

THE HISTORY OF THE PARISH OF OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS

Painted on the wall of the New Bedford Whaling National Park Visitors' Center is a phrase taken from the novel *Moby Dick*, in which noted author Herman Melville described the City of New Bedford "as the town perhaps the dearest place to live in all of New England." Although this statement was published in America's most recognized novel some fifty years before the establishment of the Parish of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and at about the same time that New Bedford was officially chartered a city, the city's enduring history and charm is certainly something that was recognized by the immigrants who made their way from Poland to these United States of America as they set out to make New Bedford their new home.

There were two reasons why the Poles, especially the peasants and laborers, left their homeland and journeyed to America: adverse economic and political conditions. It was, therefore, the need for bread and the desire for freedom that drove these first waves of immigrants across the Atlantic Ocean. Although they knew neither the language nor existing conditions, they were full of hope and expectation that through hard labor and careful spending they would be able to work out a better existence for themselves and their families.

The first Polish immigrants arrived here after the whaling era had ended. It was the advent of the industrial revolution, and textiles were now the source of wealth and development for the City by the Sea. People of diverse nationalities came to this community in search of the promise that "America" held. Unlike many other immigrant colonies, the beginning of the Polish community in the Whaling City traces its origins back to the Polish settlements first established in Galveston, Texas, rather than to groups of European immigrants who passed through Ellis Island in New York.

Historical documents show that Nicolas and Barbara Misiarz and their daughter Catherine were among the first Poles to settle in New Bedford. Other family names such as Gwozdz, Przybyla, Tabak, and Kilanowicz formed the backbone of what was recognized as a growing Polish presence in New Bedford. Driven by a strong work ethic and a deep religious faith, these families sought to secure a Polish priest, hoping, eventually, to establish a church and school, as so many other Polish colonies across the United States had already done. Whoever has at least a passing knowledge of the history of the Polish immigration will note a definite trend: wherever a group of Polish immigrants settled, their first concern was to organize and build from their own scanty resources, a parish church, and a school for their children. This was certainly a challenge, but it was one that the new Polish-Americans faced with determination. The dream of having their own parish was

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now brought to New Bedford, to what would be called Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. Our parish will forever remain a permanent and undisputed monument to our ancestors' faith and attachment to the Roman Catholic Church, as we can attest to and have witnessed over these past 100 years.

Divine Providence sent these first New Bedford Poles a Catholic priest who, himself, was a Polish political refugee and a patriot devoted to the spiritual needs of his countrymen. Rev. Edward A. Uminski arrived in our city toward the end of 1902 and immediately took up the difficult task of organizing a Polish parish. This he did by permission of the Most Rev. Matthew Harkins, Bishop of Providence, Rhode Island, since the diocese of Fall River did not yet exist. (It would be founded only in March of 1904.) For a few months, Father Uminski satisfied the religious needs of his people while serving as a curate at Saint Kilian's Parish. He next moved to the Chapel of the Guardian Angels, which later became Holy Rosary Church, located near the intersection of Acushnet Avenue and Logan Street. He lived, at that time, in a house belonging to Patrick O'Leary on the west side of Acushnet Avenue opposite Washburn Street.

1905

Following two years of relentless efforts, Father Uminski bought the site for a new church on North Front Street and began the erection of the building on July 9, 1905. The architect was L. H. Giele of New York, while the contractor was a local man, J. B. Sullivan. The blessing of the cornerstone took place on September 1, 1905, and the Most Rev. William Stang, first Bishop of the Fall River Diocese, solemnly blessed the church on December 31st of that year.

On this same day, the painting of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was hung in the church. The painting was imported from Rome and was endowed with many privileges by the Holy Father, Pius X, on the 20th of November 1905. The painting was a gift of Father Uminski, who offered it as a votum to Our Lady in thanksgiving for his escape from the oppression of the Czar, since he had been guilty of taking part in an uprising. This is the origin of our parish's name and the reason why our church was placed under the patronage of our Blessed Mother.

After the church was completed, Father Uminski was untiring in his efforts to beautify the edifice. This can be seen in the collection of various church vessels and the offerings made by the parishioners and the different parish societies. Another of this pastor's strong points was his care and zeal for the group of Polish families living in the South End. The City of New Bedford is some eighteen miles long. This presented a real challenge in an era in which transportation consisted of a trolley

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car or simply a horse. Many parishioners living in the South End found it difficult to attend services in their own parish church. Consequently, in 1906, Father Uminski bought a tract of land on the corner of Delano and South Second Streets. There he built a chapel, the first of what would be two satellite missions of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. Father Uminski, and later, his assistant, Rev. John Mard, traveled there and held divine services until the 1st of October 1908, when this mission chapel became a parish church. Father Mard was then appointed its first pastor.

