

A Fort, a Movie Theater, and a Tent

**A History of Three Catholic Church Parishes in
the Highland Park Area of St. Paul**





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The Catholic Church comes to Southeastern Minnesota

French missionaries and explorers had first provided religious instruction to natives and baptism for the dying in the Prairie Island area of Minnesota as early as 1655. The first presence of Christian worship in Minnesota was in 1727 when Mass was celebrated by two Jesuit Missionaries in the humble Roman Catholic Chapel, St. Michael the Archangel, at Fort Beauharnois. The site was a French Fort/Trading Post on the shores of Lake Pepin near the present-day Villa Maria in Frontenac, Minnesota. Catholic religious activities in southern third of Minnesota would evolved quietly for the years that followed. It was not until almost one hundred years later, when Fort Snelling was established in 1819 at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, that attention of the Church was renewed. This immediate area was known locally by the Dakota as *Mbote* ("meeting of waters"). The fort established the first firm foothold of the U.S. government on the upper Mississippi River. The 1819 date is considered so significant to the area that it was included later in the design of the Seal of the Great State of Minnesota.

In 1838, refugees, including 100 Catholic families, were driven from Lord Selkirk's ill-fated British colony at Fort Douglas on the Red River near Winnipeg. They had suffered from a flood and loss of their crops. As they sought protection, they re-settled on the nine-mile tract of land on the military reservation surrounding Fort Snelling. Many of them found their way to the east bank of the Mississippi River, opposite the Fort. This small, newly growing section of St. Paul was known as the Homecroft area. These new settlers included unemployed voyageurs, and farmers who had previously struggled through long, hard winters, floods, or grasshopper plagues in the summer. Unfortunately, these new settlers achieved nothing more than squatter's status on this land that was controlled by the military.

After his arrival in the U.S. in 1839 from France, and receiving instruction in the Sioux and English languages, Rev. Lucien Galtier was sent by the Bishop Loras in Des Moines, Iowa to Fort Snelling to serve the soldiers and nearby residents. For the 186 Catholics with whom he visited with in the area for over a month that year, it was for many of them the first time in the Northwest they were in the presence of a priest. The contact Bishop Loras had was largely with farmers and traders in the area. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was offered up for the first time in what was to become the Diocese of St. Paul at St. Peter's (now Mendota), by Rev. Mathias Loras, first Bishop of Dubuque, Iowa in June 1839. In

In a letter to his sister in 1839, Bishop Loras described his journey north from Dubuque:

"This fort is built at the confluence of a river of the same name (St. Peter, and now Minnesota) and the Mississippi, is advantageously situated; the soil is very fertile and the mountains around of no considerable elevation. Our arrival was a cause of great joy to the Catholics, who had never before seen a Priest or Bishop in these remote regions; they manifested a great desire to assist at divine worship, and to approach the sacraments of the Church. The wife of our host, who had already received religious instruction, was baptized and confirmed. She subsequently received the sacrament of Matrimony, and made her first communion."

those early years, religious services were held regularly at the Fort Snelling, and the nearby Mendota area.

Then, in 1840, the early settlers were driven off the military reservation lands near the fort and their cabins were destroyed. A new settlement was established five miles downriver on the Mississippi, beyond the military's control. Later, in 1841, Fr. Galtier guided the erection of the first house of worship in the immediate area, in what was to become the Chapel of St. Paul the Apostle. The chapel at this new site would become the beginning of the city of St. Paul. Over sixty years later, the Cathedral of St. Paul that we know of today underwent nine years of constructions, opening in 1915.

The Diocese of St. Paul, is established in 1850. Its area includes Minnesota, the Dakotas and northern Iowa.

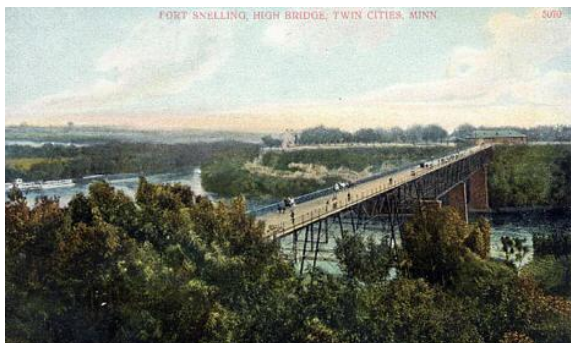
It was at this time that Fr. Galtier formed the mother parish of the diocese at St. Peter's (Mendota). Nearly 200 Catholics were living in the Mendota area when St. Peter's Church was founded. Mass was offered in a private home from 1840 to 1842, and then in a log church and residence. The historic stone church on that site today was built in 1853 with seating for 200.

Homecroft area settlers near the fort benefited from the presence of the Catholic Church

During 1888, The Diocese of St. Paul started to send part-time missionaries to Fort Snelling. Approximately 30 families had settled in the Homecroft area, immediately across the Mississippi River from the Fort. The early settlers in the area, and the 150 soldiers stationed at the Fort had begun to attend services and received further religious instruction. It was at this time that the Holy See elevated the Diocese to the Archdiocese of St. Paul.

The need for religious instruction and worship continued to grow in the area. In 1920, Fr. Edward Casey was serving as the principal of St. Thomas Military Academy, located then on the campus of the College of St. Thomas. He soon had Fort Snelling added to his ministerial responsibilities by Archbishop Austin Dowling. The hopes of the archbishop were that there would be daily Mass celebrated henceforth for those in military service and for the nearby residents. For Fr. Casey over the next six years that proved to be a daily challenge. He was often found walking swiftly from the college's campus on Summit Ave. to Fr. Snelling to attend to his duties. He was physically fit, so after Mass he occasionally dared follow church goers to beat him across the old Fort Road Bridge back to the east bank and their homes. Sometimes the younger ones would be successful.

Locally: 1920's St. Paul: Underworld czar Dan Hogan and Police Chief John O'Connor offered a system of protection for out-of-town gangsters if they did not commit crimes in the city and donated bribes. Gangsters were known to frequent a house in the Homecroft area at the southern end of Mississippi River Boulevard



Original Fort Road Bridge over the Mississippi River, undated photo

During the early 1920s many children made their First Communion at Ft. Snelling. Confirmation for local Catholics was celebrated at St. Helena's Church in Minneapolis. Street cars served both the Fort and the nearby area. At the bridge terminal the Motorman would let the passengers know where Mass would be celebrated that day. Catholic Mass was held in various locations throughout the Fort, depending on space availability. These options included the post theater, the mess hall, or in an old barracks. In the theater the altar boys and Fr. Casey would temporarily remove the

photos of movie stars from the walls. Parishioners would bring flowers during the summer to decorate the worship space. Before Mass, Fr. Casey would hear confessions. The altar for that day was always temporary, and may have been an unused mess hall table. In these unheated buildings Fr. Casey or the visiting priest often had to wear his vestments over an overcoat during the winter months. On Memorial Day the children would parade to the Fr. Snelling cemetery to pay honor to the fallen military heroes. It became increasingly difficult however to identify a suitable, permanent location for Mass at the Fort. Fr. Casey was refused the use of the new chapel that had been constructed on the land within the Fort. It was impossible at the time to design the chapel to properly accommodate both Catholic and Protestant services.

On the St. Paul side of the Mississippi River and near the Shepard Road and Davern Street area, Father Casey rented a portion of an older home that came to be known as the Homecroft Club. The home served as a location for religious instruction and as a social center for the community,

Establishment of the first permanent foothold in the area

In 1925 there was much discussion around the role of the armed forces chaplains and Diocesan priests within the Fort, and how, when, and where religious services would be observed. As a consequence, Archbishop Dowling requested that Father Casey acquire land and build a chapel on the St. Paul side of the Mississippi River. At the time there were approximately 30 Catholic families living in the Homecroft area that was across river from the Fort. The chapel would also serve the 150 Catholic soldiers stationed at the Fort.



Mission Chapel of the Little Flower, undated photo

The very first small chapel, named the **Mission Chapel of the Little Flower of Jesus**, was constructed of prefabricated materials at the Norfolk Ave. site on four lots donated by Den E. Lane. The first Mass was celebrated in the incomplete building on Feb. 21, 1926. The communion railing, confessional, Stations of the Cross, candlesticks, three altars, statues of the Blessed Virgin and of Little Flower, vestments and altar linens were all provided by way of gifts from other parishes or through private donations. This was for the first time that Catholic soldiers and civilians in or near the Fort had a chapel they could call their own. While other new immigrants and their offspring chose religious services in the area often for their ethnic identity, the Chapel remained ethnically neutral and welcoming to all. The mission chapel was officially designated as a parish of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis in June 1926. Articles of Incorporation for what would become the **Church of St. Therese** were filed in Minnesota in 1926.

