

Griffith was founded in 1904 as a key interchange point for five railroads. Many residents were employed either directly by the railroads or by businesses reliant on the rail system, while others settled in Griffith to work in nearby industries.

Many of the parish's founding families were of German heritage, with a smaller contingent of Irish descent. The initiative to establish Saint Mary Parish commenced on June 21, 1921, when thirty-four women formed the "Catholic Ladies Social Club" to begin organizing the creation of a Catholic church in Griffith.

By October of that year, this group collaborated with local Catholic men to form a corporation with the goal of selecting a site for a new church, thereby eliminating the need to travel to Saint Michael Church in Schererville for sacraments and religious education. Over the following years, parish members undertook significant fundraising efforts to construct a combined church and school facility. Most of Griffith's population resided south of the "tracks" at the time. The old schoolhouse, located at the entrance to the present South Park, was available but that site was rejected in June of 1922 when members of the committee were able to get a donation of five acres of land for the church in return for the purchase of the adjoining 15 acres at \$5,000. Personal funds were advanced by Mr. Joseph Grimmer in order that terms of the sale could be met. This original purchase, with the five-acre donation, included the property between Elm and Pine Streets, East of Broad and West of the EJ&E tracks. During the next five years, these people worked constantly accumulating funds, a few dollars at a time, and then official papers were filled in September of 1927 requesting permission to establish a parish and build a Catholic church in Griffith.



Standing outside Franklin School, the first mass was held in Griffith, December 21, 1927.

THE YEARS OF JOSEPH ANTHONY SUELZER



Rev. Fr. Father Joseph Suelzer, founding pastor of St. Mary's. He was pastor from 1928 until 1932.

The first mass in Griffith was held at the Franklin School gymnasium. On December 21, 1927, Catholic families in Griffith selected Saint Mary as the name for their parish. At its inception, the parish was part of the Diocese of Fort Wayne. The Most Rev. John Francis Noll, after whom Bishop Noll Institute is named, appointed Rev. Fr. Joseph Suelzer as the parish's first pastor on June 24, 1928. At the time he was the pastor in Kouts. A pastor is an experienced priest entrusted with the pastoral care of a community under the authority of the diocesan bishop. Pastoral responsibilities include teaching, sanctifying, and governance, supported by other clergy and lay members. Pastors are typically appointed for a six-year term, which may be extended for another six years or indefinitely at the bishop's discretion.

Father Joseph began organizing the congregation and overseeing the construction of a combination church and school building, rectory, and convent. Following seven years of fundraising activities such as chicken dinners and church socials, the combined church and school facility was completed on September 28, 1928. The parish boundaries encompassed all of Highland and Griffith, portions of Black Oak, and several families from Munster.

According to parish records, Richard Nicholas, the son of Joseph and Mary Spitz, was the first individual to be baptized on July 16, 1928. Subsequently, the parish conducted its first funeral for Mrs. Therese Redar on August 5, 1928, followed by the first wedding, uniting Andrew Stark, and Irene Austgen on August 7, 1928.

The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration were tasked with overseeing the school, which opened in the autumn of 1928 with three sisters instructing ninety-nine students beginning at the second-grade level. The curriculum was expanded to include first grade the following year. On May 5, 1929, fifty-nine children received their First Solemn Communion. In the fall of 1929, grade one was added to the school, and the first eight grade class graduated on June 8, 1930. Bishop Noll administered Confirmation for St. Mary parishioners on October 26, 1931. By 1932, the parish consisted of eighty-three families.



The building committee with Father Suelzer in 1928.



The first class to make their First Solemn Communion, May 5, 1929.



The first class to graduate on June 8, 1930.



The sanctuary of the original church in 1928.



From the intersection of what is now Broad Street and Elm Street, you can see the original building in 1928, showing the school wing.

Transition in Pastoral Leadership

As Father Suelzer's health began to decline, he requested a reassignment from his duties as pastor. This led to his official relief from pastoral responsibilities on April 7, 1932. On that same day, the parish welcomed a new pastor to guide their community.

At the time of this leadership change, the parishioners were unaware that their newly appointed second pastor, Father Leo Peter Hildebrandt, would serve St. Mary's for the next forty years. His extended tenure would usher in a significant and influential era for the parish.

THE YEARS OF LEO PETER HILDEBRANDT



The Rt. Rev. Msgr. Leo P. Hildebrandt, PA, second pastor of St. Mary's. He was pastor from 1932 until 1972.

Father Hildebrandt arrived after serving as an assistant to Father Francis Jansen at St. Joseph's Parish in Hammond. In 1940, due to a fire on Easter Monday, most of the school building was destroyed. Rebuilding also included the addition of classrooms north of the original school wing.

In 1942, Catholic residents of Black Oak sought sacramental services by traveling to either the City of Gary or the Town of Griffith. To serve this community, the parish of Saint Ann was established that same year. Black Oak, situated on the southwestern periphery of Gary, lies directly north of Griffith.

The same year, Rev. Robert Weis was appointed the first Assistant Pastor and contributed much skill and talent to maintenance and improvements including an addition to the convent. In 1945, while still in residence here, Father Weis was assigned to organize families of Munster and part of Highland into a new parish. St. Thomas More parish was established at that time.

On February 10, 1946, the first of our priest-sons, Rev. Kenneth Seberger, celebrated his first Mass in Griffith. Other priest-sons include the Most Rev. Carl Mengeling, Rev. John Siekierski,

Rev. Richard Orlinski, Rev. Thomas Mischler, Rev. Michael Yadron, and Rev. David Kime. Rev. Al Philips was assigned as assistant pastor in 1946, followed by Rev. Charles Buescher in July of 1947. In 1949, Bishop Noll appointed Father Alvin J. Jasinski—then residing at St. Mary's—to form an additional Catholic congregation in the expanding town of Highland. The new parish, Our Lady of Grace, was created from the northern section of St. Mary's, recognized as the mother parish of the region. It was situated at Highway and Fifth Streets on property acquired by the diocese.

Enrollment in our school had climbed to 451 in 1949 and continued to climb for several years necessitating additional classrooms and remodeling during 1949, 1951, and 1952. On March 1, 1951, Rev. Andrew Topor became assistant pastor followed by Rev. Matthew Kish in July of 1952. In March 1955, when Rev. Stephen Vrabley became assistant, six Sunday masses in the small church were unable to accommodate the 626 families of the parish. Fourteen classrooms were crowded with 625 schoolchildren. Under the direction of the pastor and finance

committee, a campaign for donations and pledges made it possible to pay off the debt and begin to accumulate funds for a new building.



Rebuilding the school after the fire in 1940.

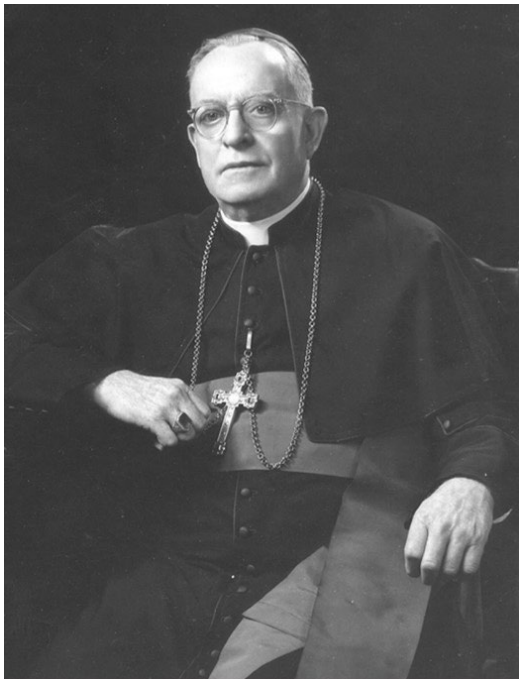
In 1955, our first pastor, Father Suelzer, was living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. After serving in several roles within both the Diocese of Fort Wayne and the Diocese of Lafayette in Indiana, Father Suelzer moved to the southwest because of illness, hoping that the warmer climate would help ease his health issues. He passed away on November 6, 1955, at the age of 63. His body was returned to Indiana, where he was interred in his family's cemetery plot in Fort Wayne.



The headstone of our first pastor, Rev. Fr. Joseph Anthony Suelzer. His grave is in the family plot at Catholic Cemetery in Fort Wayne.

THE MOST REV. JOHN FRANCIS NOLL, D.D. ARCHBISHOP – BISHOP OF FORT WAYNE

The 1950s marked significant transformation for the town of Griffith and the four northwestern counties within the Diocese of Fort Wayne. Bishop John F. Noll, originally appointed by Pope Pius XI on May 12, 1925, and consecrated by Archbishop George Mundelein on July 30, 1925, was widely commended by Father Hildebrandt and the parishioners of Saint Mary for his numerous accomplishments. During his episcopate, Bishop Noll established a preparatory seminary, multiple high schools, and an orphanage. He also reorganized the Catholic charitable system during the Great Depression. On a national level, he chaired the Department of Lay Organizations of the National Catholic Welfare Conference and played a pivotal role in reviving support for the completion of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., in 1953.