1908

Next, in 1908, Father Uminski took steps to erect a school for the children of the parish. However, certain existing conditions did not permit the realization of this goal. He, therefore, took care of the education of the children by opening classes in the hall beneath the church. The children were taught by two Sisters of the Congregation of Saint Joseph and also by lay teachers. From 1908 to 1910, Father Uminski, as a true priest of God, also assisted the small Syrian population of the city by allowing them to hold services and baptisms in the church hall, according to their own rites. He did the same for a group of Portuguese faithful from 1910 to 1912 until they had erected their own church, the Church of the Immaculate Conception, on Earle Street.

After ten years of unstinting labor, Father Edward A. Uminski left this parish by the will of the Most Rev. Bishop Daniel F. Feehan on the 25th of October 1912. When we reflect upon history and think of the challenges of the early 1900s, we realize just how much was accomplished in those early years by Father Uminski, and how great those accomplishments truly were. Beyond his religious ministry to a new and growing Polish community, his legacy included the early church building, an educational component for the children of the parish, and a satellite chapel that grew into an autonomous parish. Father Uminski died at the age of 76 in April 1937. He was buried in Calvary Cemetery from Saint Stanislaus Church in New York.

1912

After the departure of Father Uminski, the parish was assigned to Rev. Hugo Dylla on the 1st of November 1912. Father Dylla was no stranger to the parishioners because he had served as a curate here from July to September of 1908. With a zeal that is worthy of admiration, Father Dylla set out to meet the needs of the parish, both material and spiritual. He liquidated debts that Father Uminski had been unable to pay off due to the difficult economic times and to a bit of reluctance on the part of the parishioners. The parish was also in debt to the banks for the sum of

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\$27,500. Father Dylla reduced this sum by half. He had the interior and the exterior of the church repainted in 1913, while also making necessary improvements to the rectory. He bought a piece of land on Sawyer Street, which he intended to use as the school site. Besides this, he had imported from Munich, Bavaria, beautiful images of the Stations of the Cross. Father Dylla took care of the needs of the sanctuary and the altars. In fact, he also imported from Bavaria in 1915 the magnificent statue of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, which to this day adorns the church's main altar. It is one of only two such statues in existence. The other is on display in the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Boston. On September 30, 1918, the Most Rev. Bishop Feehan appointed Father Dylla pastor of Saint Stanislaus Church in Fall River.

1918

On September 30, 1918, the Rev. John A. Nowicki, Ph.D. succeeded Father Hugo Dylla. The beginnings of his administration were rather difficult because of the Spanish influenza that raged at that time. He, like his predecessor, had to serve the needs of the sick night and day, at home and in hospitals. There were several funerals every day. In fact, his first two Sundays at the parish found the church closed to prevent the dreaded contagious sickness from spreading. In the two years that Father Nowicki served as pastor, he was noted for his deep concern for the spiritual needs of the parishioners as well as for the financial status of the parish. He managed to pay off \$3,000 on the parish debts. Father Nowicki resigned his pastorate on the 11th of October 1920 and returned to his native Poland.

Upon the resignation of Father Nowicki, the Rev. Andrew S. P. Baj was appointed pastor on the 11th of October 1920. He is best remembered for the projects that he began and completed. No more than a year after he assumed the duties of pastor, he noticed that the walls of the church were beginning to bulge from the weight of the slate roof. He solved this problem by hiring a local contractor, Joseph Dias, to install iron supports and pilasters in the church at a cost of \$3,000. Despite this major expenditure, Father Baj managed in his first five years to reduce the parish debt by \$15,000.

1924

At about that time, the lack of a parochial school and the need to build an additional church for parishioners who lived further north and in Acushnet were concerns being expressed to the pastor. Father Baj took steps to address these problems. In 1924, he bought a piece of land and a house on Acushnet Avenue, near Wood Street, on which he built a mission chapel. The priests of the parish then served this chapel, just as Father Uminski had served parishioners at the South End mission chapel

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during his term as pastor. The necessary funds for this project were obtained by borrowing from the banks. Two years later, the Most Rev. Bishop Feehan established this North End chapel as a parish church. It was named Saint Casimir, and its first pastor was the Rev. Albert Folta.

Next, Father Baj decided to build a parochial school beside the church. The homes near the church were bought and moved onto the parish lots on Sawyer Street. The rectory was relocated from Howard Street to face North Front Street. One of the houses on Sawyer Street was remodeled and set aside as a convent for the Sisters who were to teach in the school. This whole project cost \$125,000. This sum, again, had to be borrowed from the banks, since the donations did not come up to the expectations of Father Baj. Moreover, these were hard times, and the national depression was already felt. It was only by supreme effort that the parishioners were able to meet the high rates of interest and the expenses that the parish had incurred.

