

St. Michael Historian



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A Home for the Pastor *by Bob Zahler*

Since the arrival of the first resident pastor for St. Michael's Catholic parish in 1862, it has been the obligation of the congregation to provide a home for their priest. In Catholic parishes, as in Anglican parishes, it is customary to call the pastor's house a rectory. Although the term parsonage is also sometimes used in Catholic congregations, rectory has been most common. The first resident pastor was Rev. Magnus M. Mayr, but where Fr. Mayr lived when he arrived in the fall of 1862 is not clear. Since the settlers had been lobbying the bishop for a pastor for four years, it is likely that they had a log home already built to show the bishop that they were serious about wanting a resident pastor. There was definitely a rectory by 1864 as it was noted as being valued at \$100 in an account of parish property. This rectory probably sat near the first log church on the hill behind the present Millside Tavern.

In 1866, at the urging of their new pastor Rev. Gregory Koering, the congregation relocated the church two miles west on what is now the Catholic school site. Newspaper publisher and parishioner Ignatius Gutzwiller Jr. noted in an article years later that an "old building" had been "patched up" to use as a rectory. This building was likely the former store and home of Henry Invie who owned the parcel where the historic Catholic church now stands. While this old building was likely to have been a modest log structure, the settlers were also all living in log homes yet.

By 1881, however, the farmers of St. Michael were making additions to their houses or building new homes made of cut lumber. The parish priest was also overdue for a better house and so in the summer of 1881 the parish built a new two-story house in the Italianate style on the same lot, the northwest corner of Main and Central. While the new rectory provided the pastor with the most fashionable house in the town, during the next thirty years conveniences like indoor plumbing and electricity came to St. Michael and this house wasn't designed for them. Additionally, by the second decade of the twentieth century, pastor Rev. Anton Miks was frequently hosting visiting priests and the rectory had insufficient room nor did it offer the kinds of comforts to which people were then accustomed. In the spring of 1913 plans were drawn up for a modern and substantially larger rectory.



This house served as the rectory from 1881 until 1914 when it was then moved two blocks south where it still stands at 109 Main Street South.

In 1913 as in 1881 the congregation built a home that was fashionable and more impressive than the homes of most parishioners. While there was a great deal of respect for Fr. Miks, the construction of the large, prairie style brick home was also a source of community pride. According to the *Buffalo Journal* of April 17, 1913 one congregation member was quoted as saying "We are not sleeping; we want to keep up with our neighboring parishes." The construction took seven months and Fr. Miks was not able to move into his new home until January 1914. The new rectory could boast of indoor bathrooms on both floors, a modern kitchen with butler's pantry and a large front office with fireplace and built-in bookcases that were dressed with lead and stained glass doors. The second story had guest bedrooms and separate sleeping and bathing quarters for a live-in housekeeper who had her own "servants stairway" from

her bedroom to the kitchen. In his 1916 article “The Catholic Church in Wright County,” Rev. Mathias Sava noted that “the parsonage is undoubtedly the most modern and up-to-date building of its kind in the diocese of St. Paul, and a great credit to the co-operative spirit of the generous parishioners of St. Michael.” People traveling through St. Michael would see a community that made their love for God and respect for His priests a priority.



This photo, taken about 1918, shows the rectory when it was a fairly new building. At this time it was one of the largest and most modern homes in the community.

home for the remaining School Sisters of Notre Dame while the convent was turned over for other parish uses. Wishing to return the priest to the rectory, the congregation in 1981 remodeled both the convent and rectory which took the sisters back to the convent and the priest, Rev. Frank Fried, back to the rectory. St. Michael’s pastor remained in the 1913-built rectory from that point until 2014.

With modest improvements through the years, like new windows and shingles, the rectory remained a decent home for the pastor and his associates, but it lessened in comfort compared to the modern homes being built around town. The most significant change to the rectory was its setting. St. Michael was a sleepy farm village for most of its existence. The rectory sat near the only major intersection in town, but these roads had very little traffic until the 1990s when the building boom turned St. Michael into one of the most sought after bedroom communities in the metro area and the traffic noise downtown became constant. Adding to the annoyance of traffic was the noise coming from the two nearby bars on the weekends. In the summer this was especially problematic as the rectory did not have central air conditioning, and unless the priest had a window air conditioner unit, he was forced to leave his windows open allowing in the vulgar conversations of the saloon patrons. After the construction of the new church and parish offices on Frankfort Parkway in 2004, the rectory wasn’t even convenient for the priests. While the parish did purchase a lot for a future new rectory, its construction was low on the priority list after paying off the current mortgage, adding a social hall and making school improvements. The nation-wide recession and corresponding drop in weekly contributions put nearly everything on hold in 2008.