The Most Rev. John Francis Noll, Archbishop-Bishop of Fort Wayne (1925-1956).

After founding the Catholic publication *Our Sunday Visitor* in 1912, Noll made it a widely read newsweekly and donated its profits to charitable causes. He used print, radio, and TV for communication, and served on boards like the Catholic Press Association and Church Extension Society. Pope Pius XII named him archbishop *ad personam* on September 2, 1953, a title not passed to successors, while he remained head of a small diocese. On July 18, 1950, Father Leo Aloysius Pursley was appointed auxiliary bishop of Fort Wayne to assist the aging 75-year-old Archbishop Noll. He was consecrated bishop on September 19, 1950. In 1955, the Holy Father named Bishop Pursley as the apostolic administrator of the diocese as Archbishop Noll's health continued to decline.

On September 18, 1955, Father Hildebrandt was appointed as a Domestic Prelate of His Holiness by Pope Pius XII, thereby assuming the title Monsignor Hildebrandt. During that year, the parish church conducted six Sunday masses, yet the facility could no longer accommodate the parish's 626 families. Fourteen classrooms were occupied by 625 students, taught by fourteen sisters and two lay educators. In response to these growing demands, the parish began accumulating funds for the construction of a new worship space. At the outset of 1956, it was not yet apparent that significant changes—including a new building, bishop, and diocese—were forthcoming.

Bishop Pursley recounted that Archbishop Noll had previously advised him, "Don't let them make Gary a diocese," highlighting concerns regarding the potential loss of both the rural diocesan areas and the city of Gary, which was emerging as a significant industrial center with a large Catholic population. The separation of Gary would have notably affected the Catholic demographic of the Diocese of Fort Wayne. Following Archbishop Noll's passing on July 31,

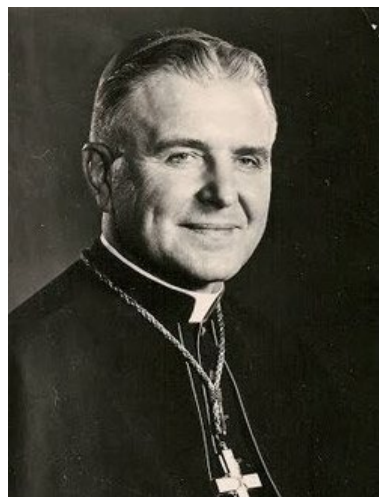
1956, at the age of 81 in Huntington, Indiana, Bishop Pursley reflected, “But what could I do? Five months later it was a fact.” He elaborated that any objections would have been futile, as his appointment as bishop of Fort Wayne only occurred after the creation of the new diocese had already been confirmed.

THE NEWLY ERECTED DIOCESE OF GARY



The new church building near completion, in 1957.

On December 10, 1956, Pope Pius XII formally established the Diocese of Gary, appointing Father Andrew Gregory Grutka as its inaugural bishop on December 29—the same day Bishop Pursley was appointed to become the next bishop of the Diocese of Fort Wayne. Bishop Grutka was consecrated on February 25, 1957. During this period, preparations commenced for the groundbreaking ceremonies at St. Mary’s new church. Although the construction was still in progress, 1,100 parishioners attended midnight mass in the new facility. On April 7, 1958, Bishop Grutka officially dedicated this worship space—the first erected within the newly constituted diocese—and placed the parish under the patronage of the Mary of the Immaculate Conception, designating her as its patroness.



The Most Rev. Andrew Gregory Grutka, first bishop of the Diocese of Gary. He was bishop from 1957 until 1984.

Due to limited space at the school, grade one was removed from the curriculum in 1958, followed by the discontinuation of grade two in 1961. To address the needs of affected students, a religious instruction program was established, utilizing texts authored by the pastor and instruction provided by members of the Legion of Mary along with other community volunteers in neighborhood classes. By 1965, this initiative had expanded to encompass all upper grades, with Sr. M. Emmarita, OSF, appointed as the full-time C.C.D. coordinator. Through her leadership and that of subsequent Sisters, the parish’s program became the largest in the diocese, serving over nine hundred public school students through regular religious education classes.

In 1957, during the tenure of Rev. Stephen Vrabley as assistant, there was an increased demand for Hungarian-speaking priests within the Diocese of St. Louis. Consequently, Fr. Vrabley

was temporarily assigned to that diocese and was succeeded in 1959 by Fr. John Houlehin and Rev. Bertrand Mattingly.

On May 25, 1957, a son of the parish and member of SMS class of 1944, Carl F. Mengeling, was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Grutka. In 1960, Rev. Anthony Quinlisk assumed residence at our rectory, followed by Rev. James McGrogan in 1965, Rev. John

Winterlin in 1969, and Rev. Patrick Connolly in 1971. The latter three priests resided at the rectory while serving as instructors at Bishop Noll Institute. Rev. Richard Zollinger was appointed Assistant Pastor in 1961, with Rev. Richard Ameling succeeding him in 1966 and Rev. Paul Jackura in 1968. Additionally, during 1966-67, Rev. Eugene Hoffman resided at our rectory during the establishment of St. James Parish for Griffith residents located west of Wiggs Ave. and in the southeastern area of Highland.



Msgr. Hildebrandt in 1972.

On November 6, 1964, Monsignor Hildebrandt was distinguished with another papal honor when Pope Saint Paul VI elevated him to the rank of Apostolic Protonotary. This designation is reserved for members of the highest non-episcopal college of prelates in the Roman Curia or, outside Rome, granted as an honorary title accompanied by specific privileges conferred by the pope. These events coincided with the Second Vatican Council, a period marked by renewed evangelization efforts within the church, as well as significant social, geopolitical, and cultural changes in both the United States and internationally. On May 27, 1967, another son of the parish, John J. Siekierski, was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Grutka. Two other men would be ordained with Fr. Siekierski, who would be familiar faces in the future of the parish. Those young men were Ronald Bartnicki and Theodore J. Mens.

Approaching 1972, the congregation of St. Mary's felt a sense of uncertainty, knowing that Msgr. Hildebrandt would retire on April 30th. Their concerns were soon alleviated when Father Richard Zollinger, who had served as assistant pastor in the early 1960s and was well-loved by parishioners, was appointed to lead the parish as its third pastor. Many parishioners expressed gratitude and excitement at the familiar face returning, confident that his leadership would guide St. Mary's through this period of change.

THE YEARS OF RICHARD FRANCIS ZOLLINGER



Reverend Monsignor Richard F. Zollinger, second pastor of St. Mary's. He was pastor from 1972 until 1992.

On May 1, 1972, Rev. Richard Zollinger was appointed Pastor and on June 28, 1972, Rev. Timothy Benante was assigned Associate Pastor of the parish numbering 1600 families. On September 30, 1973, another son of the parish, Richard A. Orlinski, was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Grutka. He was ordained along with a future associate pastor of St. Mary's, Joseph Pawlowski.

Father Zollinger, commonly referred to as "Father Z," was instrumental in overseeing the renovation of the sanctuary to comply with Vatican II guidelines. Notable updates included the removal of the altar rail, repositioning of the main altar closer to the congregation, and installation of a large cross featuring the resurrected corpus of Christ. By 1976, the interior design of the church was finalized and has remained unchanged since that time.

During the 1970s, Father Zollinger initiated the annual parish festival, which became known as Western Days and adopted a western frontier town theme. This distinctive festival quickly set itself apart with its lively atmosphere and array of activities, including carnival rides, games, and food stands. The continuing addition of various live music, rides, booths, and food would result in the festival drawing not only parishioners but also visitors from neighboring towns. Over the years, Western Days grew from a modest fundraising event into a major tradition celebrated by the entire community, with volunteer involvement expanding and new attractions introduced to keep the festival fresh and engaging. The festival's evolution mirrored the parish's own growth, fostering a keen sense of togetherness among families and parishioners and cementing its reputation as a cherished highlight of the town's annual calendar. As the parish continued to grow and thrive during this period, new leadership also emerged. In 1976, the Rev. Joseph Pawlowski joined the parish as associate pastor, further strengthening the church's pastoral team and contributing to its vibrant community life.

When Monsignor Hildebrandt retired as pastor of St. Mary's in April 1972, parishioners were surprised and heartened to learn that he would remain in residence at the parish rectory. In an era when retiring pastors typically moved away, his decision to stay reflected both his deep roots in the community and the mutual affection he shared with parish families. Hildebrandt's presence became a familiar and comforting sight—neighbors recall seeing him on the porch, greeting children on their way to school, or joining parishioners for Sunday suppers. As "pastor emeritus," he continued to shape daily life at St. Mary's, his wisdom always within reach for those who sought it.