The twelve years that Father Baj spent at the spiritual and financial helm of the parish of Our Lady of Perpetual Help are proof of his loyalty to the Polish people and of his energy and courage. Although he did not have the privilege of seeing the debts paid off, he cannot be deprived of the honor of being credited with the establishment of the parish school. The Most Rev. Bishop Feehan terminated his pastorate on the 11th of October 1932. It is also appropriate to give just acknowledgment to the assistants of Father Baj, namely, the Rev. John S. Czerwonka and the Rev. Joseph F. Sutula, for their vigorous work in this parish. A particular note of appreciation goes to Father Czerwonka for his work with the youth of the parish, by whom he was often remembered. Father Sutula went on to become pastor of Saint Casimir Parish in New Bedford.

1932

The Rev. Stanislaus J. Ryczek was appointed as Father Baj's successor. His stay in the parish was very short, from the 11th of October 1932, to March 2, 1933.

The conditions under which Father Ryczek began his administration proved to be too difficult. The depression had its effects not only upon individuals and families but also and especially upon parishes that were heavily in debt. Father Ryczek tried to handle this critical financial situation in the best way he could with the help of the various societies and zealous parishioners. But this was not enough in the face of the obligations taken on and the demands of the banks. In fact, the church was on the brink of bankruptcy. It was then that Father Ryczek took the bold step of approaching the Most Rev. Bishop Feehan with the idea of inviting a religious order

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to take over the parish. He was of the belief that a religious community, united in communal resources, would be able to save the parish from bankruptcy. It had been done in other instances, and he believed it could be done here. The Most Rev. Bishop Feehan, after pondering over the suggestion made by Father Ryczek, gave the parish to the Polish Franciscan Fathers of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual of the Province of Saint Anthony of Padua.

Of special note is the fact that Father Ryczek introduced the eleven o'clock Mass at which the announcements, the Gospel, and the sermon were delivered in English. This helped the parish financially because many faithful of other nationalities attended this Mass. This post-depression development reflected the understanding of the parish community that it could begin to serve a greater population of Catholics while at the same time welcoming the financial support these non-Poles could contribute in such difficult times.

Upon the arrival of the Franciscan Fathers, Father Ryczek relinquished his pastorate and joined the Army as a Chaplain. His understanding that there were yet difficult days ahead for Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, his vision for the future, and his petition to the bishop saved the parish from possible closure and were instrumental in placing it in the hands of the Franciscans, who to this day maintain and faithfully serve our parish and our parishioners' needs.

The Polish Franciscan Fathers began their administration on Ash Wednesday, March 2, 1933 with what is often referred to as the beginning of the Golden Era of our parish. The first religious pastor to be approved by the Most Rev. Bishop Daniel F. Feehan was the Rev. Leonard Pakulski, O.F.M., Conv. He remained here for two and a half years.

When Father Leonard came to the parish, the total debt was \$131,775.00, while the parish treasury showed a balance of only \$461.10! However, Father Leonard, with his pleasing disposition, succeeded in winning over the hearts of the parishioners, and his willingness to serve everyone brought about a greater co-operation among the parishioners.

It was no wonder then that, despite the heavy debt that threatened the parish, Father Leonard managed to have the interior of the church repainted by the artist Rafael Gironi and his son, Henry, of Boston, and to recarpet the sanctuary. A high percentage on the debt was paid regularly, while the cost of other needed repairs on the church and parochial buildings were met. By the end of his term, Father Leonard also managed to pay off almost \$1,000.00 on the principal, despite the national depression.

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The religious superiors sent Father Giles Kaczmarek as successor to Father Leonard. Although his stay was brief, hardly a year, he did commendable work for the good of the parish.

1936

It was through the efforts of Father Giles that a Hammond electric organ was installed in the church. In a musical and religious ceremony, this organ was blessed on June 14, 1936.

Besides this, with the willing help of the parishioners, Father Giles not only met the interest on the debt, but also reduced the principal by \$100.00. On the 2nd of August 1936, Father Giles was recalled to the Province to fulfill important functions in its administration. Later he was called to Rome, Italy, by the General Curia of the Order to become head of the Confessors at the Basilica of Saint Peter. At the same time, he was given the important office of an Assistant to the General of the Order.

1940

The Very Rev. Justin Figas, the Provincial of Saint Anthony's Province, sent the Rev. Method Szymanski, a former well-known missionary preacher, to replace Father Giles. He immediately captured the hearts of the parishioners with his eloquent sermons. Father Method served the parish for three and one-half years to April of 1940. During this time, he made a definite step towards the liquidation of the debt, paying the banks \$4,975.00 on the principal.

Toward the end of April 1940, Father Method was sent to Haverhill, Mass., as pastor of Saint Michael's Church.

