



St. Basil Catholic Church

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The History of St. Basil Church and Parish By Ed Kowieski

It is known that explorers and missionaries were active in Southwest Michigan as early as 1679. Although the region was densely wooded and the only access to the area was by water or Indian trails, one can reasonably assume that in their travels, they visited the area.

In 1833, Jay R. Monroe, a New Hampshire native, acquired some land holdings in South Haven. Within a few years, a viable settlement ensued.

In 1857, Father DeMize visited the South Haven area and preached to the few Catholic residents. During the next twelve years, services were occasionally held in various homes.

In 1869, South Haven was incorporated as a village. At the time, the Catholic community was under the auspices of St. Augustine Mission at Kalamazoo, but was soon transferred to St. Joseph's Mission at St. Joseph, Michigan. It was about this time that Father Joseph Theissen celebrated Mass in South Haven about every three months. With his encouragement, five Catholic families organized, and in 1877 arranged to purchase a small building at the southwest corner of Indiana and Superior Streets for the use as a chapel. In 1884, the little mission chapel was dedicated under the name and protection of *St. Basil*.

In 1887, Father Michael O'Rourke arranged for masses to be held regularly in South Haven during the summer and occasionally during the winter, depending on availability of a priest and travel conditions. By 1899, attendance at services had increased rapidly, especially during the summer months. Father John Wall (Father O'Rourke's successor) recommended that consideration be given to building a new church. So, in 1900, Bishop Foley designated St. Basil as a parish church and assigned Father John W. O'Rafferty, a young priest on the cathedral staff at Detroit, as its first Pastor.

The beginning of the new century meant a new beginning for St. Basil as it began to solicit funds to build a new church. Construction began and the cornerstone of the new church was placed in position on October 2, 1902. Additional property was purchased in the spring of 1920 with plans to build a home for the nuns. Tragically, a major fire destroyed the church. The people of St. Basil were not about to give up. Soon after the fire, Father Leo Hover secured a square block of property on Monroe Blvd. and construction began once again for a larger church and rectory that would overlook Lake Michigan. St. Basil Church, in the location it stands today, was completed in 1923.

In the late 1930s, the stained glass windows were installed and donated by the Overton and Cleary family.

Under the leadership of Father Horkan, work constructing St. Basil School began at a cost of \$90,000. Classes began in 1950 and 128 children were taught by three nuns and one lay teacher. In 1961, the second floor was added to the school, providing four additional classrooms and a large all purpose room. Attendance in 1961 was 218 and peak attendance was reached a year later with enrollment of 237 children.

In July of 1971, The Most Reverend Bishop Paul Donovan became the first Bishop of the newly formed Diocese of Kalamazoo, of which St. Basil Church became a member. Prior to that, St. Basil was a member of the Lansing Diocese which was established in 1937. In 1976, the church was renovated and refurbished. In 2005, the rectory was torn down and a new administrative and parish building was erected.

Since its founding as a parish in 1900, St. Basil has been served by nineteen pastors. There have been five vocations to the priesthood and a considerable number of vocations to the sisterhood. Currently, the St. Basil Parish consists of over 500 families.