Monsignor Hildebrandt's leadership extended far beyond the walls of St. Mary's. Serving as Dean of the Crown Point deanery—now known as the Southlake deanery—he held this influential diocesan role for much of his tenure as pastor, with the two responsibilities often

overlapping during the 1950s and 1960s. As Dean, he guided fellow priests, helped establish and support new parishes throughout the region, and offered steady mentorship to newly ordained clergy. Parish records and local memories alike attest to his active involvement in both community and diocesan affairs, his influence reaching well beyond Ridge Road and into the heart of neighboring towns.

Hildebrandt's bond with parishioners was personal and profound. Parishioner Lorriane Musial recalled in 2003 that her father, Robert Conley, took care of the ink wells on the school desks. The plaque on the flagpole is in remembrance of Lorraine's brother, Francis Conley, who died at the age of 18 from appendicitis. Lorraine remembers that children in grade school were expected to put a penny in their weekly church envelope. When they got to high school Monsignor expected a dime saying, "you're above the penny stage!"

Phyllis Miklusak recalled in 2003 that about 50 years prior, Msgr. Hildebrandt wished to have a stained-glass window installed in the new school building. Being good friends of Monsignor, Phyllis and her family wanted to help. Phyllis and her children, Margaret Ann, Paula, and David, who was about 3 years old at the time, made many journeys to Chicago to meet with the stained-glass window designer. The result? A beautiful window depicting the guardian angel with Phyllis' three children. The window still exists today, and the window is above the exit doors located next to classrooms five and six.

On Monday, December 3, 1979, Monsignor Hildebrandt passed away at the age of 81, closing a chapter of extraordinary service that spanned more than four decades. The announcement of his death resonated across the parish and beyond; for three days, his body lay in state at St. Mary's, and mourners streamed in from all corners of the community. The school held a private liturgy, honoring him as both spiritual leader and cherished friend, while parish and school activities were paused so everyone could attend the funeral mass. On the morning of December 6, 1979, the church overflowed with families, clergy, and local dignitaries—some standing in the aisles, others gathered quietly outside in the winter air—all united in grief and gratitude. The service was marked by solemn hymns and heartfelt tributes, with many recalling his kindness and tireless dedication. The collective turnout was a vivid reflection of the respect and affection the community held for Monsignor Hildebrandt.

Following the funeral, Monsignor Hildebrandt was interred at Holy Name Catholic Church's cemetery in Cedar Lake. His legacy endures not only in parish history, but in the lives and traditions he helped shape—a guiding presence whose memory continues to inspire generations at St. Mary's and throughout the Southlake deanery.



Monsignor Hildebrandt's grave at the parish cemetery in Cedar Lake, IN.

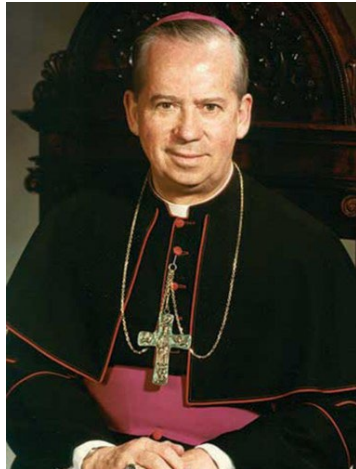
In 1980, Father Pawlowski sought to leave a lasting mark on the church grounds. His vision was realized with the installation of a fountain that continues to beautify the parish courtyard. This addition provided a tranquil and welcoming space for parishioners and visitors alike, enhancing the overall atmosphere of the church campus.

That same year also marked a significant milestone for Father Zollinger. He celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood, an occasion recognized by the parish community with appreciation for his dedicated spiritual leadership and service.

The following year, 1981, brought further improvements to the church's interior. Twelve new stained-glass windows were added, each illustrating a title from the Litany of Loretto. These vibrant windows enriched the church's worship space, offering both beauty and inspiration to all who entered. During this period of growth and renewal, The Rev. Fr. Derrick Dudash joined the parish as parochial vicar, bringing new energy and support to the pastoral team and the wider parish community.

On July 11, 1981, a class of six men were ordained to the priesthood. One of them would be a son of St. Mary's, Thomas E. Mischler. Another classmate of his would become a future associate at St. Mary's, Clarence E. Danforth. On May 28, 1983, Michael J. Yadron, a parish son of St. Mary's, was ordained to the priesthood.

On April 27, 1984, the diocesan office announced several priestly promotions conferred by the Holy Father. Among those honored was Fr. Zollinger, who was appointed Honorary Prelate of His Holiness by Pope John Paul II. This distinction, which grants the title "Monsignor" and certain privileges regarding clerical attire, is the second highest of three papal honors available to priests, recognizing exceptional service to the church. The rank immediately below is "Chaplain of His Holiness," while the highest rank, "Protonotary Apostolic," was held by Monsignor Hildebrandt. Later in June of 1984, Fr. Carl Mengeling, SMS Class of 1944, was also appointed an Honorary Prelate of His Holiness. Both appointments were one of the final acts of Bishop Grutka as he neared his retirement.



The Most Rev. Norbert Felix Gaughan, second bishop of the Diocese of Gary. He was bishop from 1984 until 1996.

In July of that year, the diocese saw changes in leadership. On July 9th, the Holy Father accepted Bishop Grutka's resignation, and he served as Apostolic Administrator until a new bishop was named. The wait wasn't long—on July 24th, it was announced that Auxiliary Bishop Norbert F. Gaughan from the Diocese of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, would be the next Bishop of Gary. Bishop-Elect Gaughan was officially installed as the second Bishop of Gary on October 2, 1984.

Arriving to the parish to help Monsignor Zollinger were two priests who became parochial vicars, The Rev. Fr. J. Anthony Valtierra arrived in 1986, and the Rev. Fr. Clarence E. Danforth arrived in 1987. Together, all three priests led the parish into the second part of the 1980s.

In the early morning hours of March 6, 1988, Father Danforth woke up and noticed flames through the windows of the church. The Griffith Fire Department responded promptly and extinguished the blaze. The incident resulted in approximately \$50,000 in damage to the sanctuary, necessitating renovations. A female suspect was taken into custody, authorities determined that the female suspect suffered from multiple mental health illnesses. She was arrested and subsequently charged for setting the fire.



Mmgr. Zollinger inspects the damage from the attempted arson.

During the repair period, church services were relocated to the basement of the original church building. The original worship space had since been converted into three classrooms and the school nurse's office. While serving as a temporary worship space, the basement continued to function as the school's cafeteria, gymnasium, and a venue for parish activities and programs. Restoration work lasted four weeks and was completed prior to Holy Week and the Easter liturgies. Following the

fire, the parish, which for years had been known for never locking its doors so that anyone can pray before the Lord at any time, ended a tradition that had been maintained for six decades.

Establishment and Dedication of St. Mary – Hildebrandt Hall

In 1988, alongside other construction projects, the parish achieved a significant milestone that had been envisioned by Monsignor Hildebrandt and Monsignor Zollinger for years. Thanks to the generous support and dedicated fundraising of parishioners, the community was able to build a permanent church hall. Groundbreaking occurred in 1988, initiating a year-long process of development and construction.

The completion of the new parish hall was marked by a formal dedication ceremony held on Sunday, April 9, 1989. In recognition of the parish's patroness and in honor of its second pastor, the hall was named St. Mary – Hildebrandt Hall, establishing a lasting tribute to both figures and providing a vital space for parish gatherings and activities.

The parish hall features a gymnasium utilized for the school's physical education curriculum and athletic programs. When not scheduled for classes or sporting events, the space serves as the venue for the parish's weekly Tuesday night bingo program and is also available to rent for large events and banquets. Additionally, a smaller meeting room—the Joseph Tschida Hall—was designated in recognition of Mr. Joseph Tschida's longtime service as maintenance coordinator and facility manager of St. Mary's.



An aerial view of Hildebrandt Hall, as seen today on the grounds of the parish.

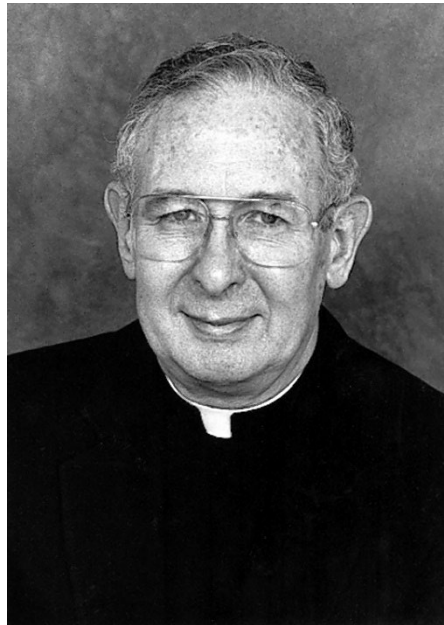
In 1991, the Rev. Fr. Joseph A. Angotti joined St. Mary's as parochial vicar, assisting Monsignor Zollinger during the transition into the 1990s. After suffering a minor stroke in 1989, Bishop Gaughan experienced a more severe and debilitating stroke in February 1992, resulting in paralysis on his left side. Despite his continued dedication to his responsibilities at the chancery, his condition became increasingly challenging.