The Rev. Richard Brzozowski, O.F.M. Conv., who had been an assistant to Father Leonard, came back to the parish as the ninth pastor. He continued in that capacity until September of 1948. It was during his tenure that the parish rose to new spiritual heights and also benefited most financially. It was World War II, employment was plentiful, and people earned more and responded generously to the calls of the pastor. The results of his efforts were that the debt was reduced by \$87,300.00.

It is also noteworthy to mention that during this period Father Richard also undertook significant building maintenance projects. A new church roof was added, the exterior walls were painted, leaks were repaired in the school, the Sisters' Sawyer Street convent was remodeled, and repairs to the rectory were made. The parish history reflects the fact that much of this work, as well as daily routine maintenance, was done by the Franciscan Fathers—in addition to their religious

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ministry. The contributions of parishioners to these efforts were also significant, as reflected in the 50th anniversary history that singles out the labors of Mr. Joseph Sitarz, president of the ushers. Another contributing factor to Father Richard's efforts to reduce the debt was the fact that the Franciscan Fathers, now having staffed the parish for nearly ten years, had not accepted salaries in an effort to accelerate the reduction of the debt.

1948

On Sunday, September 17, 1948, the Very Reverend Norbert Zonca, the former Rector of Saint Hyacinth Seminary, Granby, Massachusetts, officially took over Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish. In his first act as pastor, Father Norbert approached his new assignment with an analysis and evaluation for potential development. His planning mapped out a gradual plan for the renovation of the church and parochial buildings—but only after a complete reduction of the debt that the parish continued to carry. In just two years time, by November 23, 1950, Father Norbert had successfully directed the efforts of the parish in eradicating \$37,900.00 in debt. An official ceremony and banquet called “Burning of Notes and Mortgage Day” was held. In conjunction with this event, Father Norbert introduced his plan, aimed at the development and continued enhancement of the parish properties. The parishioners responded enthusiastically, with nearly \$1,000.00 raised in conjunction with the special events.

Numerous benefits were being conducted, adding monies to the parish treasury. Opportunities to sell certain properties and purchase others presented themselves. One of these was the home on the corner of Beetle and North Front Streets, which would be converted into a convent for the Bernardine Sisters who taught in our parish school. Here yet another name of a parishioner giving above and beyond in assisting the Franciscans in this building movement is mentioned. Mr. Andrew Stefanik is cited as having contributed greatly in a professional capacity to Father Norbert's planning effort.

Father Norbert pushed forward: remodeling the sacristy, installing a public address system in the church, padding the kneelers, procuring new desks and amenities for the classrooms, and paving the school playground. Father Norbert lead a group of curates and volunteers in revarnishing the pews, in addition to the floors of both the church and school buildings. He did other woodwork as well. Large amounts of money were invested in new heating systems and upgrades to the electrical wiring and lighting.

1954

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In 1954, working with the general contractor Sullivan-Foster of New Bedford, Father Norbert began a major remodeling of both the interior and exterior of the church. New windows—stained glass by the Polish glass artist Stanislaus Balut—were installed, as well as beautiful interior oil paintings by the artists Boleslaus Twarog and Brothers. A new vestibule was built outside the sacristy for safer entrance into the church and its basement. All of this took place during the year of the Golden Jubilee of the parish. The complete renovation costs amounted to some \$61,000.00, all of which was contributed by the parishioners with not a dollar being borrowed from the banking community.

The parish at the time of the Golden Jubilee recognized a number of its sons and daughters who entered the diocesan priesthood or religious life. The first young man to enter, study, and be ordained was the Rev. Stanislaw T. Sypek, A.M., M.S.W., Ph.D. He was followed by Rev. Cyril Augustyn, O.F.M., Conv., Rev. Patrick Rolak, O.F.M., Conv. (at that time in studies), and Brother Albert Kaszynski, O.F.M. Conv. Among those entering and serving in the convent were: Sister M. Andreata Kaszynska, Sister M. Wirginela Kaszynska, Sister M. Wirgilia Siwik, Sister M. Wirgineta Glowacka, and Sister M. Immakula Supczak of the Bernardine Sisters. Serving as Franciscan Sisters of Saint Joseph were: Sister M. Bonfilia Olemberska, Sister M. Martiniana Budra, and Sister M. Maurelia Olemberska.

Father Norbert brought to realization a tremendous physical enhancement and a rejuvenated parishioner commitment to Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. In the face of challenging circumstances, the historical records reflect the high degree of success he enjoyed not only in bringing to completion numerous projects, but also in raising the needed financial resources without incurring long-term debts. His analytical approach to planning and his tenacity in fundraising contributed to his success in the parish as well as to his recognition as an outstanding leader in the Greater New Bedford Community, as noted by the New Bedford Standard Times in 1955. Father Norbert served the parish as pastor until 1960, when he was assigned to Corpus Christi Parish in Buffalo, New York. Father Norbert died in 1979.