The Sacrament of Baptism for Catholics, which had been conducted at the Fort since 1888, ceased at that site in 1924. Records indicate that weddings, which were first celebrated in the Catholic faith at the Fort in 1908, were transferred to St. Therese in 1931.

Father Casey had successfully started the parish in the Diocese and had led the construction of the new Mission Chapel. However, it was time for a more permanent arrangement. In 1932 Archbishop John Gregory Murray summoned Fr. William J. Gibbs and relayed to him; “I want you to go out to a mission church – called St. Therese of the

Notably, Fr. Casey would later leave St. Therese to do missionary work in Australia and later in the Philippines. He would become a prisoner of war during World War II and would not return to the U.S. until 1948. He was in ill health and nearly penniless at the time of his return.

Little Flower, and start a parish . . . it's a small community across the bridge from Fort Snelling . . . you shouldn't have too many problems." He had served as the director of physical education for the archdiocese, so the prospects of quiet, calm and almost wilderness area suited Father Gibbs well. In a telling comment during his retirement from the priesthood, he recalled thinking at that moment, "Well, at least I won't have to build a new church or school."

Under Father Gibbs guidance, an alternate name for Chapel emerged, **Chapel of St. Therese / Twin City Shrine of the Little Flower**. By 1933 there were 275 local families and soldiers at Fort Snelling who were members of the parish. The first trustees were Christopher Dempsey and U.S. Army Sgt. Anton Fahley.

By 1935 Archbishop John Gregory Murray recommended a parochial residence be constructed adjacent to the church, so that Fr. Gibbs could give his full attention to the growing community in the area, and to the Catholic soldiers at Fort Snelling.

Father Gibbs was also assigned at this time to the Chaplaincy of the U.S. Veteran's Hospital, across the Mississippi River, and St. Mary's Home for the Aged across the street from the Mission Chapel. Archbishop Dowling requested that a parish house should be constructed so that Father Gibbs could devote more time to his duties in the area. In 1942 the original Mission Chapel was remodeled and enlarged to accommodate the growing needs of area Catholics. Father William Gibbs served the St. Therese parish for its longest tenure, from 1933 to 1965. He recalled at his retirement celebration that a U.S. Army General assigned to Fort Snelling served at Mass one Sunday, and Father told him, "We've never had such a high-ranking altar boy before." In part due to Father Gibbs leadership throughout these early years at St. Therese, the Altar and Rosary Society, the Holy Name Society, and the Girls of Little Flower were active in social events and fundraising.

In December, 1927 Fr. Casey penned the following tribute to the newly constructed Little Flower mission chapel:

*The "Little Flower" Chapel nestles low
Beneath the tall trees, beyond the cities din;
Beside a mighty stream's majestic flow;
The joyous birds above – calm peace within.*

*These rugged soldiers from the Fort;
The mothers lead their children there;
And pilgrims from afar pay loving court
To little St. Therese in grateful prayer.*

*They've known her "breath of roses" and are come
in gratitude or wistful plea for grace;
The desolated heart with grieving numb
Can feel her lovely presence round the place.*

*With trembling hope and love's creative flame
We built and beautified that house of prayer.
In poverty we wrought – but her sweet name
Brought golden gifts and culture's matchless care.*

*Dear friends of yond little shrine, good cheer
And holiest Christmas joys to you be given;
And may we meet in endless glad New Year
Our darling little St. Therese in heaven.*

WWII veterans return home and there is an interest in starting a parish in Highland Park

After World War II, when many returning veterans chose to live in the area, and would result in new families moving into Highland Park. The small section of homes in the Homecroft area at the western end of Fort Road/West Seventh Street would soon become absorbed more generally into the larger Highland Park area of the St. Paul. Homecroft Park, and its recreation center, continue today as a reminder of that early community settled on the east side of the Mississippi River.

New homes were being quickly constructed throughout the area. Throughout this time, it was the desire of the Archdiocese that young children be afforded an opportunity for a Catholic school education. That potential higher demand on space for worship had an immediate impact on the existing **St. Therese** Parish.

It was apparent that the rapid growth the Highland Park area could no longer be served by the original Mission Chapel alone. In a whirlwind 28 months from June 1945 to September 1947, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis moved swiftly to expand the presence of the Catholic Church in Highland Park. It was also this time between 1945 and 1951 that there is significant cooperation growing between the three parishes, as a second and third parish is added to the Highland Park area.

In November 1944, Archbishop John Gregory Murray met with Father Bernard Murray at St. Patrick's Church in Edina, where Fr. Murray had been assigned. The archbishop let Fr. Murray know that he would be expected to establish a new parish at either 50th Ave. and Normandale Blvd. in Minneapolis, or in the Highland Park area in St. Paul. Fr. Murray indicated a preference for the Highland Park location.

By early June 1945, Father Bernard Murray was appointed by Archbishop John Gregory Murray as the first Pastor of the **Church of St. Leo** in the Highland Park area. During a later meeting with Archbishop Murray, Fr. Bernard Murray suggested the name of **St. Leo I** for the name of the new parish. Upon approval the name was included immediately in the articles of incorporation. **St. Leo's** was established as a parish on June 14, 1945. Father Murray was designated to become Pastor at St. Leo's on June 20th.

Locally: May 8, 1945: Victory in Europe Day, and the war ends in Europe. During World War II approximately 50 Diocesan priests were overseas with the military as chaplains. When they returned to their home Diocese, they were given the option to: a) return to the classroom by using the G.I Bill to prepare themselves to teach; b) become an Associate pastor in an existing church; or c) start a whole new parish in areas where there was significant post war population growth.

place. A plot our ground set forth about as big as our plot here . . . some nice tall weeds growing there . . . no equipment . . . no vestments . . . nothing. . . will not expect anything. Anxious to have a parish and they will take care of that . . . the extension of the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Archbishop Murray indicated to Father Murray that this plan for a new church would proceed immediately. A parcel of land (280' x 570') at Hillcrest and Cleveland Avenues had been purchased previously by the Archdiocese and was designated for the establishment of a new parish.



Fr. Murray took action quickly and as he noted in his letter announcing his new St. Leo's assignment to the St. Patrick's church congregation on June 17:

My new assignment. . . St. Leo parish in Highland Park in St. Paul. . . where's the church? . . . there isn't any. . . where is the rectory? . . . I would like to invite you there. . . there isn't any. . . the school? . . . the same

Due to the growth of the number of families living in the Highland Park and Merriam Park areas, the new **St. Leo's** Parish would alleviate the demand placed on Nativity of Our Lord (est. 1922), St. Therese (est. 1926), and Holy Spirit (est. 1937) parishes during the post-World War II era. The area assigned by the archbishop for the new Leo's parish boundaries were as follows:

St. Leo I was Pope from 440 to 461, and who was at that time the longest serving Pope in Church history. He was noted as a peacemaker.

> Beginning at the corner of South Fairview Avenue and Bayard and running the middle line of South Fairview to Montreal Avenue, thence westerly in the line of Montreal to the Mississippi river, thence northerly in the line of the Mississippi river to Hartford Avenue, thence easterly in the line of Hartford Ave. to Mt. Curve Avenue, thence southerly to Bayard Ave. to So. Fairview Ave., the point of the beginning. <

Temporary and immediate plans called for the new parish to celebrate Mass in the McDonough variety store at 790 Cleveland Ave. So. However, a complication quickly arose. The store's inventory and display

Nationally: *What is going on elsewhere in the world in late June, 1945?*

-On Okinawa Island, the battle ends after 80 days with heavy losses on both the American and Japanese sides.

-Over Japan, American B-29 Superfortress bombers launch the first in a series of nighttime raids against Japanese oil refineries.

-In New York, an estimated 4 million turn out to cheer General Eisenhower during a motorcade throughout the city.

-In San Francisco, the United Nations Charter is signed by representatives of 50 countries.

-In Washington D.C., President Truman approves the plan to first invade Japan on November, 1945 followed by a second landing in March, 1946. Five million allied troops would be deployed.

equipment could not be moved quickly and efficiently for a Mass in June. A secondary location, at Highland Theater on Cleveland Avenue. South, was located for the first Sunday Mass and for several months that followed. The variety store was eventually remodeled to accommodate daily Mass in the front area of the store. This location also served as an administrative space to facilitate the development of this new **St. Leo's** Parish in St. Paul.

To establish a temporary residence near the new parish, Father Murray sought out and signed a term-of-agreement for a lease at Apartment E-10, 50 Inner Drive, St. Paul. Those original apartment buildings are situated today across street from the present-day church building on Cleveland Avenue.