Bishop Gaughan (right) speaks with Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago (left), during one of his visits to assess the bishop's condition after his 1992 stroke.

By mid-year 1992, it was evident that further action was necessary. Following another hospital discharge, Vatican protocol required the metropolitan archbishop of the Indianapolis province to assess Bishop Gaughan's capacity to continue his duties. Since the Archdiocese of Indianapolis remained vacant due to Archbishop O'Meara's passing, this responsibility was delegated to the metropolitan of the province of Chicago. His Eminence, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, conducted visits in May and June 1992 to evaluate the situation. Based on Cardinal Bernardin's assessment, it was determined that Bishop Gaughan would be unable to continue in his role. On August 19, 1992, notification from Rome confirmed the appointment of an apostolic administrator

sede plena. An apostolic administrator—appointed by the Holy See—formally oversees a diocese when a bishop dies, resigns, is transferred, or, as in this exceptional case (sede plena), becomes incapacitated due to illness. Consequently, the Most Rev. Dale J. Melczek, then auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Detroit, was appointed as apostolic administrator sede plena of the diocese.



Msgr. Zollinger, around the time of his retirement.

On December 1, 1992, the parish received unexpected news about another leadership change. After consulting with doctors, family, and staff, Monsignor Zollinger announced his immediate retirement and resignation from his role as pastor. His departure ended a 20-year tenure, leaving the community both surprised and saddened. Throughout his career, Monsignor Zollinger served in various diocesan roles, including Vocations Director and Dean of several deaneries. After focusing on his health and undergoing rehabilitation, he moved to St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Knox, Indiana, where he continued to assist with sacramental duties as needed.

Upon his retirement, he was given senior priest status, relieving him of administrative responsibilities. As apostolic administrator, Bishop Melczek would be required to appoint a parochial administrator to manage St. Mary's Parish until a permanent pastor was selected. A parochial administrator takes on pastoral duties when a parish is vacant, or the pastor is unable to serve due to circumstances

like illness or absence. Appointed by the diocesan bishop, the administrator has similar rights and responsibilities as a pastor unless noted otherwise. Sometimes, this role acts as a probationary

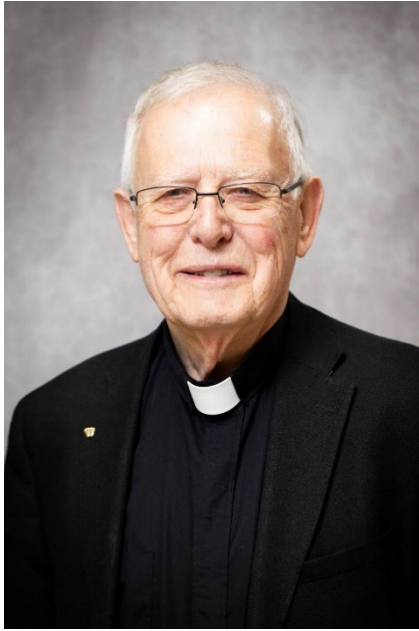
period before a formal appointment. Rev. Fr. Joseph J. Gazarkiewicz was selected for this position.

In 1993, the parish demonstrated continued growth, with parishioners and students exhibiting a powerful sense of patriotism left over from Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990-91. Students provided active support to parishioners serving in the armed forces, and the school reported accomplishments in its athletic and extracurricular programs, including noteworthy achievements by the school band. Bishop Melczek made his first pastoral visit to St. Mary's during the 1992-93 academic year and was welcomed by a dedicated group of students, parishioners, and faculty. Father Gazarkiewicz ensured the effective operation of parish activities, prompting some parishioners to consider the possibility of Father Joe's appointment as the next pastor.

Pastoral Transition at St. Mary's

As the summer months drew near, the parish community awaited news regarding upcoming pastoral appointments. Official communications from the diocesan chancery began to circulate, offering clarity on the anticipated changes in priest assignments. It was formally announced that St. Mary's Parish would soon receive a new pastor. Although Father Joseph J. Gazarkiewicz had faithfully served as parochial administrator during this interim period, the announcement confirmed that he would not be appointed as the permanent pastor.

THE YEARS OF THEODORE JOHN MENS



Father Theodore J. Mens, fourth pastor of St. Mary's. He would serve as pastor from 1993 until 2019.

Effective July 1, 1993, the Rev. Fr. Theodore J. Mens was appointed as the fourth pastor of St. Mary's. This transition marked a notable change for the parish community, which up until this time could only remember the leadership of two pastors over the past sixty years.

Father Mens previously served as pastor at St. Mary's Parish in East Chicago and held pastoral roles at other parishes, in addition to working as an instructor at Bishop Noll during the late 1960s. He was subsequently appointed director of Pro-Life activities and the Office of Pro Life for the Diocese of Gary.

After reviewing updated protocols from Rome, it was determined that the placement of the presider during Mass required modification. Traditionally, clergy at St. Mary's were seated in the center of the sanctuary between the tabernacle and the altar; however, liturgical scholars later identified this arrangement as incorrect according to revised church guidelines. The issue was resolved by installing a new presider's chair near the front and right of the St. Joseph altar.

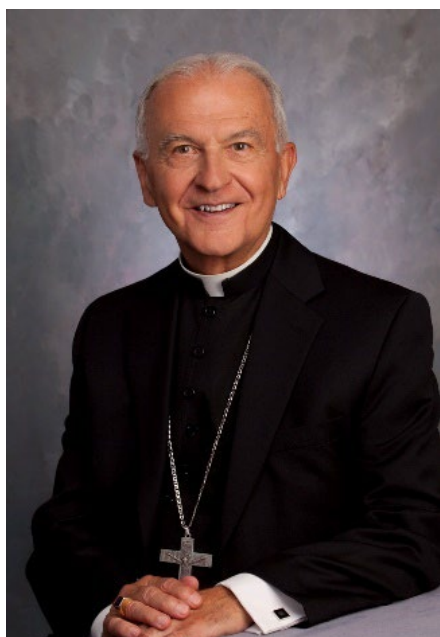
The permanent baptistry would be replaced, with the baptismal font moved to a mobile platform so baptisms can take place more flexibly in different areas. When organizational changes are introduced within a parish, it is common for members to respond in ways that may not align with expectations. At St. Mary's, parishioners were accustomed to the leadership styles of only two priests prior to this period. With the arrival of Father Mens and the initiation of changes as the parish prepared for the new millennium, some resistance arose, resulting unfortunately in several families relocating to Schererville, Munster, and Highland.

Nevertheless, many parishioners remained loyal to St. Mary's, demonstrating adaptability and a willingness to embrace the evolving direction under Father Mens' leadership. As he settled into his pastoral role, Father Mens prioritized fostering unity and understanding, encouraging open communication and active involvement in parish life. This period of adjustment served to strengthen the bonds among those who remained, laying a foundation for renewed growth and participation as St. Mary's moved forward into a new era.

On November 11, 1993, sixty years of priestly service ended when Bishop Grutka passed away at the age of 84. He died peacefully at his cabin, located on the grounds of Camp Lawrence in Valparaiso. Bishops Gaughan and Melczek presided at the different liturgical services. Seeing that this was the first time the diocese experienced the passing of a bishop, a historic funeral mass would be conducted. Father Mens and members of the parish would attend. After the final commendation at the cathedral, the remains of Bishop Grutka were transferred to the east transept of the cathedral, and he was placed in a marble sarcophagus.



The tomb of Bishop Grutka, inside the cathedral in Gary.



The Most Rev. Dale Joseph Melczek. He was apostolic administrator from 1992-1995, co-adjutor bishop from 1995-1996, and 3rd Bishop of Gary from 1996 until 2014.

In 1994, Rev. Fr. Jon Plavcan joined the parish as parochial vicar, concurrently serving as a theology instructor at Bishop Noll Institute. On November 7, 1995, the Diocese of Gary received the announcement that Rev. Msgr. Carl Mengeling, a member of the Class of 1944 and then pastor of St. Thomas More in Munster, would become the first priest from the diocese to be elevated to the episcopacy. He was appointed as the fourth Bishop of Lansing, succeeding Bishop Kenneth Povish upon his retirement. Members of the Diocese of Gary traveled to Lansing for the occasion. Msgr. Mengeling was consecrated and ordained bishop on January 25, 1996, with His Eminence Adam Cardinal Maida, Archbishop of Detroit, presiding, and Bishops Melczek and Povish acting as co-consecrators.

On October 28, 1995, it was announced that Bishop Melczek would become the co-adjutor bishop of the Diocese of Gary. A coadjutor bishop is a bishop who is granted nearly equal authority to that of the diocesan bishop. He has specific powers and the right to succeed the current diocesan bishop. The appointment of a coadjutor bishop ensures continuity in church leadership, typically when a serving bishop or archbishop plans to retire due to illness. In such cases, the bishop can request the Vatican to appoint a coadjutor bishop. On June 1, 1996, Pope John Paul II accepted the resignation of Bishop Gaughan. When the resignation took effect, Bishop Melczek immediately became the third Bishop of Gary.