1960

The eleventh pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church was the Rev. Adolph Banach, O.F.M. Conv. A native of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he came to New Bedford from a previous assignment in Clifton, New Jersey. Sadly, his health failed shortly after his arrival. A progressive illness reduced his ability to carry out the bare essentials of his religious ministry. On April 2, 1961, Father Banach died. His funeral

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Mass was celebrated by the then Auxiliary Bishop of the Fall River Diocese, the Most Rev. James J. Gerrard, D.D.

The twelfth pastor was appointed on April 4, 1961, when Rev. Seraphin Stachowicz, O. F. M. Conv., arrived from Athol Springs, New York. It seemed as if the faith of the Franciscans Friars and their parishioners was being tested, for, as in the case of Father Banach, Father Seraphin fell very ill. Well-liked and having earned the heartfelt respect of the parish, Father Seraphin was forced to resign in August 1963 due to failing health. Father Seraphin died in August of 1965.

Upon the resignation of Father Seraphin, Father Fulgence Gorczyca, O.F.M. Conv. became the thirteenth pastor of the parish. Much like Father Norbert, Father Fulgence approached his new assignment by planning and looking to the future. It was a turbulent era in the city. With the development and construction of Route 195, so much of what was considered to be the extended community of the parish was to meet its demise. Families relocated, business moved or closed. The impact of the loss of the Polish neighborhoods began to be felt. Route 195 was a sign of progress, moving transportation forward, but it left in its wake the initiation of a change whose impact on urban living would be felt for decades to come.

Father Fulgence recognized the need for the addition of the written word, and the parish weekly bulletin was introduced. No longer was the pulpit the main communication medium for the Franciscan Friars. The 60s were ushering in the ability to communicate with many people at once—and not only with those who attended weekend Masses, but with everyone who could put their hands on this very local weekly newsletter. Father Fulgence also recognized that he needed to utilize more effectively the services of the numerous parish societies. More opportunities to socialize were offered, and the parish societies were asked to stand up and help even more than they had in the past, providing manpower for various projects and even assisting with fundraising.

Father Fulgence was invited by Bishop James L. Connolly to serve as the Diocesan Coordinator of the observance of the Millennium Celebration of Poland's Christianity. The official observance for the diocese and for Poles of the region was held on the steps of Bishop Stang High School with the celebration of a Pontifical Mass on August 26, 1966. This was not only a great honor for Poles but for our parish, since our bishop had singled out Father Fulgence for coordination duties.

1966

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In late 1966, Father Fulgence undertook the challenge of repainting the entire church, inside and out. This was a nearly two-year project and one that required bank financing. In 1968, after almost forty years of affiliation with our parish, their superiors notified the Bernardine Sisters that they would be leaving Our Lady of Perpetual Help School. There was nothing that could be done. Suggestions by parents and parish members for restructuring of costs and fundraising efforts received repeated negative responses from the pastor and the leaders in the Diocesan Department of Education. With the graduation of the class of 1968, Our Lady of Perpetual Help School closed its doors after providing Catholic elementary education to parishioners and residents of the greater New Bedford Community for four decades. The decline in religious vocations and the inability to change established educational institutions into lay-run schools proved too great a challenge for our parochial school, as it would for a number of others in New Bedford and the Fall River Diocese as a whole in the years ahead.

In addition to working to bring down outstanding debts, Father Fulgence looked for ways to generate revenue with the vacant school building and convent. Hard work realized short-term success. The school building was rented out to a work force development program for training the unemployed. The resulting income, together with some successful fundraising, allowed the pastor to retire the bank loan in 1969. There was yet one more project to take on—a new roof for the rectory. This he completed in the fall of 1969, just as he was being reassigned. In September 1969, Father Fulgence Gorczyca was assigned to Saint Anthony's Parish in Chicopee, Massachusetts. He died in 1979.

1969

The fourteenth pastor was the Rev. Joseph Trawinski, O.F.M., Conv., who remained in that position until the summer of 1976. Faced with many of the same challenges as Father Fulgence, Father Joseph worked to bring special meaning to the customary Polish celebrations such as the *Oplatek* and *Swieconka*. These special traditions were viewed as a means of bringing and keeping our parish community together. In highlighting these celebrations, Father Joseph also recognized that areas such as the church hall kitchen needed to be upgraded. With the school being closed, it was no longer possible to utilize its cafeteria. Once again, the impact of weather on a coastal New England community took its toll on the parish properties. The exterior of the church and rectory buildings needed painting. Known as an advocate of Catholic education both at the elementary and secondary levels, Father Joseph worked with parish youth and families looking to enter and sustain the type of Catholic education that had been so much a part of parish life for some forty years prior to his arrival.

