

# History of the Catholic Church in Stayton, Oregon

(from the Bulletin of Immaculate Conception Parish)

Vincent and Marie Pietrok were young married Catholics in 1877 living in St. Paul, Minnesota. It was not a prosperous time for the family members, and they kept reading in the papers of the opportunities that lay in the Oregon country. Finally, they decided their future lay in the new land.

Young Vincent made the trip to Oregon alone. His wife and baby daughter Mary (Mrs. John Mertz), were to follow as soon as he had a home for them. He worked a year for a Mr. Downing at Sublimity, receiving a \$20 gold piece each month as his wage. With Mr. Downing's help, he located and obtained a homestead. This homestead was near the present Mt. Pleasant district in Linn County, and its closest trading point was Stayton. In the spring of 1878 his wife, Marie, her father, August Kufner, and small Mary made the long trip. Thirteen more children were born to them, and many of their descendants still attend Immaculate Conception Church.

It wasn't until 1888 that more Catholic families arrived in the Stayton area. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Zimmerman, their two married daughters and eight unmarried children left Perham, Minnesota, to settle in this area. Hearing about the Santiam area from the Zimmermans, Mr. and Mrs. John Spaniol, their son George and the younger children moved to Stayton in 1891. The Spaniols were from Nurborn, Germany, and had immigrated to the United States in 1882. They purchased the Andrew Sanford flour mill and commenced the manufacturing of Eureka Flour.

The next ten years saw the arrival, with their families, of Theodore Gehlen, Michael Fery, Michael Streff, Fred Rock, Emil Forrette, John Funk, John Goeders, Peter Freres, Barney Minten, E.D. Alexander and John Kerber along with three unmarried men, John Mertz, Nick Geymer, and Mike Laux.

Previous to the autumn of 1903, the Catholics of Stayton - about 50 households in all - attended Mass at St. Boniface Church in Sublimity. In those days, it was a long trip to Sublimity each Sunday to attend Mass. The roads were poor, and in winter they were often nearly impassable. It was particularly difficult for the young families. As more Catholics located in Stayton, they began to think of a parish of their own. The small group of Catholic men, George Spaniol, Andrew Fery, Emil Forrette, B. Weinrich, John Spaniol, John Brown, Theodore Gehlen, Joseph Zuber, Dr. Charles Brewer, Peter Freres, Nick Geymer and E.D. Alexander met in the old Daisy Hall of the Streff Building in Stayton, on February 17, 1903, to discuss the possibility of building a church in Stayton.

As the planning for a Stayton church commenced, an offer of four acres by Theo Gehlen Sr. was accepted and a committee of two, John Spaniol and Theo Gehlen, was appointed to broach the subject to Archbishop Alexander Christie of the Archdiocese of Oregon City (changed to Portland in 1928).

They found him not in the least in agreement with them, and the several more trips they made found him unrelenting.

On one of their last trips Mr. Gehlen was stricken with a sudden illness and died, at which time George Spaniol was appointed to take his place.

When Archbishop Christie refused to give permission for a church to be built in Stayton, the small group of disciples decided "they would build the church anyway, and then ask the Archbishop to accept it."

A group of four - John and George Spaniol, Dr. Charles Brewer and Andrew Fery - became the charter members appointed as the steering committee for the construction. This group, with help from Cornel Silbernagel, Nick Fehlen, Joe Fery, Ed Goeders, Barney Pape and Herman Marking, was the major force in the building of the church.

It was John Spaniol who suggested that the new parish have the title of "Immaculate Conception." The Spaniol family had all found comfort in the beautiful prayer that proclaimed Our Blessed Mother's purity. When the name was accepted, Mr. Spaniol donated the Immaculate Conception statue to the new parish.

Having built the church at a cost of \$5000, the members found they had no money for the furnishings. A meeting was called and it was determined that each family should purchase its own pew. Orders were given to Lee Brown & Sons of Stayton, and a price set for \$11 each. The organ was a gift from Peter Freres.

The church, which measured 40 feet by 70 feet, was designed by Andrew Fery as both the architect and lead carpenter and built by the parishioners, so that when the church was dedicated it was free from debt. Jordan Jungwirth, because of his ship-building experience, along with Cornel Silbernagel, Nick Fehlen, Joe Fery, Ed Goeders and Barney Pape built the steeple, which measured 97 feet tall to the ball below the 6 foot by 9 foot cross.

The construction was finally completed in 1904 and on August 14, 1904, Rev. E. O'Hara (under delegation by Archbishop Christie) dedicated the church. Rev. O'Hara and Rev. Anthony Lainck of Sublimity, assisted by Rev. Seroski of Sublimity and Rev. Frobein of Mt. Angel, conducted the services. High Mass was celebrated and a large number of members and guests attended. The choir rendered excellent music during the services, while the Stayton Band played before and after the dedication.