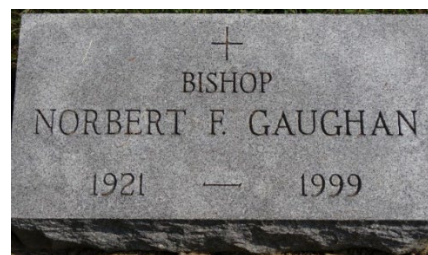
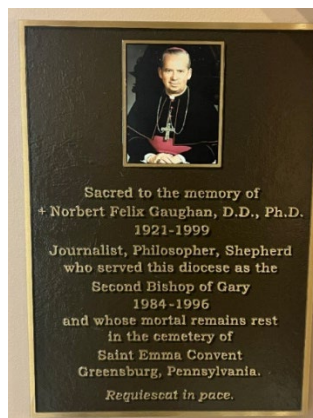
In 1996, the Rev. Fr. James W. Meade would be assigned as associate pastor of St. Mary's. In 1997, the Rev. Fr. Charles Mosley would soon assume residence at St. Mary's while

assigned as a theology instructor and wrestling coach at Bishop Noll Institute. Father Mosley would also provide sacramental assistance to the parishioners. On June 7, 1997, another son of the parish, David W. Kime, was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Melczek. Another son would follow on October 23, 1999, when Lee Purcell would be ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Melczek.

On October 1, 1999, St. Mary's Parish received the sorrowful news of the death of Bishop Emeritus Norbert F. Gaughan at Saint Anthony Home in Crown Point. Bishop Gaughan had led the diocese for fifteen years, and his legacy included an initial hesitancy to accept the responsibilities of episcopal leadership. As Father Dominic Bertino remarked, Bishop Gaughan's funeral took place "in the cathedral he rarely used, in the city he never lived in, in the diocese he did not want."

Father Mens, accompanied by other parish members, attended the funeral Mass at the cathedral in Gary to represent St. Mary's Parish. The altar servers for this solemn occasion were seminarians from the Diocese of Gary, who were quickly summoned from their seminaries and requested to return home for the funeral mass. Among these seminarians was Dave Negrete, a member of the SMS Class of 1995 and a freshman in college seminary.

Following the funeral service, Bishop Gaughan's remains were transported to the Benedictine Monastery of Saint Emma in Greensburg. During his years of service in Greensburg, Bishop Gaughan had lived at the monastery, serving as chaplain to the sisters and working at the Greensburg chancery. He was laid to rest in the cemetery of the monastery, marking the end of his dedicated service to the Church and its communities.



A cenotaph located in the east transept of the diocesan cathedral in Gary, dedicated to the memory of Bishop Gaughan. Above right, the headstone of Bishop Gaughan, located in the monastery cemetery of the Benedictine Monastery of Saint Emma in Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

As the new millennium approached, the parish continued to prosper. In 2002, the removal of the church's bell tower became necessary due to significant water damage sustained over years of inclement weather. It was determined that neither restoration nor reconstruction would be pursued, and parishioners observed as the tower was carefully dismantled brick by brick. The removal of the bells and tower led to the installation of a carillon system, which now replicates the sound of church bells during select occasions. The Western Days celebration has grown, to the extent that the entire town of Griffith regards it as the unofficial reunion for all GHS alumni. That same year marked the appointment of the school's first lay principal in 75 years of

administration; since then, Mrs. Rebecca Maskovich has served as principal of St. Mary's School. Additionally, upgrades were implemented in the sacristy, including new closets, ceiling tiles, and flooring.



The church and school grounds, as it appears today.



An aerial view of the parish grounds in 1953. At the intersection of Broad and Elm Streets, you can see the original church building, now the school's junior high wing. To the north is the school complex. To the north of that is the rectory building.



The church building as it appeared from 1957-2002



The bell tower being removed in September of 2002.



An aerial view of the parish grounds, taken during the Western Days parish festival.



The church as it looks today, after the removal of the bell tower in 2002.

The parish celebrated its 75th anniversary on June 28, 2003. Father Mens and Father Mosley were joined by Bishop Melczek, who celebrated the jubilee mass. Con-celebrants were

former associate pastors of St. Mary's, Monsignor Zollinger, 3rd pastor of St. Mary's, and all ordained priests who were sons of the parish. Following the mass, a reception and dinner was held, with over 400 people in attendance to celebrate the historic milestone.

Throughout the 2000s, a few priests would assume residence at St. Mary's, providing sacramental assistance to the parish. Those would include Fr. Jim Wozniak, Fr. David Nowak, and Fr. Lourdu Pasala. Permanent Deacons assigned to the parish through those years would be Deacons Tom Kreidler and John Bacon. Many transitional deacons who would later go onto the priesthood would also serve summer assignments at St. Mary's. The most recent would be now Fathers Jaime Perea, Jacob McDaniel and Jeffrey Burton.

In 2003, the diocese informed Father Mens that he would formally administer the parish of St. Ann's, located in the Black Oak area of Gary. This marked the first occasion in St. Mary's history that the parish assumed responsibility for two locations. St. Ann's, established in 1942, originated when Father John Beckmann—then an assistant at St. Mary's in East Chicago—recognized the area's growth and requested Bishop Noll's approval to survey the Catholic population within the region. The community initially convened for Sunday mass in a rented hall on Colfax Street. Notably, the date of the first mass was December 7, 1941. Despite concerns that the onset of war might postpone the parish's founding, many members remained committed to advancing its establishment.

Father Beckmann was appointed pastor in June 1942. Land on Twenty-Seventh Avenue, one block east of Burr Street, was donated for church construction. Bishop Noll authorized the building of the church and contributed \$1,000 to the building fund. Approval from the War Production Board was secured, stipulating that the church could be constructed with a budget not exceeding five thousand dollars; as a result, members of the congregation collaborated to complete the project themselves. That same year, Bishop Noll dedicated the church in honor of Saint Ann. Following the development of Interstate 80-94, the community relocated the church to its current location, where a new rectory was constructed in 1947.

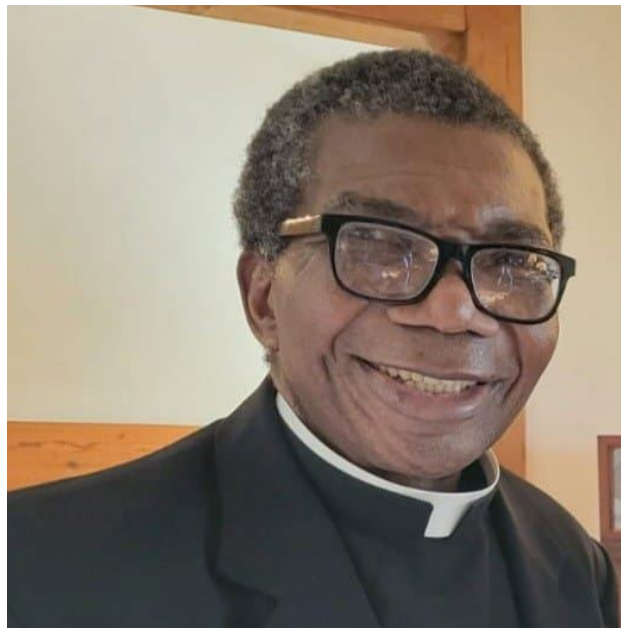
St. Ann's Parish established its school in 1945, with operations entrusted to the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ. The school remained active for over four decades, nurturing generations of students until its closure in 1987.

Following the transfer of Father John Beckmann to Saints Peter and Paul in 1955, pastoral leadership transitioned through several priests who devoted themselves to the parish community. These included Father Andrew Mattiew (1955–1956), Father John Frawley (1956–1958), Father James Stapleton (1958), Father Walter Mastey (1958–1963), Father Philip Fusco (1963–1965), Father John Minnich (1967–1996), and Father Stephen Kosinski (1996–2003).

Today, St. Ann's Parish remains a tightly knit congregation, composed of 30 to 50 parishioners. The Rev. Fr. Joseph Uko, a priest from the Diocese of Ikot Ekpene in Nigeria, currently resides at St. Ann's. His primary assignment is to provide sacramental assistance as a chaplain for the Franciscan Health network, working at their Michigan City campus. As part of the arrangements between Gary and Ikot Ekpene, Father Uko also provides sacramental assistance to the parishioners at St. Ann's and is the priest in residence.



St. Ann Roman Catholic Church in the Black Oak neighborhood of Gary, Indiana. To the right of the church building is the parish rectory. After the school closed, the school building and convent were demolished, leaving just the rectory and church.



The Rev. Fr. Joseph M. Uko. He is the priest in residence and is responsible for providing sacramental assistance at St. Ann's. He is a priest from the Diocese of Ikot Ekpene in Nigeria. His primary assignment is to serve as chaplain for Franciscan Health. He is assigned to their Michigan City campus.