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His last noteworthy project, which he did not see completed, was the replacement of the exterior statue of Our Lady. He imported a beautiful new marble statue from Italy and secured the support of generous parishioners to fully fund this effort.

1976

In August of 1976, Rev. Felician Plichta, O.F.M., Conv. became the fifteenth pastor of the parish. Upon arriving at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the Fall River native immediately began a study of the population of our parish family. Searches through journals, account books, and bulletins, as well as conversation with parish members painted a very clear picture—the parish was becoming increasingly smaller. The results went beyond the books. A noticeable decline was detected in weekly Mass attendance and concerns were developing regarding the properties and the future viability of the parish. Parishioners were becoming older. Funerals were increasing, and newer parishioners were fewer and fewer. Notable parishioners contributing to the success of the parish over the years were dying. Joseph Sitarz, long recognized for his contributions passed away in 1976. Attorney Henry Bartkiewicz, parish organist for thirty-five years, died in 1978. Urban sprawl, the creation of Route 195, and generational differences in life-style were painting a very bleak picture. Regrettably, all Catholic parishes in the region were experiencing much the same reality.

Although challenges abounded, there were also high points in this era. First came the celebration of the 25th anniversary Mass of Father Cyril Augustyn O.F.M., Conv. in 1978. A native son, he is recognized as the first of our parish's priests to return for such a celebration. Then, in 1979, Cardinal Karol Wotyla of Krakow, Poland, was elected to the Papacy, taking the name John Paul II. Later that year, a busload of parishioners made a pilgrimage to the Boston Common for the Papal Visit and Mass. It was a truly moving and memorable experience. The fire of Polish and Polish-American religious fervor was recognized on the world stage and helped to maintain the parish life-style so many enjoyed at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. In an almost humorous turn, the only thing to cool our parish family was the Blizzard of the '70s and weather not typically experienced for many years in this region.

1980

This also became a time of preparation for the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of the parish, which was held in October of 1980. Father Plichta began an effort to clean and restore the church. Walls were chemically treated, lighting fixtures restored, and the statuary was repainted. Once again, the exterior of the church and rectory were repainted. Even the pews were refinished, something that hadn't been

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done since Father Norbert's project in preparation for the 50th anniversary celebration. October 19, 1980 became celebration day, the 75th anniversary of the founding of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. The Most Rev. Daniel Cronin, D.D., S.T.D., Bishop of Fall River presided at the anniversary Mass. Concelebrants included Father Plichta, Father Joseph, and Father Augustyn. A dinner dance followed at the Venus de Milo Restaurant in Swansea, capping the Jubilee festivities.

With the many challenges and accomplishments, the Jubilee celebration also drew attention to a number of men of the parish who had committed their lives to the service of Christ. In addition to Father Augustyn, who had celebrated his twenty-fifth anniversary, there was Father Patrick Rolak, O.F.M., Conv., ordained in 1956, and Father Gabriel Swol, O.F.M., Conv. (nephew of Father Augustyn), ordained in 1968. In addition, Sister M. Francis Olembaska had joined two siblings in becoming a Franciscan Sister of Saint Joseph.

1982

The summer of 1982 brought yet another change to the pastoral and administrative leadership of the parish. The Rev. Roman Chwaliszewski, O.F.M., Conv., assumed his responsibilities and immediately began to strengthen the basic religious and cultural foundations of the parish. Working with parishioners, societies, and community-recognized ethnic organizations, Father Roman set out to re-introduce the parish to daily recitation of the Rosary, Days of Recollection, the celebrations of the Coronation of the Blessed Mother, devotion to the Divine Mercy, Eucharistic adoration, and recognition of Polish-American Heritage month along with the Polka Mass.

As with all pastors serving this or any parish, the exercise of his religious ministry was always challenged by the need to attend to the physical maintenance of the church properties. The now vacant and underutilized school building had been the scene of several small fires, which, although not serious in nature, did present potential threats to both the church and neighborhood. Electrical wiring upgrades needed to be made to the church building, and several leaks, which were causing significant deterioration to the basic structure of the church, had to be addressed. As so many before him, Father Roman was placed in the position of having to initiate a multi-phased plan of action that would upgrade the properties, make safe the area, and raise the necessary funding to accomplish the work.

Father Roman proposed to the parishioners a multi-year, multi-level financial giving program. The goal was to raise nearly \$300,000. New regulations, new standards for efficiency, and environmental concerns complicated the simple replacement of the

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heating system, which would consume an anticipated one third of the fund drive proceeds. The physical grounds would also undergo a major transformation with the demolition of the vacant school, paving of the parking lots, installation of a meditation garden, and erection of wrought iron fencing. Exterior lighting, enhancements to the vestibule, and upgrades to the concrete stepping placed a new face on the buildings and spaces that comprise the parish complex.