The celebration of Mass becomes a reality at St. Leo's

On June 24, 1945, the first Sunday Masses of **St. Leo's** parish were held at 8 AM and 10 AM at Highland Theater, 760 Cleveland Ave. So. The availability of the theater space on Sundays was donated by Mr. George Granstrom. In the very first outward collaboration of the parishes, Father Gibbs, at **The Church of St. Therese** loaned the Highland Theater some chapel pews. The first baptism, Matthew Claude Christensen, also occurred that day. The collection totaled \$212.87. Fifteen items essential to the celebration of Mass were borrowed from St. Thomas College, St. Therese Church, and St Joseph's Church (W. St. Paul).

A portion of the first Sermon at St. Leo's that day included the following from Father Murray:

"I know that you are very happy this morning and I want to tell you how happy I am to be the pastor of the new St. Leo's parish. For you and for me it is a dream come true. I am well pleased at the fine spirit of cooperation you have shown to me since I have come among you. No wonder you built such fine parishes as Nativity and Holy Spirit. Now you work begins again. Remember, it is the extension of the Kingdom of God, and no task is too difficult when we do it for God.

We have a plot of ground, and idea, and faith. I am sure you are all thinking this morning how the future of St. Leo's will look. We must not only think and dream, but also pray and work. It will be many years of hard work, but not too hard. You will not have to lay the block or pour the cement, but rather offer the full and generous spirit of cooperation of faith in action. Many years from now when the parish celebrates its 10th, and 25th, and 50th anniversary, the memory of this day will still linger.

Every parish in this country has started with humble beginnings. This will be our lot also. Like Christ, when he came among men, he had no place to lay his head. So, we begin with nothing that is ours, only buildings and equipment donated to us by those who have our good at heart."



After the first Mass, June 24, 1945

During those early weeks at the Highland Theater, men of the parish typically arrived 45 minutes before Mass on Sundays to set up the altar and prepare the space for worship. One wonders if any popcorn had to be swept up as the residue evidence of Saturday night movies in the theater. It would become the Sunday morning home for the parish for 18 months.

The theater was unavailable on weekdays, therefore in the remodeled front area of the McDonough's store at the 790 Cleveland Ave S. location, daily Mass was celebrated.

The Certificate of Corporation as ***The Church of St. Leo in St. Paul*** was finalized and filed with the State of Minnesota on June 28, 1945. The first Board of Directors consisted of five members. 1) Ordinary of the Archdiocese, 2) Vicar General of the Archdiocese, 3) Pastor of church, as appointed by the bishop, 4) Two lay persons appointed by the first three above. Officers of the Board included a President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer. Pastor and Trustees met for the first time on July 10, 1945, at the 790 Cleveland Ave So, site. Plans began almost immediately to build a school building with a chapel on the lower level. The land for the school and church was acquired for \$6,500.

Over that first summer, the **St. Leo's** Women's Guild and Altar Boys Club were formed, and the Ladies' Altar and Rosary Society began meeting.

By 2020's the entrance to 790 Cleveland Ave. South was located between the Panera Bread restaurant and Turnstyle Consignment store.

St. Leo's school and church design and construction began in earnest

Work began during the summer of 1945 to design and build a new **St. Leo's** school and church. Archbishop Murray instructed those planning new parishes to start with building a school to promote Catholic education and include a sanctuary for worship. There was also an early emphasis on eventually building a convent nearby the new parish. In late August 1945 the Architect, Edmund Prondzinski, developed the design for a sanctuary for worship and an eight-room school building, bounded by Hillcrest Ave., Cleveland Ave., Bohland Ave. and Kenneth St.

On Dec. 4, 1945, ground was broken and site excavation began for the combined St. Leo's school building and church.

In January 1946, a financial report for 1945 indicated that 92 parishioners had pledged \$11,274 and nine merchants had donated \$850 to the Building Fund drive. In 1946, Mass was celebrated at 8 am, 10 am, and 12 pm on Sundays, with weekday Mass at 8 am. There were 578 baptized Catholics in the parish. The total land value of the area designated for the parish was \$7,500. The Rectory on Wilder Avenue was completed in March 1946.

Like any construction project, there are surprises and a few disappointments. Father Murray notified a supplier, in writing, that the Kewanee Boiler delivered to **St. Leo's** School and Church on August 12 was dropped by the final movers while it hovered over the basement, a distance of 13' below. The chain holding the boiler had broken. Rev. Murray accepted the Boiler only conditionally, not only through initial inspection, but also throughout full use afterwards.

In early May there was a vote by the Trustees to approve the borrowing of \$30,000 to complete the original one-story school building, pay the remainder of the architect's fees, and address the balance of the school and sanctuary equipment costs.

By early summer, 1946, it became apparent that the school would not be ready for its first students until Fall of 1947. On July 13 Archbishop James J. Byrne blessed and officially opened the new St. Leo's Church and School building.

Reverend Bernard H. Murray was ordained in June 1928 by Archbishop Austin Dowling. He was the Pastor at **St. Leo's** for 28 years, 1945 to 1973, shepherding the parish through multiple transitions.

By the end of September 1946, the Father Murray and the two Trustees, David O'Dea and William Jungwirth, approved a motion to borrow up to \$12,000 from Midway National Bank at 2.5% interest for one year to finance the building of a temporary rectory to be located at Wilder and Bohland Ave. (850 Wilder Ave.).

Construction of the two-story home began immediately and Father Murray was able to move

in during February, 1946. Once it was completed, card parties and other events were held there to help raise funds for furnishing the rectory. By April, 1946, the rectory would also host daily Mass, and Confessions. The space at 790 So. Cleveland, McDonough's variety store, was no longer made available to the parish as of January 1, 1946. This necessitated the re-location of Daily Mass and administrative services to the rectory.

During this time, Rev. Murray received a letter from U.S. Navy service member Leonard Tracy, mailed from Tokyo Bay. He reported on the devastation from the war in the Yokohama area and he asked Rev. Murray to look in on his family while he is at sea, and to pray for his safe return to the United States.

During 1946, new parish life activities emerged. A group of **St. Leo's** parish members joined a bowling league with other Catholic parishes, with competition at the Highland Bowling Alley. The first choir

rehearsals began in early October. Throughout 1946, church organizations, such as the Men's Club and Holy Name Society, held their meetings and presentations at **The Church of St. Therese**, 1924 Norfolk Ave.

By Oct. 7, 1946, it is announced that the new **St. Leo's** church and school building planning process was completed and the finished structure would include eight classrooms, plus kindergarten, library, and hygiene rooms. Initially Mass would be celebrated on the basement level. Eventually, after completion of the auditorium on first floor, that new space would better accommodate weekend Masses. The auditorium could seat 500, with a balcony and a choir loft would seat 200 more. The initial cost was estimated to be \$250,000 for this fully completed school and church facility. The archbishop recommended that in the early construction stages that only five classrooms be completed and the auditorium be downsized. As a consequence, Rev. Murray and the two trustees of the Church of St. Leo approved borrowing the sum of \$100,000 for the purpose of building a five-room school with a basement with McGough Bros. as the



St. Leo's School and Church, 1946

General Contractor. However, the bid came back from McGough at \$150,000 for a one-story building with foundation. Subsequently, The Building Fund Campaign had begun in earnest.

Parish membership had increase to 697 by November, 1946. Other notable characteristics of the parish life include 38 baptisms and four weddings celebrated. 44 members of the parish were identified as having served during World War II. This included four sets of two brothers, and one set of three brothers.

By mid-December McGough Bros. proposed a second floor being added to the building at a cost of \$20,000. Initially the second floor would be left as an open shell, with a further classroom completed later.

A major milestone was reached on Christmas Eve, 1946. Midnight Mass was offered for the first time in the basement auditorium of the new church building. As a final good bye to the first location for Sunday Mass at **St. Leo's**, Christmas Day Mass, 1946, was offered for the very last time at the Highland Theater.

On February 2, 1947 the first Mass was offered in the upper level of the new combined **St. Leo's** church and school building.

Total costs for the new building were becoming finalized. Estimates were set at \$247,262. Approvals for final loan amounts to finance the church and school were sought and completed during April and May. \$40,000 of these loans were borrowed from the College of St. Thomas, and was later repaid.

In August, Sr. Angelica was assigned by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (1890 Randolph Avenue.) as the first principal of St. Leo's School. Four additional nuns were assigned to teach at levels K-4.

In September, **St. Leo's** School opened for the first time for grades K-5. One grade would be added each year until it was fully a K-8 school.

