

# **A BRIEF HISTORY OF** **ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST** **CATHOLIC CHURCH** **OF** **NEW BRIGHTON**

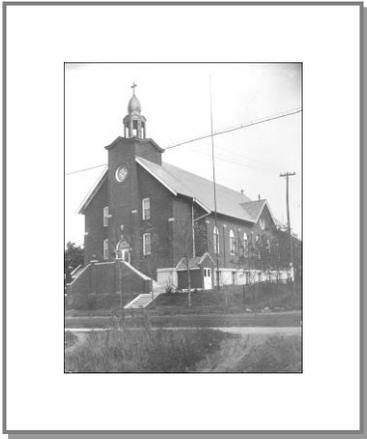
## Foreword

The history St. John the Baptist Parish is rich with tradition and service, both to its parishioners and the community. This brief history barely scratches the surface of the history of this large, diverse parish. It is organized around the succession of pastors serving the parish. Much of the information written here is taken (or paraphrased) from the August 2004 parish centennial history book, "St. John the Baptist Catholic Parish: Building on a Century of Faith." Please refer to this book for more complete information about our parish history. The book is available in the Parish Library and, on occasion, for sale. Inquire at the Parish Center Information Desk or Office. Other sources include the Archdiocesan Chancery Office, the Minnesota Historical Society, the New Brighton Area Historical Society and the 1983 book, "St. John the Baptist Catholic Church: A Pictorial History."

Note: To find more detailed information about the named pastors, go to the PARISH PASTOR portion of this site.

## A Brief History

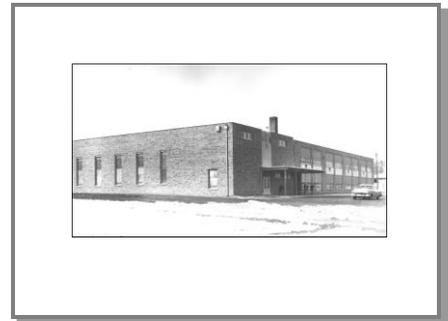
St. John the Baptist Catholic Church can trace its roots to 1883, first in a local home and then in 1884 in a small mission chapel called St. Charles in what is now Arden Hills. This mission parish grew and in the early 1900's there was a need for a new church to serve the expanding and predominately Polish community. After some convincing by potential parishioners, Archbishop John Ireland approved a new parish, St. John the Baptist, in 1902 along with the first pastor, Polish-speaking, Reverend Anthony Szsukowski. He was born in Poland and ordained in 1902 at the St. Paul Seminary. The first rectory was built on Fourth Avenue in 1903, now the Washburn-McReavy Funeral Home. He oversaw the building of the basement church on Fifth Avenue in 1907.



In 1907 the second pastor was assigned, Reverend Stephan Zdechlik. The land for St. John's Cemetery was purchased in 1908, located north of Seventh Street between Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues. In 1908 the Reverend Vincent Yany became the third pastor. The fourth and fifth pastors were Reverend Francis Matz in 1914 and Reverend Ambrose Kryjewski in 1916. In 1922, under Fr. Kryjewski, the upper church was completed over the basement church, which had served as a place of worship for about 15 years.

In 1931 the Reverend Andrew Handzel became the sixth pastor of St. John's and the first booya dinner was served to the parish and community to raise funds for the church. The seventh pastor was Reverend Maxmillian Matz, the younger brother of our fourth pastor, Fr. Francis Matz. He came in 1934. Plans were being made for a parish school and convent when he was notified of his transfer in 1950. In 1952 the parish school was completed and the 1903 rectory was converted into a convent for the nuns, who were to serve as teachers. A new (temporary) rectory was built for the priests.

Reverend Paul Koscielniak was now the eighth pastor, coming in September of 1950. He was to be the longest serving pastor staying until he resigned in September 1977. He retired in March 1980. Shortly after retirement, he tragically died in a boating accident on Mille Lacs Lake. He oversaw a lot of changes and improvements to the parish. Under his guidance the parish school became a reality in 1952 and was enlarged in 1955, including a library and a church/gymnasium. This school church served as the parish church over 12 years from January 1956 to August 1968. In 1957 a new convent for the Sisters of St. Francis, who were now teaching in the parish school, was built just south of the school building. The old church and original rectory (temporary convent) were sold. In 1960 the current rectory was completed and the temporary rectory was sold. Ground was broken for the new church in 1967 and services began there in August 1968. Archbishop Leo Binz dedicated the new church, seating 1400, in June 1971.