Challenges certainly existed in securing and achieving the financial commitments necessary. In an attempt to keep this in the minds of the parishioners, envelop systems for weekly and special collections were established. This helped everyone to become more aware of the financial realities of operating the parish as we moved out of the twentieth century.

Sadness also fell upon the parish with the passing of long-time parochial vicar Rev. Adolph Szlagowski, O.F.M., Conv. in 1989. For the first time in their decades of service to our parish, the Franciscan Friars would procure a burial plot at New Bedford's Sacred Heart Cemetery #2 for their members who passed away locally. The numerous men who had served our parish and who would yet serve were growing older, and it was recognized that the long-term commitment to the Diocese of Fall River was soon to take another turn in the development and the presence of the Franciscans in Southeastern Massachusetts.

Father Roman's creativity in fundraising continued as he introduced the "Keys to Heaven" campaign for the replacement and installation of a new church organ. The uniqueness of the effort contributed to the project being fully funded and contributions being visually recognized on engraved plaques mounted in the church.

With the loss of Father Adolph, the parish welcomed the Rev. Isidore Kowalski, O.F.M., Conv., who assumed the responsibilities of parochial vicar. In 1993, our parish family celebrated with this very holy and pious man his 50th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood. Months before, the Franciscan community at Our Lady of Perpetual Help had received yet another member when Father Sebastian Slesinski, O.F.M., Conv., joined his fellow friars after leaving Saint Hedwig's Parish in the South End of New Bedford as pastor. Saint Hedwig's was the first of two satellite chapels developed from the Mother Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Father Sebastian's move to the Franciscan residence on North Front Street signaled yet again the change occurring in the Church with fewer religious vocations and the inability of the diocese to maintain traditional parish operations. Saint Hedwig's Parish would soon be viewed as a split congregation of Polish/Polish Americans and the now growing Hispanic/Latino populations of the neighborhoods. Although the

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change was attempted in the most gracious of manners, the days of a South End Polish language/cultural oriented Catholic Church were numbered. Nonetheless, Father Sebastian's addition to the Our Lady of Perpetual Help community truly reflected the strong commitment that the Conventual Franciscans were making to this region.

1995

1995 brought yet another celebration, the 35th anniversary of the ordination of Father Roman. Now in his thirteenth year as pastor, his efforts and the movements he had begun reflected Father Roman's untiring commitment to the flock he had been placed in charge of. His diversified background as educator, administrator, and now pastor through periods of challenge, success, sacrifice, and change served him well in what would be one of his longest assignments in the service of the Lord.

During this period, preparations took shape for the anticipated celebration of the 90th anniversary of the parish. With Father Roman at the helm and with the assistance of Rodney Cejka, a prominent local businessman, the planning began. Father Roman, working through his parishioners, established numerous social events during his first years as pastor with the intent of generating a critical mass of activities that would reestablish the prominence of what he referred to as the "parish family." This polite and constant encouragement created the Polish Heritage Ball, presentation of debutantes, awarding of scholarships, the activation of youth groups, and the encouragement of regional participation in religious/ethnic celebrations at the parish, as well as the hosting of the City of New Bedford's first inaugural community prayer service. Father Roman encouraged and invited other ethnic groups seeking to hold celebrations in our Catholic faith tradition to use our facilities and supported their annual religious observances. Our Polish-American parish family under the leadership of Father Roman was and is viewed as a welcoming community to all who wish to share in our faith.

The parish's 90th anniversary celebration began with a Mass of Thanksgiving celebrated by the Most Reverend Sean P. O'Malley, O.F.M. Cap. Bishop of Fall River on July 1, 1995. Today, Sean Cardinal O'Malley is the leader of the Archdiocese of Boston. The church took on a special aura of excitement with prominent community leaders, societies, organizations, and most importantly, members of the "parish family" participating not only in the liturgical celebration but also in the subsequent events that followed. Many challenges had left cause for great concern over the past decade but with the guidance, strong will, and tireless efforts of the Franciscan Friars, new enthusiasm could be felt and—most importantly—be seen in a

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rejuvenated “parish family.” The 90th anniversary ended on June 27, 1996 with a Mass of Celebration marking the Feast of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Patroness of our parish.

The next ten years were being viewed as potentially those of the greatest challenge to our parish, yet with the strongest sense of optimism because they would bring us, as a parish family, to the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Father Roman Chwaliszewski was still pastor and responsible not only for the parish but for the maintenance of what was growing into the only Canonical House of Conventual Franciscan Friars in the Diocese of Fall River. Decades of presence in parishes, primarily of Polish language orientation, were quickly disappearing. Urban population moves, loss of vocations, and reorganization of parishes within the diocese ushered in the recognition that the rectory on North Front Street would be far more valuable than just the hub of parish activities, it would become the only home of the Conventual Franciscans in the diocese.