Due to the rapid expansion of the parish during this period, Father Murray petitioned Archbishop John Murray in for an assistant priest.

In January 1947 Rev. Murray expressed his concerns, via a letter to Robert Peterson, Commissioner of Parks and Playgrounds, regarding the construction of a lumber yard at the corner of Montreal and Cleveland. His objection was that this new building, and its activity, might damage the residential areas nearby. In a written response, the Commissioner assures Rev. Murray that the property would be used by the City as a playground area. This location was likely the future site of Highland Little League baseball fields and then incorporated later as a portion of the Highland Bridge project in the 2020's.

1948 and 1949: The schools at St. Leo's and St. Therese quickly achieved full enrollment

In December, 1948, as he continued to monitor the neighboring business within the boundaries of **St. Leo's**, Rev. Murray filed a written appeal to members of the City Council of St. Paul in regards to their decision to grant an on-sale beer license to the Highland Bowling Center, due to the proximity to the parish's school playground.

After the opening of the new church and school buildings, 500 families would call **St. Leo's** their home parish. As a consequence of the rapid growth in the area, and expansion the **St. Leo's** Church boundaries, Father Murray and the trustees of the Church in April 1948, approved pursuing an additional loan of \$40,000 to complete the second floor of the School building. The architectural firm of Keenan and Clarey, Inc. was retained for the necessary work.

After World War II, with new homes were being built rapidly in the area, and with plans to house 75 military veterans and their families in the Homecroft area, Fr. Gibbs also

recommended building a school and community center for the **St. Therese** parish. With enthusiastic approval to move forward with these new facilities, J.C. Niemeyer was selected as architect, and H. B. Kilstrofte of Winona was named General Contractor. Groundbreaking was on the Feast day of the Little Flower, October 3, 1948. In 1948 Fr. Gibbs at **St. Therese** offered a special, and final Christmas Midnight Mass at Ft. Snelling. It was not until 1949, however, that the territory aligned with the property of the Fort was ceded to the St. Therese parish.

In order to raise sufficient funds Fr. Gibbs announced that the entire Easter Collection would be applied to the School Fund.

The original school was constructed throughout 1948, and 1949, and the cornerstone was laid on May 15, 1949 with a formal dedication by Auxiliary Bishop James Byrne in honor of St. Therese. The **St. Therese** school at 1834 Mississippi Boulevard opened for the first time that September, with 156 pupils enrolled in grades K-5. The Sisters of St. Joseph provided the teachers and staff. The church itself was remodeled and somewhat enlarged during that same year. The new school building was dedicated on Oct. 2, 1949 by Archbishop Murray.



St. Therese School during the 1950's

In December 1949, Rev. Murray and the Trustees of **St. Leo's** church voted to approve the purchase of the home at 866 South Wilder for \$10,700. The parish caretaker would occupy the home so that he could attend to his duties at the nearby church and school building. (The home was later sold in 1966.)

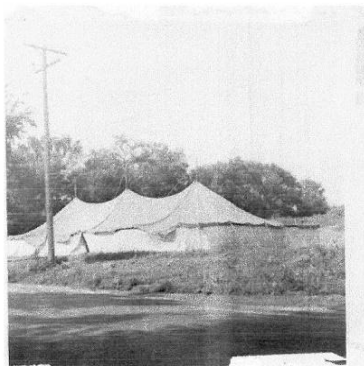
The 1950's: A third parish, further growth, and financial stability

The land on Montreal Avenue at which **The Church of St. Gregory the Great** was developed as a parish and school was originally settled upon by William Davern in 1850, an immigrant from County Claire, Ireland. It was a 160-acre claim made within the land of the military reservation of Fort Snelling. The area at the time was identified as Reserve Township. William Davern was himself a devoted Catholic. He began his farm by growing potatoes and wheat, and raising livestock. Although significantly renovated, the Davern farmhouse still stands at 1173 Davern Avenue.

At 1640 Montreal Avenue, the foundation for the first house at that address was excavated in 1907 for the landowner at that time, George Morton. The land, then known as the Davern property, continued to be farmland. It later was utilized as community victory gardens for 17 local families during the WWII and as an apple orchard. Notably, the U.S. Navy Aviation operations stationed six Navy personnel in a small and temporary house on this site to provide surveillance of the Twin Cities airport, using the Highland water tower for their observations.

In 1950 John W. Norton Co. bought the 10 acres of land at 1668 Montreal Avenue, for the Diocese to start a new parish community. In June 1951 **St. Gregory the Great** parish was established by Archbishop Murray, and Father Thomas R. Jude was appointed the first pastor. He had been serving as a Chaplain in the U.S. Navy and he then initially went on to an appointment as the first pastor at The Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Glen Lake. The St. Gregory's parish was established as a result of the rapidly

St. Gregory I was Pope from 590 to 604.



The tent that was used temporarily in 1951

growing population in the area, which caused the capacities of Holy Spirit, St. Leo's, and St. Therese's parishes to be taxed. Unfortunately, there was no building in the area that could host a new parish temporarily. During early June 1951, a temporary tent (110' x 150') was purchased for \$2,000 and erected with a dirt floor on the southwest corner of the land on which St. Gregory's would eventually be constructed. In spite of the tent collapsing due to high winds the night before, the first Mass was celebrated on June 24, 1951, with 400 in attendance. There were ongoing concerns with pests, such as mice and snakes, which were disrupting services. The local fire marshal had indicated at the time a strong reluctance to allowing the use of candles during the services, due to the potential fire danger. That same fire marshal returned a year later for the new school/church building dedication.

By the early 1950's, the renovated home at 1640 Montreal Avenue initially accommodated a Sexton in St. Greg's, and later a place for Father John Abbott (1957 to 1968) to use as his home. It was in this rectory where he enjoyed his many hobbies, such as violin repair and picture framing. Father Abbott was also committed to a strong liturgical music and choir program at **St. Greg's**.

Due to the opening of **St. Gregory's** parish, the parish boundaries for the **St. Leo's** moved from Snelling Ave. on the west side to Fairview Avenue. The very first fall festival and parish dinner at **St. Gregory's** were celebrated in September 1951. The dinner, for 1,500 people, raised \$2,700 for the new building. Fr. Jude temporarily resided with Fr. Murray in the rectory at **St. Leo's**. Beginning in October 1951, Mass for **St. Gregory's** parishioners was celebrated in the basement of St. Leo's school/church building.

The architect of record for the new building was Ellerbe and Company. Construction plans were approved, and it was time McGough Construction to begin the work to bring a permanent school and church for **St. Gregory's** to life. During the May 11, 1952, groundbreaking ceremony, the new school and church site there was subjected to sustained heavy rains, but the ceremony proceeded. Two months later, Father Jude petitioned the Archbishop in July 1952 to borrow upwards of \$350,000 to design and construct the new school and church building.

Bingo on Sunday nights were a major fundraiser for the new building. Throughout these early months of the parish there were many other fundraising events, including: holiday fairs, festivals, dinners, teas, raffles, and bake sales to help raise money for the land and building.

Construction of the school and church progressed rapidly over six months, and the first Mass was celebrated in November 9, 1952 without its pews, floor tiles, communion railing, and even a permanent altar in place.

In June 1953 the **St. Gregory the Great** church and school were dedicated by Archbishop Murray. The school opened for grades K-6 in September, with Sr. Mary Martin serving as the first principal. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet taught and staffed at the new school. Seventh grade, and then eighth grades were added during the next two years. Throughout this time period it was a challenge to get a sufficient number of Sisters of St. Joseph to teach at all three parishes, as all of the area parochial schools were flourishing. On the fifth anniversary of **St. Leo's** School in 1950 there were 300 enrolled students and 550 families as members of the parish. Outstanding debt for the new church and school stood at \$290,000.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, social activities continued to expand at **St. Leo's**. The Council of Catholic Women were organizing successful style shows and bridge mixers, collecting Christmas gifts for deserving children, and funding school scholarships. The annual parish dinner was so popular it was held at the Prom Center on University Avenue in St. Paul. It was at this time The Legion of Mary was active in the church.

Also in the school, the student arts and crafts show became very popular. Also, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts met regularly there for many years. The Mr. Basketball event at the school in January 1953 included Mr. Basketball himself, George Mikan, and seven of his defending NBA champion Minneapolis Laker teammates. He distributed copies of his autobiography, *Mr. Basketball George Mikan's Own Story* to the children. Another popular event was the St. Paul Winter Carnival royalty, who would visit the school periodically. The Leo High group included social gatherings and presentations for high school age students whose families were members of the parish. Hayrides and ice-skating parties were some of the social activities offered. By late 1953, **St. Leo's** Church reported there were 2,212 members of the parish,



St. Gregory the Great School and Church,
undated photo

and 435 students in the school. There were 95 baptisms, 92 of which were infants. Fourteen Weddings were celebrated.