On February 27, 2008, our parish son, Bishop Mengeling retired and became bishop emeritus of the Diocese of Lansing after 12 years of dedicated service to the faithful of Lansing. He was succeeded by the Most Rev. Earl Boyea, on April 28, 2008.

The parish remained stable during the 2010s. On November 24, 2014, it was announced that His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI had accepted the resignation of Bishop Melczek, who had reached the age of 75 and, in accordance with church protocol, submitted his formal resignation. Concurrently, The Most Rev. Donald J. Hying, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, was appointed as the fourth Bishop of Gary. Bishop Melczek subsequently served as the apostolic administrator of the diocese until Bishop Hying's formal installation. Bishop Hying was officially installed as diocesan bishop on January 6, 2015.



The Most Rev. Donald J. Hying became the 4th Bishop of Gary, serving from 2015 to 2019, after which he was named the 5th Bishop of Madison. Ordained as a priest in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee on May 20, 1989, he was later appointed auxiliary bishop and titular bishop of Regiae on May 26, 2011, and received his episcopal ordination on July 20, 2011.

On March 4, 2017, Father Mens reached a significant personal milestone as he celebrated his 75th birthday. Just a few months later, on June 27, 2017, the parish community gathered once more to commemorate his remarkable 50th anniversary in the priesthood. In honor of these achievements, the parish organized a series of events to celebrate Father Mens' enduring service and profound impact as both priest and pastor.

As these landmark occasions approached, thoughtful conversations emerged within the parish regarding the length and future of Father Mens' ministry. Parishioners began to carefully reflect on their leadership needs, mindful of considerations related to age and health. At the same time, the diocese also undertook an evaluation of future leadership at St. Mary's in anticipation of potential transitions.

The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration transitioned from their previous parish location to establish residence nearer the hospital campus in Dyer. The convent building on the original grounds presented significant difficulties for the aging members of the religious community, as it lacked ADA compliance and featured steep staircases, which created substantial obstacles for those experiencing physical limitations. By 2019, St. Mary's, the diocese, and the broader community would soon experience a period of profound change, marked by both anticipated and unexpected developments. During the spring of that year, the parish received official notification from the chancery announcing an impending pastoral transition. After twenty-two years of faithful service, Father Mens was appointed as administrator of St. Joseph's Parish in Hammond. At that time, St. Joseph's was approaching the end of its distinguished history, and Father Mens was entrusted with guiding the parish through its final years, a period that would coincide with his own approaching retirement and transition to senior priest status.

Simultaneously, Bishop Hying announced that Rev. Fr. Keith M. Virus, who was then serving as pastor of St. James the Less in Highland, would assume responsibilities as the new administrator of St. Mary's. This leadership transition marked a new chapter in the life of the parish, setting the stage for future growth and adaptation.

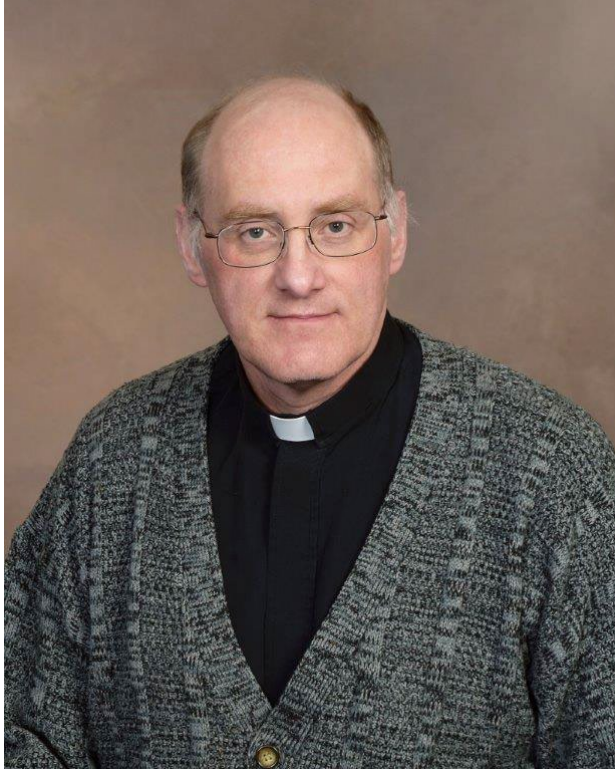


Father Mens celebrates his final mass at St. Mary's on Sunday, June 30, 2019. Deacon John Bacon proclaims the gospel at the 11:30 am mass, as a Knights of Columbus honor guard stands at attention. Father Jeffrey Burton joins Father Mens as the concelebrant for the mass.



Father Mens delivering one of his final homilies at the 7:30am mass on June 30, 2019, his final day as pastor of St. Mary's.

THE CURRENT PASTORATE OF KEITH MIKE VIRUS



Rev. Fr. Keith M. Virus, 5th and current pastor of St. Mary's. He was named administrator of the parish July 1, 2019, and was formally appointed and installed as the 5th pastor on July 1, 2020.

The Rev. Fr. Keith M. Virus was born on May 11, 1962, and grew up in Hammond, Indiana. His early spiritual foundation was shaped by his attendance at All Saints Catholic Church on Sibley Street. He completed his secondary education at Bishop Noll Institute, demonstrating both academic dedication and faithfulness during his formative years.

Military Service

After graduating, Father Keith answered the call to serve his country by joining the United States Army. His service took him to South Korea, where he worked as a field medic in the Demilitarized Zone, gaining valuable experience and deepening his sense of duty to others.

Priestly Formation and Ordination

Upon completing his military service, Father Keith returned to the United States to pursue his vocation. He entered formation studies in preparation for the priesthood and was ordained by Bishop Melczek on June 5, 1993. His ordination marked the beginning of a

lifelong commitment to pastoral ministry and service to the Church.

Pastoral Assignments

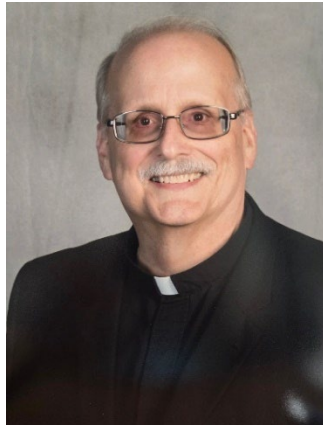
Father Keith's early priestly ministry included assignments as associate pastor at several parishes, notably St. Thomas More and St. Michael's. These roles allowed him to develop his pastoral skills and connect with diverse parish communities. Eventually, he was appointed as pastor of St. James the Less in Highland, where he succeeded the Rev. Fr. Francis Lazar, further expanding his leadership responsibilities within the diocese.

Bishop Hying's Reassignment

On April 25, 2019, as the parish was preparing for the transition from Father Mens to Father Virus, the Diocese of Gary received significant news: Pope Francis appointed Bishop Donald J. Hying as the fifth Bishop of the Diocese of Madison. This appointment came in the wake of Bishop Robert Morlino's passing, which had left the Madison see vacant. With this new assignment, Bishop Hying was called to return to his native Wisconsin to shepherd the faithful in his home state.

Bishop Hying's reassignment was met with notable sadness and a sense of loss within the local community. Parishioners and clergy alike reflected on his unique and personal approach to ministry during his tenure. Bishop Hying was renowned for his direct involvement and genuine

connection with parish life. For instance, during his visits to local Knights of Columbus councils for fundraising initiatives, he was frequently observed working behind the scenes—donning an apron and gloves over his clerical attire to help with dishwashing or food preparation. These acts of humble service not only supported the volunteers but also allowed them time to rest, demonstrating Bishop Hying’s commitment to servant leadership and his deep care for those he served.



Rev. Fr. Michael J. Yadron. Father Mike attended St. Mary's parish growing up and became the diocesan administrator during the period between Bishop Hying and Bishop McClory. He currently serves as pastor of St. Thomas More in Munster.

Bishop Hying would remain as apostolic administrator until his installation on June 25, 2019. The same day, the see of Gary fell vacant, and the diocese entered the formal period known as *sede vacante*, Latin for “vacant see.” The diocesan consultors met in formal meetings to appoint a diocesan administrator to oversee the bureaucracy of the diocese until a new bishop was announced. One of our parish son’s, the Rev. Fr. Michael J. Yadron, was appointed to this position, in addition to his assignment as pastor of St. Thomas More in Munster.

Father Mike’s time as administrator was brief. As the bishops of Indiana were preparing to travel to Rome for their ad limina visit with the Holy Father, it looked like Father Mike would be going with them to represent the Diocese of Gary. Then on November 26, 2019, it was announced that the Holy Father had appointed the Rev. Msgr. Robert John McClory of the Archdiocese of Detroit to become the next bishop of Gary. Msgr. McClory was the pastor and rector of the National Shrine of the Little Flower Basilica in Royal Oak, Michigan.