Families of record at this time included: Forrette, Spaniol, Streff, Mertz, Geymer, Gassner, Maertz, Giesler, Pietrok, Weinrich, Behren, Heidierer, Boedigheimer, Bieneman, Freres, Trotter, Rock, Polreis, Neibert, Matthieu, Funk, Fery, Alexander, Brewer, Gehlen, Klecker, Kerber, Frank, Braun, Goeders, Marking, Deidrich, Pape, Minten, Neitling, Zuber, Schmitz, Senz, Fehlen, Rauscher and Silbernagel.

Immaculate Conception Church then began as a dependent parish, and was

attended by Father Anthony Lainck of St. Boniface. The first baptism recorded was that of Anna, daughter of John and Mary Pietrok Mertz, born November 7, 1903, and baptized the following year. The first marriage was of Susan Streff, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Streff, to Herman Marking on June 10, 1908. The first funeral Mass was for Joseph Hirzsiefen.

Father Lainck served as the pastor of Sublimity and Stayton for the next 23 years, until his death on June 11, 1927. It is said that his horse and buggy traveling between the two towns was a familiar sight. Though at first he doubted the wisdom of a church at Stayton, he later became a strong ally. On his return after visiting his birthplace in Graes, Westphalia, Germany, for the first time since 1892, a recurring illness hospitalized him for many months. He never rallied, and passed away calmly in Portland on June 11, 1927.

The Stayton Mail of June 16, 1927, echoing the sentiment of all who knew Father Lainck, wrote: "During his long residence in this community he made for himself hosts of friends, both inside and outside the church. He was a constant and conscientious worker for the temporal as well as the spiritual welfare of his people. His sound advice and counsel were frequently sought and found beneficial. He was intelligent and broad-minded, and his death is a distinct loss to this section of the state... His loss will be keenly felt not only by members of his Church, but by many to whom he had endeared himself by his genial manner, his cheerful and kindly disposition and his strength of character. His was a life full of helpfulness and kindly feelings, so that while serving his Master he also served his fellow men."

The church purchased a strip of land running north and south along side Lone Oak Cemetery from Lydia and O.J. Ruble in 1914 for use as a church cemetery. The first person to be buried in the cemetery was Joseph Hirzsiefen in 1915.

In 1922, a 14 foot by 24 foot sanctuary to the 1903 structure was added because of the increase in the number of parishioners.

The death of Fr. Lainck brought the Rev. Francis Scherbring as pastor in Sublimity and Stayton. This young priest had already been recognized as a capable builder and a strong advocate of Catholic schooling for children.

On October 16, 1931, the Stayton Church became an independent parish under the direction of the first resident priest, Fr. Joseph Scherbring. He was a brother of Father Francis Scherbring, and with his kindness and zeal inspired and organized the families into a real parish unit. The parish at the time owned two houses, one known as the old Taylor house, and the other was donated by Mr. and Mrs. Goeders. This gave the new parish a whole block of land on which to build. The Taylor property was declared not worth repairing, and the other house was not properly constructed to make a satisfactory house for the pastor. The Taylor house was then torn down to make room for a new parsonage. A few years later a modern, two-story rectory 38 feet by 38 feet occupied the site. It was of brick construction designed and built by Anthony Schindler and the parishioners at a cost

of approximately \$4000 and included a full basement with a furnace and janitor's quarters.

Antone (Andy) and Caroline Keidel donated a large section of property for use as a cemetery along Third Avenue and what is now East Regis Street, on January 3, 1932. Fr. Joseph Scherbring blessed and dedicated the new St. Mary's Cemetery on June 15, 1933, Decoration Day.

On October 1, 1933, the parish gathered to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the completion of Immaculate Conception Church. A solemn High Mass was held in the morning with a cafeteria dinner served by the ladies of the parish in the Masonic park pavilion. A capacity crowd attended. George Smith, mayor of Stayton, acted as master of ceremonies for the event. A special feature was a talk by George Spaniol, who spoke on the reason for erecting the Catholic Church in Stayton.

In February of 1936 Archbishop Howard appointed Rev. George M. Sniderhon the second pastor. His winning smile and good humor created goodwill and cooperation among many, even outside his church right from the beginning. In the same year a two-story, 24 foot by 34 foot convent for the Sisters of St. Mary's was built. Previous to this the sisters lived in a house purchased by the parish.

Anthony Schindler was Father Sniderhon's right-hand man. His ability as a carpenter and mason was instrumental in the construction of the new rectory, the convent and classroom. Also especially helpful during this time were Bernard Klecker, Louis Gisler, Emil Forrette, Vincent Pietrok, John Kerber, John P. Mertz and Joseph Fery.

Father Norbert Fritz became the first priest to be ordained from Immaculate Conception Parish. Archbishop Edward Howard ordained him at the Portland Cathedral on May 31, 1942, and he celebrated his first Mass in Immaculate Conception Church on June 4, 1942.