To the credit of the school leadership in the early 1960's there was significant effort to focus on racial disparities in the community and the U.S. An Interracial Council was formed, and an extensive day of learning with students from other schools was hosted at St. Leo's School.

By 1954 there were 450 families were members of **St. Therese**, and it became apparent that a new chapel was needed to replace the small mission chapel that had opened in 1926. The parish had 475 families registered. Mass attendance at the existing chapel had taxed the space beyond its capacity.

Plans called for the new **St. Therese** Church building to replace the original Mission Chapel to accommodate 600, and expand the number of classrooms in the school building at a cost of \$275,000. In June, 1955 Keller Construction Company was awarded the contract to build the new church building, and ground was broken.



Church of St. Therese, undated photo

The new **St. Therese** Church building and school expansion was completed with the cornerstone placed on Sept. 4, 1955, with a blessing from Archbishop Murray. The first Mass at the new St. Therese Church was celebrated on December 24. Many of the new furnishings in the church were Christmas gifts. By 1957, the new hand-crafted altar rail was installed with each panel in the rail depicting a Sacrament, with a focus on the Holy Eucharist.

The need for new classroom space throughout the area continued to grow. In February, 1955, **St. Leo's** identified the need to raise an additional \$115,000 to construct four new classrooms in the original school building, and reassigning basement classrooms for other purposes. By April that figure was adjusted upward to \$155,000 to build eight classrooms on the second floor. The new school addition along Hillcrest Avenue. was completed in 1957.

Citing a need for more parishioner engagement at **St. Gregory's**, both the Women's Guild and Men's Club were established in 1957. The Women's Guild launched a rummage sale and holiday fair that became popular well beyond the parish borders for more than 20 years. Over the many years of the Guild, they funded many significant improvements to the facility, programs and school scholarships.

In March 1958, Reverend Murray and the trustees of **St. Leo's** proposed to the archbishop to spend \$200,000 to provide a convent for the nine Sisters of St. Joseph teaching at the school. The Provincial House where the nuns were living in on Randolph Avenue had become crowded. The design called for eventually housing 16 Sisters. As an alternative solution, by April of that year **St. Leo's** Church was authorized to expend up to \$55,000 to purchase the building and property at 2036 Bohland Avenue, to be used as a convent.

The dream for a new church building for St. Leo's begins

As early as 1954, Reverend Murray realized that the continued use of the St. Leo's school auditorium for Mass was no longer feasible. It was time to return that room to school use only. In 1958, he began collecting ideas regarding contemporary church design from around the United States. By 1959 Rev.

Thomas Phelan of the Catholic Art Association, in Troy NY, was contacted by Father Murray about new church designs in the United State and Europe. Reverend Phelan recommended that Father Murray contact Ms. Ade Bethune, who had a reputation as a contemporary church designer, writer, artist, and student of Catholic Liturgy and symbolism. At that time she was he also had served as the Editor of Catholic Art Quarterly and was affiliated with St. Leo Shop, Inc. in Newport R.I. Father. Murray sought out Ade Bethune for guidance on the design of a new church. His vision was to have Ms. Bethune serve a consultant with the selected architects.

With the blessing of the archbishop, in December, 1960, the Church Building Trust Fund was established. The All-in One-Program, a fund-raising campaign developed by Rev. Murray and the Trustees, was introduced to St. Leo's parishioners, recommending a round or octagonal shape for the main building.

Archbishop Leo Binz publicly extended his support for the new church building and acknowledged his personal pride in the church leaders recognizing, by name, his own patron saint. The architectural firm of Bettenberg, Townsend, Stolte, and Comb was retained for future building design and planning. Rev.

Murray began in earnest to consider a round building with circular seating. One model for a central altar was St. Peter's Lutheran Church, on France Ave. in Minneapolis. It featured a center altar with pews surrounding it. In her first reactions to this idea, Ms. Bethune discouraged this concept as lacking a focal point.

Throughout 1960, Rev. Murray continued his correspondence with Ade Bethune. Her thoughts on this contemporary design seemed to have evolved. In time she also conveyed some guidance on the merits of a central altar and how it could be incorporated into the new building. From early in the design process both of them sought more inclusion of interfaith recognition, including artifacts and design features that would reflect the Jewish faith in the church. Some those features, described later, were included in the final design.

In his personal reflections on church architecture and guiding the its design, Fr. Bernard Murray at [St. Leo's](#) expressed the following insights: (undated, early 1960's)

-The laity does not merely belong to the church, they are in a real sense the Church, the Holy People. Present emphasis is on restoring to them an active part in the liturgy, an atmosphere of community participation.

-On his own initial hesitancies about a semi-circular seating design. . . . We all have certain fixations, a long rectangular Nave is what we expect. Anything different jars our religious sensibilities. In a circular or semi-circular church, we lose immediately the desired focal point.

-The de-emphasizing of the role of the saints must be understood as not an obstacle. Many modern churches today are well in line with the Church's thinking in this matter, and all measures must be taken to strengthened to the role of the Altar of Sacrifice.

-The side altars must not compete. It is really preferable if they were no side altars.

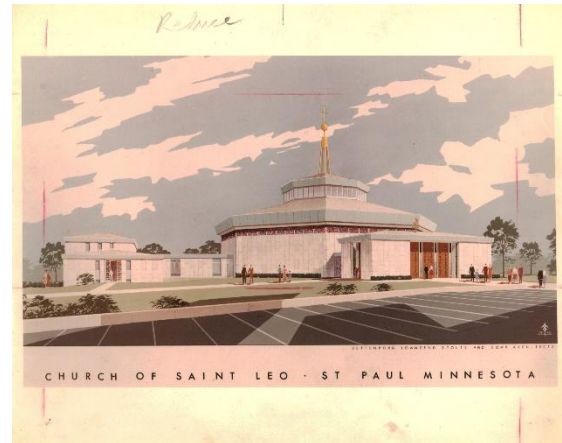
-St. Augustine said we have two tables from which we are fed, the Table of the Bread of Life, and the Table of the Bread of Truth. Both should receive high honor in our sanctuaries.

-Don't decide on a type of church to build. If you decide on the external appearance, you immediately define the floor plan.

-One of the greatest weaknesses I have observed in visiting thousands of American churches is the lack of artistic unity. We are often coerced into putting in statues and windows to honor the deceased. After that the church becomes more like statuary shop with no artistic unity.

Ms. Bethune encouraged Rev. Murray to advance at least two significant building design ideas, so that one did not bear all of the criticism or was considered the sole preliminary design. She believed this was particularly relevant with a circular vs. semi-circular design concepts. Among the building features, the necessity of a communion rail was fully evaluated. She recommended that the idea of receiving communion while standing should be further investigated. She also supported facing the church east, towards the school, to make a clear connection between the two. Inside the church, Ms. Bethune indicated a dislike for the use of carpeting; potentially as a color competition with the rest of the space; limited wearability over numerous years; and the potential for dust to catch your breath upon entry. As an alternative she recommended flagstone floor, cut between $\frac{3}{4}$ and 1" thick.

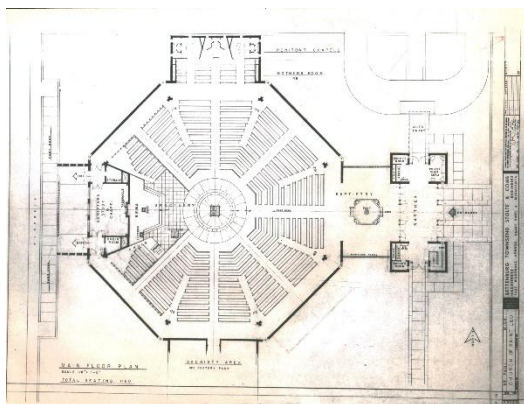
Preliminary plans for the new building called for seating for 900, with a later expansion to 1,500 seats. The initial available budget identified was between \$700,000-\$800,000. As it evolved, the sanctuary included a 12' wide central altar, facing the congregation. Ms. Bethune recommended the inclusion of a prominent baptistry at the Church entrance to remind people of their own baptism as they entered. Proposed was a large narthex surrounding the font, with lighting from above or with stained glass. Exterior of the church walls were chosen to be of grey granite.