Bishop McClory was born in Detroit, Michigan, on October 10, 1963, as the youngest child of James and Ann McClory. He graduated from George A. Dondero High School and later earned a BA in politics and communications from Oakland University (1985), a master's in public policy and administration from Columbia University (1987), and a JD from the University of Michigan Law School (1991).

After practicing civil law for three years, McClory pursued priesthood studies at Sacred Heart Major Seminary and later in Rome, earning degrees in theology and canon law. Ordained a deacon in 1998 and a priest in Detroit in 1999, he held roles as associate pastor, administrative secretary, chancellor, and eventually became Moderator of the Curia and Vicar General. He also served as pastor in several parishes and was named a Chaplain of His Holiness in 2005. McClory was consecrated and ordained bishop by Archbishop Charles C. Thompson at Holy Angels Cathedral in Gary on February 11, 2020.



*The Most Rev. Fr. Bishop Robert J. McClory, B.A., M.P.A., J.D., S.T.B., J.C.L., D.D.
He is the 5th and incumbent bishop of the Diocese of Gary. He has been bishop since February 2020.*

Parish Transition and Pandemic Challenges

Following Bishop McClory's appointment, the parish entered a period of transition. As Father Keith assumed his new role, he devoted time to understanding his responsibilities and getting to know the parish community. This transition was marked by the departure of several longstanding parishioners who chose to step away following Father Mens' reassignment. The change in leadership brought challenges, especially from individuals hesitant to adapt to a new pastor and spiritual leader. Navigating this difficult period required a renewed focus on the unique talents and skills of each parish member, underscoring that the primary goal remained the parish's ongoing growth and success.

The difficulties of transition were soon compounded by the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. Lockdowns and health concerns had a profound effect on the parish, particularly impacting vulnerable members of the community. The closure of churches meant that many parishioners could view a mass through television broadcasts and social media platforms. It left the faithful with no way of participating as fulfilling the Sunday obligation requires

us to be physically present. These changes led to significant financial strain for the parish, and it took several years to address the resulting challenges.

Due to pandemic restrictions, a formal introduction for Father Virus was not possible. Nevertheless, parishioners took the initiative to connect with him at various social and private gatherings, fostering a sense of community despite the difficulties presented by the public health crisis.

Parish Renewal and Ongoing Initiatives

In the aftermath of the pandemic's financial and social impact, St. Mary's Catholic Church has successfully restored its financial stability. This achievement marks a significant recovery from the challenges previously faced, and it reflects careful stewardship and the resilience of the parish community.

To further strengthen the parish's vitality, a series of initiatives have been launched with the goal of welcoming both long-standing members and newcomers back to in-person worship. These efforts seek to rebuild the sense of fellowship and spiritual connection that is best nurtured through communal celebration of the Mass.

While the parish acknowledges and appreciates the support of those who continued to participate in Mass remotely and provided financial assistance during challenging times, it is important to recognize that such actions, though commendable, do not substitute for the

obligation of regular, in-person attendance. The essential value of gathering together as a community remains central to parish life and spiritual growth.

Under Father Keith's now well-established leadership as pastor, the parish has continued to benefit from the dedication of a committed core group of parishioners. Their steadfast involvement has been instrumental in maintaining the strength and continuity of St. Mary's mission.

St. Mary's Catholic School is experiencing a period of steady growth and stability in enrollment, reflecting strong community support and confidence in its educational mission. Recent upgrades have greatly enhanced the learning environment, including newly refurbished office spaces for the secretary and principal, state-of-the-art computer lab, and classrooms equipped with smart boards to facilitate interactive learning. In the 1990s, the original church basement beneath the junior high wing was thoughtfully transformed into a modern library and music room (now an after-school care center), providing additional resources and support for students and families. Outdoors, the campus features new playground facilities, as well as expanded athletic amenities with the addition of soccer fields and a dedicated athletic field, further enriching student life and physical education opportunities.

The Passing of Bishop Melczek and Parish Tribute

On August 25, 2022, the Most Rev. Dale J. Melczek, Bishop Emeritus of the Diocese of Gary, passed away following a stroke suffered several days earlier. The parish community came together to honor his memory, demonstrating their respect and gratitude for his service.

During the funeral Mass, Father Keith concelebrated alongside fellow diocesan priests, marking a solemn occasion of remembrance and prayer. Parishioners joined in paying their final respects to Bishop Melczek, reflecting on his contributions and leadership within the diocese.

Our parish liturgical master of ceremonies and president of the pastoral council, David Negrete played a key role in organizing components of the funeral. He served on a joint committee with diocesan members and the Knights of Columbus, tasked with coordinating the guard of honor for Bishop Melczek's remains. The Knights of Columbus provided an honor guard that kept vigil with the body for 36 hours, demonstrating the parish and diocese's profound respect for Bishop Melczek. In addition, they ensured the safety of visiting bishops and clergy during the funeral mass. After the rite of commendation, Bishop Melczek was laid to rest in a newly constructed sarcophagus beside Bishop Grutka's.



The guard of honor starts a near 40-hour watch over the body of Bishop Melczek. On the right is David Negrete, the parish's pastoral council president, chairman of the altar server ministry, and parish liturgical master of ceremonies.



The tomb of Bishop Melczek, located in the diocesan cathedral in Gary.

Recent Losses in the Parish Community

The parish recently mourned the loss of two individuals whose lives were deeply connected to St. Mary's Catholic Church and whose legacies continue to inspire the congregation.

Msgr. Richard F. Zollinger

On January 29, 2024, Monsignor Richard F. Zollinger, who served as the third pastor of the parish, passed away at the age of 94. His funeral Mass was celebrated by Bishop McClory, and he was laid to rest beside his parents at Catholic Cemetery in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on February 7, 2024. Msgr. Zollinger's dedication and leadership left a lasting imprint on the parish, and his memory remains cherished among parishioners.



Msgr. Zollinger attending a social function in Knox.



Msgr. Zollinger was laid to rest alongside his parents in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

The Most Rev. Carl F. Mengeling

Shortly thereafter, The Most Rev. Carl F. Mengeling, Bishop Emeritus of Lansing and a former student and son of the parish who later entered the episcopacy, died on July 1, 2025, also at the age of 94. He was interred at St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery on July 10, 2025. Bishop Mengeling's journey from parishioner to bishop stands as a testament to the spiritual foundation and nurturing environment of St. Mary's, and his passing was deeply felt by all who knew him.



Newly ordained priest, Father Carl F. Mengeling, in 1957.



Bishop Mengeling, enjoying giving an interview after his retirement in 2008.

Looking Ahead: Fostering Community and Renewal

Strengthening Belonging Through Faith and Mutual Support

Looking ahead, St. Mary's remains focused on fostering a sense of belonging and community among its members, even as it confronts the challenges brought by recent losses and changes. While honoring the memory of those who have passed, parishioners find strength in

their shared faith and mutual support, reinforcing the church's role as a cornerstone of hope and healing. As preparations begin for the upcoming centennial celebrations, there is a renewed emphasis on service, outreach, and the spiritual enrichment of all who call St. Mary's home. These efforts, rooted in tradition yet responsive to the present, ensure that the parish continues to thrive as a vibrant and welcoming place for worship, learning, and fellowship.

Welcoming and Empowering Younger Generations

In the spirit of forward momentum, St. Mary's also looks to its younger generations and the many families who have recently joined the parish, recognizing their energy and fresh perspectives as vital to shaping the church's next century. Initiatives to engage youth in liturgical ministries, religious education, and community events are flourishing, helping to build lasting connections and inspire new leaders within the congregation. Through these collaborative efforts, St. Mary's not only honors its storied past but also embraces innovation and inclusivity, inviting all members—longstanding and new alike—to share in the mission and promise of a faith community that continues to grow stronger together.

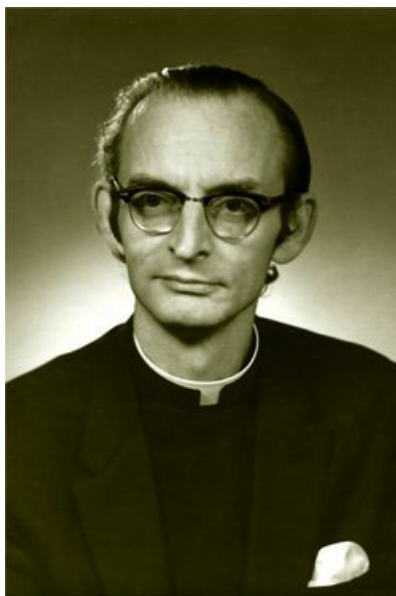
Renewal of Parish Facilities and Spiritual Life

The convent today still remains vacant and with a collaboration between Father Keith, the maintenance staff, and the Marquette Council of the Knights of Columbus, plans are underway to rehabilitate the interior living quarters and replace some plumbing in the building. The parish will then look to invite a congregation of women religious to occupy the house and take up residence and ministry at the parish.