In March of 1945 Father Mathias Jonas became the pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish. Father George Sniderhon had served the parish for nine years and enjoyed the esteem of all the community, including members of all religious faiths.

Early in 1950, with the consent of Archbishop Howard, a building board composed of Father Mathias Jonas, Dr. W.A. Burrell, George Frichtl, John Etzel, T.G. Freres, Louis Freres, Chris Neitling, Ernest Dozler, A. J. Frank, and Gus Kirsch was formed for the purpose of building a new church. Plans were drawn by Louis A. Schmerber A.I.A. of Salem. After many detail reviews, they were approved. The contract was awarded to A.N. Minden Construction Company. Work began on March 26, 1951 (the day after Easter), and was completed on April 12, 1952 (the day before Easter) at a cost of \$250000.

The last marriage in the old church was that of Marlene Odenthal, daughter of Mr.

and Mrs. Leo Odenthal, and grand-daughter of Andrew Fery, to Robert Hartmann on February 9, 1952. The last Mass held in the old church was on April 12.

On June 22, 1952, the dedication of the new church was held. His Excellency, the Most Rev. Francis P. Leipzig, D.D., Bishop of Baker, Oregon, preached the festive sermon on this special occasion. It was most fitting and proper that Bishop Leipzig was asked to be the main speaker for this occasion as he had been instrumental in responding to the rapid growth of the Church in this Archdiocese during the past thirty years.

The first service in the new church was Easter Mass on April 13, 1952. The first baby baptized in the new church was Laura Mae Mack, daughter of Charles and Kathleen Mack. This occurred on April 14, 1952. The first marriage was La Veta Dozler, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Dozler, to Arthur Christiansen on May 24, 1952. The first funeral Mass held in the new church was for Edwin Forrette.

During this time the Grotto (north of the new church) was built. Fred Kremwinkle, a long time friend of Father Jonas, donated the statue of the Virgin Mary to be placed in the Grotto. Mr. and Mrs. Ted Freres donated the money to build the Grotto, which was constructed by Nestor Van Handle. Over the many years, the Freres families have maintained and decorated the Grotto at Christmas time. In 1955 two organs were purchased for \$2999.

Rev. Lawrence Saalfeld came to the parish in 1960. His love of Catholic education helped spur the expansion of St. Mary School and the founding of Regis High School. Also at that time the Rev. Vincent Cunniff was in residence. He is remembered for using his engineering experience to survey the land where Regis would be built.

In 1962, Stations of the Cross were purchased for \$2357. And in 1965 the first electronic bell system, with the equivalent of 25 tons of bells, was purchased as a memorial to Chris Silbernagel at a cost of \$3000.

Rev. John Goodrich came to the parish in 1968 and used his warm personality to help promote the growth of the schools.

He was followed in 1972 by Rev. Donald McHugh, who was also an Army chaplain and who was known to apply his military experience for maintaining discipline.

Rev. Alfred Williams arrived in Stayton in 1979, and during his tenure introduced men as Eucharistic ministers and women as lectors. He also focused his attention on social justice and helping those in need.

Rev. Joseph Neuville, who came to the parish in 1983, introduced women as Eucharistic ministers and believed in volunteerism. His motto was "Everyone needs to volunteer at some point."

Rev. Robert Beltrami, OFM, followed in 1986 and was the first and only member of a religious order to be the parish's pastor. He often visited parishioners in their homes.

During 1987, a section of the center of the communion rail was removed and communicants for the first time received communion standing. New carpeting was placed in the church at the same time.

Rev. Beltrami was followed in 1990 by Rev. (now Rev. Msgr.) Gregory Moys, who first came to Regis as a teacher and counselor. Known for his ready smile, he helped introduce small church communities to the parish.

The church grounds were landscaped in 1992. During 1993, the church was remodeled, adding the new reconciliation room, cry room and bathroom. Construction was done by Mike Adams Construction Co. at cost of \$11740.

In 1994, the rectory had a new roof put on by Lindemann Roofing Co. at a cost of \$14249. During 1995 a new roof was put onto the church by Mike Adams Construction Co. at a cost of \$43100. A new bell system was purchased for the church at a cost of \$8425. In 1998, a new pipe organ was installed.

Rev. Richard Wallace came to Immaculate Conception in 1997 and was known among parishioners as a great preacher and a dynamic and creative leader. In addition to serving as a teacher and counselor at Regis, he organized parish "listening sessions" during the years 1997 and 1998.

As a result of those sessions, in 2001, it was decided to start a \$4.5 million combined capital improvement campaign, which would increase the classroom space with the additions of four classrooms and a science room at St. Mary Elementary School, a student activities center with a stage and a well-equipped kitchen for Regis High School and a new Parish Center at Immaculate Conception Church.

Rev. Panneer Selvam came to the parish in 1998. A native of India, he brought a spirit of friendship to the people of Stayton.