An early sketch of a new St. Leo's Church

The proposed emphasis focused on a central altar so that the faithful were seated nearby, as called for by Pope John XXIII. The desire was not only to bring them physically closer, but also spiritually closer. As further support for these ideas, it became evident that Italian architects were successfully designing circular churches with central altars. An early model for such a church design was St. Aloysius in West Allis, Wisconsin. Another model for a round sanctuary emerged as a good example, St. Basil's, in Ottawa, Canada. In Father Murray's ongoing contact with Archbishop William Brady, the archbishop continued his support of a design that was rounder and more contemporary in nature. By October 1960, tentative design plans for the new church were forwarded to the archbishop.

In February, 1961 Reverend Murray began to consider stained glass in the windows near the roofline, including the work of Ludwig Schermer of St. Paul, as evidenced in similar settings in Grace Lutheran Church on Old Hudson Road in St. Paul. The stain glass in this church is one inch thick and chipped around the edges to refract light. It is set in a special concrete, known as beton. An adaptation of this same technique can be found in the Cathedral in Coventry, England. In March 1961 Ade Bethune, while on a Midwestern speaking tour, stopped at St. Leo's Parish for a presentation on contemporary church design.



Initial floor plan for St. Leo's Church

In September, 1961, Father. Bernard Murray from [St. Leo's](#) and Fr. Harvey Egan of St. Peter's Church in Mendota advocated church design that fit the age in which it was being built. They both were very interested in new church designs in Europe, and Fr. Murray toured several

churches in Europe. After the devastation of the WWII, churches in France, Germany, and Italy had to be rebuilt, and many of the new churches utilized circular, fan shaped, or semi-circular designs. There was a special interest in the newly constructed churches in Dusseldorf, Germany and Cologne, France, both of which were heavily bombed during the war. In his written personal reflections. While in Europe, Father Murray was struck by the beauty of the light passing through the stained glass in many of these churches. It was very likely these experiences guided his thinking about both the quantity and quality of stained-glass treatment in the new church building.

Father Murray also developed his own ideas further by reviewing the designs of the following: 1) the U.S. Senate chambers; 2) the original Guthrie Theater in the Kenwood area of Minneapolis; 3) the Theater of Dionysus in Athens, Greece; and 4) the Cobo Hall convention center auditorium in Detroit, Michigan. Each of these had semi-circle seating around a main stage or focus point.

It was at this time that *The Beacon* newspaper of Akron, Ohio, introduced the newly opened Holy Family Catholic Church in Stow, Ohio. It featured many similarities in design to what would become the new **St. Leo's** Church. The last row at Holy Family Church was only twelve pews away from the altar. Other newly constructed churches that were reviewed by Reverend Murray included: the Church of St. Mary in Worthington, MN; St. Regis Chapel in Toronto, Canada; St. Charles Church in Spokane, WA; St. Dominic's Church in Bremen, IN; and St. Martin of Tours church in Maple Heights, OH. Another example of the altar-island was present during the International Eucharistic Congress in Munich, Germany.

Oct. 1962: Pope John XXIII convenes the second Vatican Council.

The architectural firm of Bettenberg, Townsend, Stolte, and Comb began drafting the preliminary plans for the new St. Leos's Church in April 1962. Throughout this time, Ade Bethune had continued her relationship as a consultant on the design of the new building. Permission to proceed with the new building was requested of Archbishop Binz in 1963, with an initial estimated cost of \$844,000.00.

During June, 1963, while building design was being finalized, there was the arrival of the jeweled faceted slab glass to be used inside the entrance in the Baptistry area. This glass, in the stain glass design, had won first place recognition at the World's Fair in Seattle, Washington. Its overall size was 10 ft. x 40 ft. The 32 four foot by five foot panels were originally designed for use as part of the façade of the Christian Witness Pavilion at the Fair. The 4,385 pieces of colored 1¼" thick glass were embedded in a in an epoxy material with marble chips that hardened like concrete. The abstract design was titled: "*Jesus Christ – the same yesterday, today, and forever.*" Later, with the addition of the Parish Center in 2005, it was moved to the north wall of the Community Room.

In a publication to encourage memorial gifts by parishioners for the construction of the new church building, Fr. Murray expressed his hope for an inspiring worship space,

"While it is true that God may be worshipped in lonely places and in wayside chapels, it is also true that Christians have always given of their possessions and talents to raise for the Lord dwelling places as beautiful and as magnificent as human genius can create. God's gift to us was so great – His only begotten Son – that our greatest gifts are insignificant in comparison."

The Investiture ceremony of Reverend Bernard Murray at **St. Leo's**, to be elevated to a Monsignor, occurred in June of 1964.

Construction began on a new **St. Leo's** Church in April 1965. It was completed in July 1966 and the first Sunday Masses were offered on July 17. The very first Mass required the use of folding chairs as the pews had not yet arrived.

For many years Monsignor Murray was vocal about his concerns that society was discriminatory in race relations. He had long been outspoken regarding this social ill. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, he wrote and spoke specifically about discriminatory practices at Minnesota resorts, country clubs, and anywhere else discrimination was present. He called upon others in the Church to speak out, and to act on their consciences.

During 1963 a new convent was constructed to provide a home for the Sisters of St. Joseph, who were teaching and administering at **St. Therese** School. The Convent would later be rented by the School Sisters of Notre Dame for many years. In 1966, St. Mary's Home and its nursing home responsibilities were assigned to the Pastor and staff of St. Therese. This property was later sold in 1995 to the Franciscan Health Community.

In 1966 that the Archdiocese of St. Paul was renamed the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis by decree of Pope Paul VI.

Design features of the new St. Leo's Church included design innovations

Much of what we see in the design and architecture of the church today was incorporated in the original development of **St. Leo's**. Additional changes would come during its renovation in 2005. The church spire includes a ball and a cross at its apex. The six-way cross represents Christ's redemption which extends in all directions and to all men and women, and it is therefore universal. The ball represents the earth, the focus of Christ's redemption.

Marble for the exterior walls of this new church building was chosen from a Georgia quarry. The original main entrance was intentionally designed to face east which was away from the busy streets of Ford Parkway and Cleveland Avenue, and toward the school to emphasize that relationship of the two. The original entrance was constructed with no steps, to facilitate ease of entry and mobility. The church could accommodate 1,160 people. The pitch of the floor from front pew to back pew was a drop of two feet, allowing those in the back to have a clear view of services. The exposed floor areas were of Mankato stone. Throughout all of these design decisions, Ade Bethune was continually consulted by Fr. Murray for contemporary expression of a faith-filled church.

The Oculus, in the ceiling above the Altar of Sacrifice, gathers the light from the surrounding windows and is a symbol of grace, the Light of God. The Oculus, as well as the patterns in the ceiling, serve to emphasize the Altar of Sacrifice. Ade Bethune shared at the time that the altar's position is that of a servant's table. In the ancient Near East the table was in the center of the banquet room, making it easier for the servant to more easily move about serve each guest. That placement therefore stresses that Christ is here as our servant, healing, caring, and serving.

The design of the stained glass around the outside walls of the Nave was meant to symbolize the raising of arms in praise and worship.

The Bema is the raised platform from which the Torah is read according to *The Book of Jewish Wisdom*, by author Nathan Ausubel. This feature was adopted and adapted by Christian Churches from Jewish Synagogue designs. The canopy over the Bema is in the shape of a scripture roll to reveal the relationship between the Bread of the Word and the Bread of Life. This was one representation of a desire to offer **St. Leo's** as a beacon for inter-faith collaboration and solidarity. It was Pope John XXIII who initially encouraged closer ties between the Jewish and Catholic faiths.



Original design of St. Leo's Church

The original Court of Penitents/Hall of Reconciliation, which extends off the Nave to the north, was initially designed to be used for three confessionals, each with its own double set of windows. In its original use, it was also known as the Court of Peace. However, it was never utilized for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The statue of Mary and Child was installed on the west wall. This limestone statuary, was carved specifically for **St. Leo's**, by Peter Watts. Today that area on the north wall is known as the Hillcrest Eucharistic, or North Chapel, and it contains the Tabernacle.

The Scripture Chapel behind the Bema was originally designed to house the Tabernacle, via a back door that was connected to the Sanctuary. In the years since its original design, this chapel to came to be used as an Adoration Chapel and became a space for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The original Tabernacle pass through door can still be seen from inside this room.

