



# A History of St. Joseph Catholic Church

---

## A Time to Gather

In the summer of 1924 at a priest retreat, Bishop Thomas Drumm announced the formation of a new parish to serve the eastern area of Des Moines, Iowa, and parts of northern Polk County. The new parish, named after St. Joseph, was actually a daughter parish born to serve the families and neighborhoods of Visitation and St. Peter's parishes. Fr. Francis P. Larkin was appointed as the first pastor.

The 1920s were a time that contrasted prosperity with poverty, and freedom against intolerance. The story goes that Fr. Larkin removed his priest's collar and put on bib overalls to buy three lots at the corner of East 33rd Street and Easton Boulevard, across from Grandview Park. When the news of the purchase became public, anti-Catholic sentiment showed up near the present site of St. Joseph as fiery crosses burned with an ugly intent. The price of the property was almost \$11,000 and included a barn, some sheds, and the Civil War era house that was to become the rectory.

Fr. Larkin and his board of trustees, Louis Sullivan and Jay Watkins, bought

a portable building that became the first church. Miss Kitty Lehan of St. Ambrose Parish donated the funds for the beautiful white altar.

The tiny congregation of 9 families worked quickly and proudly dedicated the new church on October 13, 1924. The collection netted \$225.58. The first parishioner to be baptized was Thomas Demar on dedication day; the first couple to be married were John Papiani and Rose Raymond on January 6, 1925; and 8 boys and 11 girls received their First Communion on May 1, 1927.

The tiny parish family went right to work hosting card parties, parish breakfasts and dinners. These fundraisers were held in parishioners' homes or in the cabin in nearby Grandview Park. Dollar by dollar, a tiny fund grew until 1930, when a new parish hall was completed. Other improvements to the parish plant included a new basement under the rectory, evergreen trees, and an eye-catching white picket fence that surrounded the property until the school was built in 1949.

## A Time to Pray

As war clouds formed on the foreign horizons, St. Joseph Parish began a

unique service on Armistice Day, November 11, 1938. The Sorrowful Mother Novena started with one service on that Friday, and within six months had grown to four services at 4, 6, 7:05, and 8:10pm. Attendance at one time numbered 1,400 persons for one week's service. Lines of those waiting to enter for the next service reached to the street corner. People came by trolley, Curbliner, auto, and on foot. Some never missed a service in 10 years.

## A Time to Teach

Sr. Mauricine, BVM, Fr. Aspinwall's sister, was a member of the order of sisters who came from St. Joseph's Academy each Saturday morning to teach catechism to St. Joseph's students beginning in 1933. The Precious Blood Sisters provided their ministry to St. Joseph's for 23 years. In 1971, the Sisters of the Congregation of the Humility of Mary began extending their loving presence to the students for the next 18 years.

By the early 1950s, it became apparent that the church was just too small for the rapidly expanding parish family.

In 1954, Bishop Daly gave St. Joseph Parish permission for the construction

of a new church. Work proceeded quickly with the demolition of the old church. Liturgies were held in a temporary chapel in the nearby parish hall during the construction. The new St. Joseph Church was joyfully dedicated on April 30, 1954, the day before the feast of St. Joseph the Worker. The parish theme was incorporated in the murals at the front of the church: Happy Life, Happy Work, Happy Death.

### A Time of Sadness

At the dedication of the altar in the 1955 church, Bishop Daly said: "This is the first time such a consecration has even taken place in this parish, and unless something very untoward happens, it will not occur again in the lifetimes of any of those now living." Sadly, however, something did happen. At 3:30pm on November 8, 1977, a special alarm fire was spotted at St. Joseph's Church. Within seconds the building went up in flames, and the pastor's tearful face appeared on the front page of the next morning's newspaper. The church was declared a total loss, with the charred remains of the beautiful wooden sculptures grabbing the attention of all those who passed by.

### A Time for Joy

The parish rallied with its usual restless energy and began the painstaking process of rebuilding its

church. On the first weekend after the fire, eight Masses were said at Grandview Funeral Home. Over 2,000 persons attended, 500 more than usual. Fr. Bacon said: "We're not here, my dear friends for a wake, we're here to celebrate a Mass of thanksgiving." After that first weekend, accommodations for Mass were made in the gymnasium.

Groundbreaking for the new church was held on a beautiful June day in 1978, with Bishop Dingman helping to turn over new ground as the banners proclaimed, "Let us Rise Up and Build Something New." Almost exactly nine months later, the new St. Joseph's Church was dedicated. More than 900 people attended the ceremonies on March 18, 1979. The new church had room for 700. The tabernacle and six stained glass windows were restored and placed in the new church. The stations and the crucifix over the altar were donated by Mercy Hospital. The statues of the holy family, carved from the same kind of wood as the carvings from the old church, were donated from the old Dowling High School. A statue of St. Joseph was visible in the garden behind the huge stained-glass window.

#### Editor's Note:

*St. Joseph's Parish has flourished for many decades since the abrupt end of this historical account, which was found in our office archives. As we*

*prepare to celebrate our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2024, we will expand this history by seeking interviews and inviting stories from the parishioners whose ongoing dedication and collaboration make St. Joseph Church a true parish home. †*