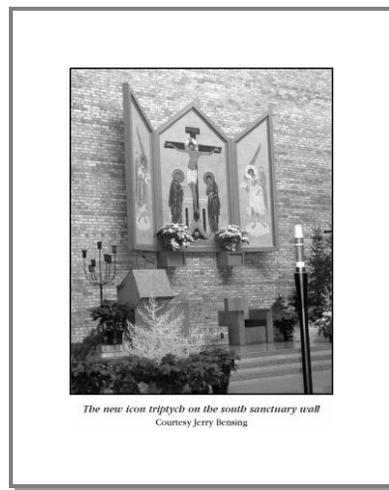
Coming in 1977, the ninth pastor was Reverend Richard Berg. During his service, Peter D'Heilly of our parish became the first of St. John's deacons, women were recommended as Eucharistic Ministers for the first time, and the Parish Council was formed. He passed away in December 2012.

In June 1980 Reverend Thomas Stitts became the tenth pastor. Fr. Tom added to the staff to support good liturgy and ministries in the areas of youth outreach, social justice and religious education. During 1981 part of the convent was converted into office

space for the Parish Center to house the increased staff. The parish school was remodeled in 1982 to be more energy efficient.

In 1985, Reverend Gerald Grieman became the eleventh pastor at St. John's. Fr. Jerry is credited for major improvements to the financial stability of the parish. He also began using the parish's permanent deacons for sacramental duties of marriage and baptism as well as preaching. The school added a kindergarten in 1989 and St. John's began to use female acolytes in 1992. In 1994 the entire convent was converted to a parish center. In 1996 a new organ was acquired and installed on the west side of the altar. Space for the choir was then moved behind the organ.

In 1996 Reverend William Murtaugh became the twelfth pastor at St. John's. In 1998 major improvements to the church acoustics and the sound system were made. A highlight of his pastorate was the new Pastoral Center, dedicated in 2001. It was built on the site of the convent, connecting the school and the church. The new 14-foot ceremonial doors were completed. Outside, a sculpture garden was created and a new 18-foot cross was installed. A triptych was commissioned for the wall behind the altar and in 2002 the altar was enlarged to be a better match in size. In July 2002 the parish of St. John's celebrated its first one hundred years. An open-air mass was held in Long Lake Regional Park followed by a picnic for about 1500 parishioners. A carillon was added to the church bells in 2003. The centennial book documenting the history of the parish was published in 2004. The Archives Committee was formed in 2005 and a large glass-enclosed display case was added to the Narthex.



In 2006 Reverend Michael Skluzacek became the thirteenth and current pastor of St. John's parish. Under his guidance changes and improvements continue to be made at St. John's. The ministry of Families Moving Forward was established as well as the Men's Fellowship group. The Servant Leader parish model for leadership and committee structure was initiated in 2013. "Creation of Water" stained glass windows above the baptistery were added. They were designed by Bill Saltzman. Major upgrades to the organ were made in 2008 and again in 2013. Decorative hanging mirrors were installed in the St. Paul Plaza, originally from a Wayzata bank and donated by Gaytee Stained Glass. Balcony area over the lower sacristy was added for special liturgies, and church lighting was upgraded in 2009. Four stained glass windows, designed by Nicholas Markell, for the four west-side lancet church windows have been donated. They are dedicated to: St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, foundress of the Catholic School System in the U.S.; Venerable Fr. Michael McGivney, founder of the Knights of Columbus; St. Kateri Tekakwitha, the Lily of the Mohawks; the Holy Trinity (largest window). The altar was significantly changed with the creation of a baldachin for the tabernacle, which was placed behind the center of the altar under the triptych. The celebrant's chair was moved the west side of the altar in front of the choir. In 2013 major renovations to the school (HVAC and kitchen upgrade) and the Rectory (ongoing) were undertaken. Also in 2013 life-size statues of Saints Peter and Paul

were donated and placed in the baptistry area of the church. Outside, many improvements have been made to the campus. A Reflection Garden with Stations of the Cross was created on the south side of church in 2010. The area around the rectory was improved with extensive landscaping in 2011 (ongoing). A new school courtyard was created in 2012 with bronze statues of Jesus and St. John the Baptist playing as children added in 2016.

Please note that no attempt has been made to make this brief overview of the history of St. John the Baptist Church complete and exhaustive. The information contained herein was last reviewed in June 2017. - The Archives Committee