The consolidation of the three schools and churches were launched and renovations continued

One of the reasons for the initial stages of the consolidation of the schools was the inability of the Sisters of St. Joseph to continue to teach and lead multiple school buildings. Over all the years of the school, the Sisters of St. Joseph had committed numerous principals, faculty and staff members for the provision of Catholic education. In anticipation of **St. Therese** School closing, in 1971, the vacated Convent at St. Therese was rented to Jonathan Home, a group home for boys. In September 1972, the combined **St. Therese** (173 students) and **St Leo's** (287 students) Schools are officially organized as **Highland Catholic School** and opened for its academic year in the existing St. Leo's school building. The **St. Therese** school building was then sold to the Northwestern College of Chiropractic, which became a tenant at the time. The convent was converted to a parish center. Looking outwardly into the world, it was at this time that members of the **St. Therese** parish became active in assisting a Vietnamese family and their acclimation to the United States as war refugees. New opportunities for parishioners during Mass were initiated. The first Extraordinary Ministers of the Holy Eucharist were named at **St. Leo's** in 1972, followed by **St. Therese** in 1973, and **St. Greg's** in 1974.

In 1979 the **St. Gregory's School**, with 95 enrolled students, was closed and merged with **Highland Catholic School**. In that same year, The St. Gregory's sanctuary was remodeled to move the altar to the East wall, rearranging the pews to face it, and adding stained glass on the east wall, near the altar. It was during this time that classrooms were used periodically for Alcoholics Anonymous and other community

meetings. In 1985, the church was extensively damaged when a water valve was stuck open on the floor above. It flooded the basement, requiring replacement of the ceiling and flooring of the church. Surprisingly the acoustics had improved with the permanent removal of the water damaged carpeting. In 1987 the bell tower and a new elevator were added at the northwest corner of the building.

By the mid-1980's a strong effort to purchase a new pipe organ at **St. Leo's** was underway. The St. Leo organ in use today, had been designed by Music Director Chuck Lenz and Art Strahle, a representative of Schantz Organ Company in Orville, OH. The new Schantz Organ took one year to build and was installed on October 14, 1985. The building of the organ was a very involved process, requiring 80 people to build it. The organ pipes alone came in two deliveries and required two weeks to assemble the whole instrument on site. The replacement value of the Schantz organ today is over one million dollars. This 3,187 pipe Schantz organ at Lumen Christi was the fourth organ at the Church, and the very first pipe organ. It was purchased through a generous donation by Mike and Sue Ellen Mickelson.

In what became a series of outreach efforts, in 1984 Fr. Peter Esterka successfully requested permission from Archbishop John Roach to celebrate Mass in the Czech language at **St. Therese**, with invitations sent to 25 recently arrived immigrants from Czechoslovakia. Renovations of the church and rectory were completed in 1987. Without a designated long-range plan, the vacant **St. Therese School** was razed in February, 1988.

By the late 1980's and into the 1990's another reality in the archdiocese was the declining number of priests available for parish assignments. Closing or consolidating parishes became a solution. In 1989 Archbishop John Roach called for the parishes to begin discussions of clustering the three parishes. **St. Leo's** and **St. Therese** initiated an intermediate step by forming a combined Highland Catholic Parish Council. As a further step in clustering, in 1994 the parishes of **St. Leo's**, **St. Therese**, and **St. Gregory's** were organized under one identification as **Highland Catholic Community**. This consolidation of three parishes set an example as the very first formal consolidation of multiple metro parishes in the archdiocese. The hope at the time was that this consolidation would greatly aid in keeping vibrancy in each parish and their combined 70 ministries and activities active for the foreseeable future. This step would also maximize financial resources and build upon the talents and energy of each of the three parishes. To formalize this consolidation, a tri-parish council was formed in 1995 to improve communication and guidance of the new Highland Catholic Community. At the time, there were 1,850 family units registered between the three parishes, and 450 students enrolled in **Highland Catholic School**.

Monsignor Terrance (Terry) Bernston and Fr. Thomas Hunstinger were to become co-pastors of this new combined community. Monsignor Bernston was the longest serving Pastor at St. Greg's (1978-94). Among his many gifts for connecting with the parishioners, Msgr. Terry also promoted the engagement of women in the liturgy. With his unexpected passing, Father Jerry Grieman was appointed co-pastor in 1996. Father Grieman worked effectively to identify and solidify the legal and administrative structure for this new consolidated church. Father Hunstinger led the successful capital campaign to significantly renovate the **Highland Catholic School** building.

St. Gregory's recognized its 40th anniversary in 1991 with a Saturday evening Mass celebrated under a tent, followed by dinner/dance and bonfire. An all-school reunion was planned on Sunday. Ten years later, in 2001, the 50th anniversary of **St. Greg's** was celebrated. It included a celebration of the good work of the St. Gregory's Guild, which had contributed to parish life for over 40 years. Over the years the events sponsored by the Guild included; a Spring Fling, St. Joseph Hospital Fund Drive, a speaker's series, participation in Pro-Life rallies, and Mission Circle work, to name but a few.

In 1996, a new effort to guide the consolidated parishes brought forth the Highland Catholic 2000 planning process, led by Father Hunstinger and Father Grieman. In time, it created a strategic plan for the period of 1997-2000. Issued to the community in April 1997, this Strategic Plan identified the common values of the community, and encouraged a vision that focused on a culture of good communication to maintain a common bond. **Highland Catholic School** was again put in the spotlight as an essential foundation of this new consolidated community. During this transition period to **Highland Catholic Community**, **St. Leo's** became the administrative center, **St. Gregory's** the educational center, and **St. Therese** the activity and outreach center. At this time a development consultant was retained by Parish Council to explore the feasibility of Capital Campaign to stabilize the parish community financially. Father Patrick Kennedy was particularly helpful in guiding **St. Therese** toward this new clustering during this rapid transition within each parish.

In 1999 Father John Bauer joined the **Highland Catholic Community** as rector, and Father Hunstinger served as his associate. It became apparent by the year 2000 that it would become necessary to consolidate the three parishes. Financially, it became unmanageable to operate all three buildings, and there was going to be no further support for an additional associate pastor. There were approximately a combined 1,500 registered families across the three churches, which was considered an average size for a single parish in the archdiocese at the time.

In 2002, Fr. John Bauer and representatives from the three parishes began their work in earnest to solidify one site for **Highland Catholic Community**. Fr. Bauer's oversight of both the consolidation of the three parishes, the fundraising for the new Parish Center, and renovations throughout the church, provided strong leadership in this transition period. While an entirely new church building was temporarily considered for the nine-acre Montreal Avenue site at a cost of \$9M, the idea was set aside in favor of a more practical plan to re-develop the existing **St. Leo's Church** building and amenities.

In October 2004, the **Highland Catholic Community** parish formally announced its plans for the new Parish Center addition. The campaign came to be known as; *"Building Community: A New Day for Highland Catholic Community – A Campaign in Support of Consolidation and Expansion Plans."* Father Bauer worked with parish leadership to implement an effective design process, focused on decision making by consensus.

Nine committees were formed to plan the new facilities, with active participation throughout the parish. The project was intended to renovate the nave, church entrances, and the addition of a substantial new Parish Center. This new addition would add a Daily Chapel, create new gathering spaces and meeting areas for community building, address accessibility, add religious education classrooms, and increase space for staff and administrative areas. What would eventually become the current Gathering Space and the Community Room were both very high on the priority list of parish leaders at that time. To make way for these significant changes, the plan called for the demolition of the original administrative offices near Bohland Avenue, and to build a new Daily Chapel in that same area. Plans included maintaining the same number of parking spaces.

November, 2004: An official decree was issued by the archdiocese that announced the formal consolidation of the three parishes into one, unified parish.

Father Bauer was also instrumental in initiating a program for the parish to host families in temporary need, in conjunction with the Families Moving Forward program. Highland Catholic Community began a relationship with a emerging mission in Chimbote, Peru. Mission trips were planned on a regular basis to help stabilize the important work of the Catholic Church and its partners in Peru. It was also during this

time that the **Highland Catholic School** building was temporarily used on Sundays by the Eritrean Orthodox (Ge'ez) Catholic Community for their services.

In November 2004, an official archdiocesan decree announced the three churches would merge into a unified parish.

To allow for remodeling the **St. Leo's** worship areas and entrance, all Masses were moved to **St. Gregory's** from January to Easter, 2005, when the newly remodeled Nave and adjoining area at **St. Leo's** would host Mass again. **St. Gregory's** held its final Mass and conducted a Closing Ceremony on May 15, 2005. To commemorate this event with the parish founding in 1951, a large tent was set up for these events.

With the final formal merger of **Highland Catholic Community**, the full consolidation was completed and announced, it brought the school and three parishes into one entity. In transition from Highland Catholic Community to a newly named and fully consolidated parish, there was an open period of time to suggest a name for the parish. After reviewing the full list of 142 suggestions, it was condensed to four names: Lumen Christi; Holy Trinity; All Saints; and Blessed John XXIII. In early 2005, after consulting with lay leadership at the time and Archbishop Flynn, Fr. John Bauer recommended the name **Lumen Christi** to the Archbishop. With the Articles of Incorporation signed on March 14, 2005, the formal name was identified as "**The Church of Lumen Christi.**" The blessing and dedication of the newly renovated church building and Parish Center addition occurred on April 23, 2006, celebrated by Archbishop Harry Flynn.