This development was not only looked upon favorably by the diocese, but was welcomed by a parish family that for so long had been influenced by the teachings of Saint Francis and had even committed numerous young men to a life of Franciscan love and service. Although a number of priests would come and join the residence here, a number of long-time servants of Christ would also serve out their final days here as well. The last decade saw the passing of Father Charles Porada, who had relinquished his pastoral responsibilities at a Fall River parish. Father Isidore Kowalski, too, passed to his eternal reward during this time period. Father Sebastian Slesinski, whose health failed, was forced to leave our parish and seek residence in a health care facility from which he too has since passed on to eternal life.

Great sadness also fell upon our parish community with the passing of Pope John Paul II. Pope John Paul brought to the world stage not only Catholicism, but also what it meant to be a Polish Catholic, to have endured World War II, to live with the values so much associated with Poles—most importantly, strong faith convictions. The Church had lost a Pope, the world had lost a leader, and Poles around the globe had lost their advocate.

It has been a joy and a blessing for our parishioners to welcome in these later years new Franciscan Friars to our parish. These have included Father Stanley Sobiech, O.F.M., Conv. and, most recently, Father Germain Kopaczynski, O.F.M., Conv. who currently serves the parish with great dedication.

Developed from a compilation of the history and accounts of the Parish Family

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With the restructuring of parishes due to population shifts, some diocesan parishes have had to close. Saint Hedwig's has already been spoken of, but in 2002 Saint Casimir's, the second mission church that grew out of our parish, was consolidated with the Mother Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. As emotionally difficult and physically challenging as these consolidations have been, it has been a great consolation to have had Father Roman in the very difficult role of overseer. His sensitivity, caring, and understanding through these developments has comforted and eased the transition in many ways. A Polish Catholic community remains, smaller and less visible, perhaps, but religiously grounded on a foundation that is strengthened by the presence of the Franciscan Friars and the beliefs and cultural elements which have meant so much to so many for such a long time.

And yet special events continue to abound. On the social level, Bingo, seasonal bazaars, food sales, and the annual church festival continue to draw people from near and far for the culinary specialties, popular polka music, or just the chance to take a moment and reminisce about times past. A committed band of volunteers of all ages continues to prove true one of Father Roman's favorite sayings that "As a parish family we can succeed!"

The parish also happily recognized the years of religious service of Sister Patricia Edward Jablonski of the Daughters of Saint Paul, Sister Catia Ines Conterno of the Marist Sisters, and Sister M. Marsha Polchlopek of the Felician Sisters. In addition to the Sisters, the parish also recognized the service to God of Rev. Stephen Bzdyra and Rev. Walter Dziordz, M.I.C., Provincial of the Marian Fathers.

Religiously, as well, the parish continues to build upon traditional Polish values and love of Christianity. Our Lady of Perpetual Help is recognized as the first Church in New Bedford to have institutionalized the Divine Mercy celebration requested by Jesus in his apparitions to Saint Faustina Kowalska. The yearly Novena to the Divine Mercy and the celebration of the Feast of Divine Mercy draw many parishioners and non-parishioners alike and are a wonderful spiritual enrichment for the parish. The parish has also opened itself up to the Portuguese neighborhood, and, in conjunction with other religious leaders and social clubs, hosted religious observances and welcomed pilgrims of other ethnic Catholic backgrounds. In addition, our church, through Father Roman's invitation, was also the site of the first City of New Bedford Inaugural Prayer Service in January of 1998, when parishioner Frederick M. Kalisz, Jr. was elected Mayor of the City of New Bedford, the first-ever Polish-American mayor of the city. Today Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church and its meditation grounds serve as a home for all to come, practice their faith, and truly enjoy the gifts that God has given our community.

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Of special note is the long and dedicated service of Father Roman Chwaliszewski, who for twenty-four years has served as pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. He is by far the longest serving pastor, with nearly a quarter century of service as religious leader and parish administrator. Through demanding economic, social, and building maintenance related issues, not to mention challenges to personal health, Father Roman has served the parishioners and the bishops of Fall River with unquestioned loyalty, dedication, and great personal sacrifice. The prayers of all our parishioners are offered for his good health and in gratitude for the faithful spiritual guidance and stewardship that this man of God has provided and continues to provide for our families.

Attention now is directed to the conclusion of the 100th anniversary celebrations of the founding of the parish scheduled for October 29, 2006. The Most Reverend George W. Coleman, Bishop of the Fall River Diocese has been invited to preside. A banquet at Venus de Milo Restaurant will follow, and certainly the much anticipated singing of the traditional wish "Sto lat" (the wish of a hundred years) will take on a very special meaning for all present that afternoon.

This is yet one more new beginning for our beloved parish.

September 2006