Celebrating Tradition and Community Milestones

As the centenary of St. Mary's Catholic Church approaches, there is a profound sense of pride in the parish's many accomplishments. The flourishing school, the robust religious education program, and the annual festival, which has become an integral part of the broader community—are all testament to the parish's enduring legacy. The congregation remains devoted to preserving and enriching the traditions and values that have defined St. Mary's for generations.

PRIEST SONS OF THE PARISH TODAY



Rev. Fr. Kenneth John Seberger, CPPS, was born on July 28, 1920, in Schererville, Indiana. He entered the Society of the Precious Blood in 1943 and professed vows on December 8, 1939. He was ordained on February 2, 1946, by the Most Rev. George Rehring, Auxiliary Bishop of Cincinnati, at Saint Charles Seminary, in Carthagen, Ohio.

Father Kenneth's priestly life was resolute and certainly varied. After spending two years as assistant pastor at Saint Brigid, in Xenia, Ohio, he sailed for the Chilean Missions in South America. In 1950, he returned to the United States, after being diagnosed with tuberculosis and had a lung removed. After his recovery, he was appointed pastor of Saint William Parish in Garden City, with the mission at Christ the King, in Deerfield. He spent several years in the Mexican missions of Kansas and in several hospital chaplaincies.

Padre Pepe, as he was known, returned to Chile and worked as chaplain for the Precious Blood Sisters in Santiago in 1962. That same year, he was appointed to the newly opened Peruvian Missions, where he taught school at Villa Maria College for Girls, in Lima, until 1978. In 1971, he was named Provincial for the Society of the Precious Blood, in Peru. He was stationed at San Francisco de Borja Parish, in Lima, Peru, when he died as a result from a stroke, on April 9, 1981, at the age of 60.

A Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated in Lima, and he was buried at Cementerio Británico Antiguo, in Bellavista, Callao, Peru. A memorial mass was celebrated at Saint Charles Seminary, in Carthagen, Ohio. Father Raymond Cera, one of Father Seberger's classmates, was the principal celebrant and homilist.



The Most Rev. Carl Frederick Mengeling was born on October 22, 1930, in Hammond, Indiana, to Carl H. and Augusta Huke Mengeling, both of whom were German immigrants. He was the second of four siblings. At the age of nine, Bishop Mengeling converted to Catholicism, having previously been raised as a Lutheran. He attended St. Mary Elementary School in Griffith, Indiana (Class of 1944), and graduated from Griffith High School in 1948. He continued his education at St. Meinrad College and Seminary in St. Meinrad, Indiana, an institution staffed by the Benedictines.

Bishop Mengeling was ordained as a priest by Bishop Andrew G. Grutka on May 25, 1957, at the Cathedral of the Holy Angels in Gary, Indiana. Notably, this ordination was part of the first class of priests for the newly established Diocese of Gary in northwest Indiana. He began his priestly ministry as associate pastor of St. Mark Parish in Gary, serving there from 1957 to 1961 before pursuing advanced theological studies in Rome.

While in Rome, then Father Mengeling earned a License in Sacred Theology from the Angelicum University and a Doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Alfonsianum Academy. During this period, he was present for the opening of the Second Vatican Council and participated as a page during the council sessions.

Upon returning to the United States in 1964, then Father Mengeling was assigned to various teaching roles. He served on the faculty at Bishop Noll High School in Hammond, St. Joseph Calumet College in Whiting, Indiana, and St. Procopius Seminary in Lisle, Illinois. He then returned to full-time parish ministry, holding pastorates at All Saints Parish in Hammond from 1968 to 1970, Holy Name Parish in Cedar Lake from 1970 to 1971, Nativity of Our Savior Parish in Portage from 1971 to 1985, and St. Thomas More Parish in Munster from 1985 to 1995. In June 1984, he was named an Honorary Prelate of His Holiness.

Throughout his service in the Diocese of Gary, Monsignor Mengeling contributed significantly by chairing the Diocesan Worship Commission, the Institute of Religious, and the

Vocations Committee. He also served on the Presbyteral Council, the Ecumenical Commission, and the Permanent Diaconate Formation Team.

On November 7, 1995, then Msgr. Mengeling was appointed to succeed the Most Rev. Kenneth J. Povish as Bishop of Lansing, becoming the first priest from the Diocese of Gary to be elevated to the episcopacy. He was consecrated and ordained a bishop on January 25, 1996, at St. Mary Cathedral in Lansing by Cardinal Adam Maida, with co-concelebrants Kenneth J. Povish, retired Bishop of Lansing, and Dale J. Melczek, coadjutor Bishop of Gary. As his episcopal motto, Bishop Mengeling chose the words of St. John the Baptist: "He must increase!"



The episcopal coat of arms of the Most Rev. Carl Mengeling, while he was Bishop of Lansing. The left side of the shield is the coat of arms of the Diocese of Lansing. On the right side of the shield is the personal coat of arms of Bishop Mengeling.

His resignation as Bishop of Lansing was accepted by the Holy Father on February 27, 2008, and he was succeeded by the Most Rev. Earl A. Boyea, who continues to serve as bishop of Lansing. In retirement, Bishop Mengeling remained active in ministry, teaching Sacred Scripture to novices with the Dominican Sisters of Mary Mother of the Eucharist and the Sisters of Mercy in Ann Arbor. He frequently served as a substitute priest at St. Gerard and St. Mary Cathedral parishes, led parish missions, and was widely regarded as a retreat master for seminarians, priests, and religious throughout the United States and abroad, including in Germany and Rome. In his later years, he presented at conferences related to the Year of Faith and the New Evangelization in locations such as Gaylord, Alma, and Hamburg.

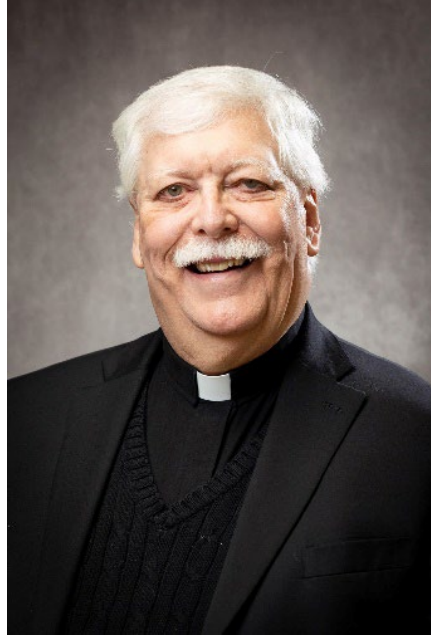
Bishop Mengeling passed away in the early hours of July 1, 2025, at Mother Teresa House for the Care of the Terminally Ill in Lansing. He was interred at St. Joseph's Catholic Cemetery in Lansing, Michigan.



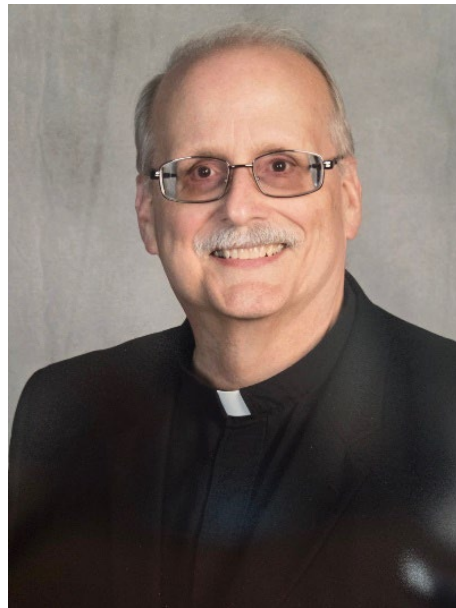
Rev. Msgr. John J. Siekierski, a senior priest of the Diocese of Gary, retired in 2024 after serving 28 years as pastor of St. Stanislaus Parish in East Chicago. Ordained by Bishop Andrew Grutka on May 27, 1967, he has been a priest for 58 years.



Rev. Fr. Richard A. Orlinski retired in 2021 and currently serves as a senior priest within the Diocese of Gary. He dedicated 23 years as pastor of St. John Bosco Parish in Hammond, Indiana, marking his final pastoral assignment. In October 2025, he commemorated his 52nd anniversary of ordination to the priesthood, having been ordained on September 30, 1973, by Bishop Andrew Grutka.



Rev. Fr. Thomas Mischler has been a priest for 44 years and is now the pastor of Holy Spirit Parish in Winfield, Indiana. He was ordained on July 11, 1981, by Bishop Andrew Grutka.



Rev. Fr. Michael Yadron is now the pastor at St. Thomas More in Munster, Indiana, and plans to retire in the summer of 2026. Before this, he led Queen of All Saints in Michigan City. Bishop Andrew Grutka ordained him on May 28, 1983, and he has served as a priest for 42 years.



Very Rev. David Kime is Dean of the LaPorte/Starke Deanery and pastor at Queen of All Saints in Michigan City. Ordained by Bishop Dale Melczek on June 7, 1997, he has served as a priest for 28 years.