St. Therese Church formally closed its doors on Feb. 5, 2006. To assure however that the St. Therese Church building would continue to be utilized, a formal agreement between the Korean Catholic Community and now more commonly known **Lumen Christi Catholic Community** was completed in 2007.

The Sanctuary and Daily Chapel Renovations, and new Parish Center combine the art of all three churches

By 2005, the newly renovated Sanctuary and the new 25,000 square foot Parish Center addition included religious artwork and symbols that were incorporated from the three original church buildings. Upon entering the south door to the church, the three cornerstones have been embedded in the columns outside the door. They included; **St. Gregory's** (1952), **St. Therese** (1955), and **St. Leo's** (1965).

The statue of **St. Therese**, the Little Flower of Jesus, that was outside that church was moved to in front of the current entrance door to Highland Catholic School where she welcomed pupils and teachers daily. The crucifix above and behind the altar and 14 Stations of the Cross were moved from **St. Therese** to the newly remodeled **Lumen Christi** church sanctuary.

Changes in the Hillcrest Eucharistic Chapel along the west wall included an icon of **St. Gregory** that was originally installed at St. Gregory the Great church. This original art was created by a Russian Iconographer, Vladislav Anderjan, in celebration of the Fiftieth anniversary of the parish. If you look closely, you will see the halo rises above the edge of the frame of the icon, signifying that the Divine cannot be contained.

In the Daily Chapel, the crucifix, representing the Risen Christ, was the original crucifix from **Saint Leo's** main sanctuary. Prior to installation in that sanctuary in 1965, it had been in the church worship space in St. Leo's School. The stained glass facing the outdoors and on both

sides of the altar in the Daily Chapel were from the west wall of **St. Greg's Church**.

The stained glass in the Daily Chapel was named "*The Fruits of the Holy Spirit*," created by Odell Prather. They are from the sanctuary at **St. Greg's** church. The flames of power near the center of the panels symbolize the power of the flames to scatter the shadows of darkness. To the right the heart symbolizes *Love*, the cross represents *Faith*, and the hand with bread is a symbol of *Goodness* or generosity. Next, *Weakness* is symbolized by the lamb, and *Temperance* is represented by calipers. To the left, the crocus is one of the first flowers of spring and is associated with *Joy*, as a relief from the coldness and gloom of winter. The tent is a symbol of the first services in a temporary meeting space at **St. Greg's**. A second meaning is that a tent housed the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament, which the Jews moved as they moved, until they built a final temple for it in Jerusalem.

The Dove represents *Peace*, and nearby the porpoise represents *Kindness*. Through stories of seafarers, porpoises have rescued shipwrecked people, lifting and nudging them to safety. The turtle represents is a symbol of *Modesty*, as it shrinks from the view of others. Finally, the desert cactus symbolizes *Patience*. It lives and thrives in the most difficult situations. Also found in the Daily Chapel are the original Stations of the Cross installed in **St. Leo's** church in 1965, as are the statues of Mary and Joseph.

The faceted stain glass windows on the North wall of the Community room in the Parish

Center were moved from the original entrance/baptistry area of **St. Leo's**. These same glass panels were purchased from the 1963 Seattle World's Fair. The design suggests a desired dissolution of differences between Catholics and Protestants. On the far left of these panels is the Tree of Life, which is the purple shape. And the rest symbolize "*Jesus Christ – the same yesterday, today, and forever.*"

Also in the Community Room are four illustrations from the St. John's Bible, the first hand drawn Bible in 500 years. On the front window is the Tree of Discipleship, created by Sue Kauffenberg. It represents the gifts we all have, and to remind us to be the word of God in the world.

In the Gathering Space you can see the Last Supper sculpture moved from the Sanctuary at **St. Gregory Church**. The twelve disciples surround Jesus to share his last meal before his arrest and betrayal.

In the Nave, the floor area nearest to the altar was raised during the 2005 renovations to bring the first several rows up to create better eye contact with those in attendance. That raised area is carpeted today. Raising the floor there also eliminated a few of the steps up to the Altar. At this time the pews were also upholstered. The interior walls had baffling fabric attached, which improved the acoustics for singing. The original candelabra lighting over the Altar, designed to replicate a crown of thorns, was replaced during the renovations with chandeliers out over the pews, largely to increase lighting in that area.

Lumen Christi Catholic Community in recent years

The **Lumen Christi Catholic Community** has continued to thrive. Fr. Paul Feela was present for, and led, much of the consolidation activities that have created the one parish. Upon his arrival in 2007, he worked diligently to mesh the three unique cultures, traditions, and Mass celebrations into a more consistent experience. Through the guidance of parish leaders, the LumenUs Strategic Plan was shared with the entire parish in 2015. The process of developing the plan included parishioners and parish staff who intensively evaluated the future of Lumen Christi. The purpose was to identify a new structure and process for leadership. This structure includes six Ministry Councils, which report directly to the Parish Council. Each of them; Worship, Care, Support and Justice, Faith Formation, School, Discipleship and Parish Life, and Finance Ministry Councils include parish members who guide Lumen Christi as a whole in these important areas. The mission for the church declared, *"We are Called to be the Light of the World"*. The model of consensus advanced during the development of the LumenUs report has continued in the work of the Councils.

A significant carry over from the three parishes are the three Loaves and Fishes programs managed by Catholic Charities. The 29th of the month dinner crew was associated with St. Therese, the 2nd Wednesday of every other month was originally organized at St. Leo's and the St. Matthew's dinner meal on the 2nd Friday of the months originated at St. Greg's. All three dinner programs exist today, as a testament to the commitment of the parishioners of Lumen Christi Catholic Community and the three parishes it was derived from.

Soon after its closing, the former **St. Therese** church building on Norfolk Avenue. was sold, and was first utilized by St. Andrew Kim Korean Catholic Community. The rectory on site was sold at that time to St. Mary's Home. In recent years the former St. Therese site was used as an Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo church. For a number of years after **St. Gregory's** church closed in 2005, it was the site of a charter school, Nova Classical Academy. Nova Classical would eventually move into new permanent facilities in St. Paul, and in 2014 the original St. Gregory church and school building on Montreal Avenue was rented to another charter school, Urban Academy. In 2020, a new building was added to the west side of the original building, where a new gymnasium, cafeteria, and classrooms were opened.

From 2020 to 2022, these were disruptive years to the parish community, as it was throughout the world, as the Covid-19 pandemic required significant changes to **Lumen Christ Catholic Community's** day-to-day operations, to all worship experiences, social gatherings, and observance of the Sacraments. The Parish Council and Ministry Councils continued to meet through this time to help the parish staff guide both the present and future of Lumen Christi. **Highland Catholic School** continued to be vibrant and has a bright future. The faculty and leadership have long been committed to a faith filled education for all the children enrolled. Highly respected Principal Jane Schmidt has effectively led the school since 1999. In 2011 she was recognized by the National Catholic Education Association as Distinguished Principal of the Year in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

A major fund raiser has been organized in the Spring each year, known widely as "Swing." There has been also a large book sale conducted once a year in support of the school, to name but two of the many efforts to keep the school vibrant.

The rapid increase in area residents during the mid-2020's, as a result of the Highland Bridge project at the west end of Ford Parkway and along the Mississippi River Boulevard, would once again challenge the parish to respond to the needs of God's people in this area, reminiscent of the years following World War II. In recent years the participation of **Lumen Christi Catholic Community** in the archdiocesan synod process had further provided guidance for both the parish and the archdiocese.

When Fr. Paul Feela retired in July 2022, another chapter in the Catholic Church in the Highland Park area was written. His care for the parish as a community and each parishioner had become his lasting legacy. Some of his strongest impact came through his day-to-day contact, his homilies, and “pastoral musings” in the weekly Bulletin.

Looking forward, the commitment of Lumen Christi Catholic Community to area residents is as strong as ever, and the responsibility of our faith-filled lives to address their needs is as timely as it has ever been.

The installation of Father Daniel Haugan as the Pastor of Lumen Christi Catholic Community in July, 2022, brought the parish into a new era, with opportunities to grow the parish and the faithful for the many promising years that would follow.



Brian D. Dusbiber
2022

Information included in this text was sourced from numerous written and verbal recollections of parishioners at all three parishes, archival records held by Lumen Christi Catholic Community, resources available from Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, and from the St. Paul Library system.