased the financial situation in the parish through the parish envelope system, which was initiated by Father Hotra's efforts.

Various communications between the Most Rev. Archbishop-Metropolitan Ambrose Senyshyn and the clergy and Committee of the parish during this time showed that all principals involved were functioning well in the parish and formalities were taking place in order to materialize the hopes and dreams of the parishioners to see a new church structure stand.

On August 17, 1967, The Rev. Andrew Baunchalk returned to his home parish as pastor and received the reins from Father Molodowitz. Since that time the new church plans came off the drawing boards to actuality. The permission and blessings of the Most Rev. Archbishop and the maximum help and co-operation of all the parishioners, and most especially with the assistance and advice of the Building Committee and Parish Board of Councillors, the parish was able to Bless the lot and break ground on March 16, 1968, at Lea Boulevard. The Cornerstone was

laid and blessed on December 7, 1968, and the first Divine Liturgy was celebrated on Sunday, May 4, 1969.

In November of 1967 the services of the Architectural Firm of Waymon-Fidance were engaged to design the present new structure. On June 24, 1968, the contracts were signed with the Wm. C. Ehret Co. to construct the New Church and within ten days, actual construction began. During the month of May, 1968, the Farmers Bank of the State of Delaware extended the parish a construction loan in the amount of \$240,000.00 for said construction, and on August 14, 1969, that sum was amortized into a conventional 20-year open mortgage.

During the month of September of this year (1969) the parish initiated papers to buy a Red Brick Home (801 Lea Blvd.) which would be used as the parish rectory for the sum of \$33,500.00. While it was decided that this home would serve as a parish home at least until that time when the parish would be in a financial position to construct a parish rectory on its own property as the over-all plot plan was designed, immediate plans call for liquidating the mortgage on the New Church. Also, since the need was felt to organize parish activities and of a social and religious nature, a Parish Social Hall is now being discussed for the immediate future, hopefully also to lend financial assistance to the parish funds.

At the present time, efforts are being made to bring back people who should be members of our parish; particularly, there is concentration in behalf of the young people.

It now remains on this dedication day of October 5, 1969, to begin the second period in the history of our parish as the first period did: namely, to fulfill the spiritual needs of the parishioners of St. Nicholas.

Truly, the Ukrainians of Wilmington, Delaware, under the patronage of St. Nicholas, The Wonderworker, have built a singularly unique and inspiring "citadel for Christ"—and from this Temple of Worship and House of Prayer, may the beacon light of the Christian Spirit beam forward and enlighten all so that all who come to St. Nicholas may say of its members what the pagans of old said of the early Christians: ". . . See how they have Love, one for another!!"

Given in the Spirit of Christ for The Glory of His Church here on earth; the preservation of Our Ukrainian Rite; and The Salvation of All The Souls who worship and pray with Christ-like love in His Citadel.

3. Sept. 1969.