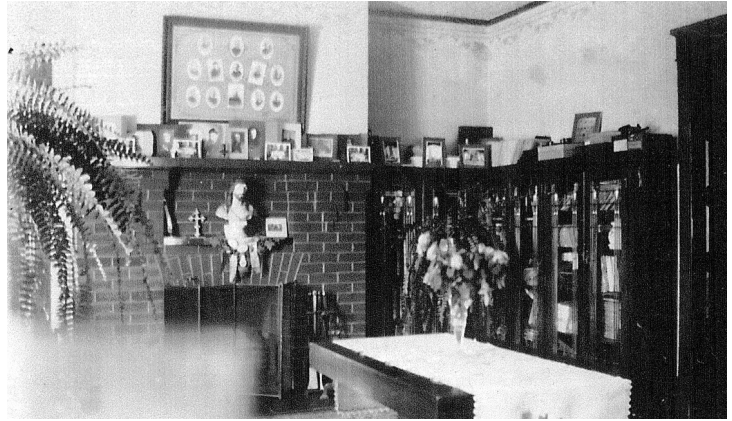
By 2009 St. Michael’s pastor was sharing the rectory with an associate pastor and a priest from a neighboring parish. In the interest of their comfort an assessment was done of the rectory and a priority list assembled. Only one project was completed and that was some updating of the main upstairs bathroom which still had the original 1913 sink with separate hot and cold faucets and walls covered with plastic tiles from the 1940s, some of which were broken or falling off the wall. Other projects that would have brought the kitchen and other bathrooms up to current standards were once again delayed.

For anyone who grew up in St. Michael, the imposing, brick home next to the historic church is what always came to mind when the word “rectory” was used. It was not just a house; it was “Father’s house,” which meant that it was home, office and a symbol of the authority of the pastor. Here the priest entertained abbots and bishops, met with grieving families, and even married couples who, according to the rules of the time, could not marry in the church because one of them was not Catholic. Because of the position of the occupant, the house itself garnered respect.

From 1914 to 1972 the rectory served this single purpose as home and office of the pastor. When Rev. Otto Neudecker arrived in 1972, he decided that the rectory was too large for one person and so he rented a small apartment in Kate Daleiden’s house across the street from church. It was also a time when the number of nuns living in the convent had decreased due to the closing of the Catholic high school four years earlier.

The rectory then changed purposes and became the

The deteriorating situation at the rectory continued until 2013 when Rev. Nathan LaLiberte arrived in July as the new associate pastor. Fr. Nathan was in the parish for only a few weeks when he started looking into having some long-overdue updates completed in the old rectory. It didn't take long to calculate that remodeling the other bathrooms and the kitchen along with replacing the half-century boiler would run in the tens of thousands of dollars. Considering that the building was already in a less than desirable location, it didn't seem wise to stick so much money into the old building; yet building a new rectory was still far down on the list of parish priorities. According to Fr. Nathan, he prayed on the matter and came to the conclusion that God wanted him to build a new rectory, but what remained to be revealed to him was how the resources to build this rectory would avail themselves. Fr. Nathan was aware that in 2012 parishioners at Divine Mercy Parish in Faribault constructed a new rectory following the Habitat for Humanity model whereby people donate their various skills to build homes for the less fortunate. He floated this idea to a few members of the local Knights of Columbus council hoping that the KCs might help generate some of the seed money to initiate the building. Even with donated time from skilled laborers, money would still be necessary to purchase architectural drawings and materials, and additional donations would not likely come in unless potential donors believed that the project had a reasonable chance of success. Mike Engel, who had just completed his term as KC Grand Knight, agreed to help Fr. Nathan set things in motion. Mark LaLiberte, Fr. Nathan's father who had connections in the building trades, put them in touch with an architect so that they could develop a design that would hopefully increase enthusiasm among parishioners. The goal was to raise \$120,000 immediately and lay the foundation in the fall of 2013 and then frame and enclose the structure during the winter months. By September 8th, the day of the church festival and just six weeks after the initial conception of the project, the KCs revealed the architect's drawing of an efficient walkout rambler centered around a chapel and started signing up potential laborers.



Above, the rectory office of Fr. Anton Miks in 1925. Above the fireplace is a collage of native St. Michael priests, many who were ordained during Fr. Miks' pastorate. In recent years this large room has been used as a living room by the priests.



Parishioners wait in line to tour the new rectory on the day of the Parish Festival, September 14, 2014.

Although they were unable to reach their financial goal to start the project in the fall of 2013, the project team developed the Paver Campaign just before Advent in November 2013 whereby people could have a paving stone engraved with a name or message for a \$250 donation. This campaign created benefits beyond what they had dreamed. It got people personally invested in the project, encouraged other large benefactors to donate, and in particular, it inspired an anonymous \$10,000 matching gift challenge. Year-end gifts along with the Paver Campaign built the financial momentum needed to guarantee a kick-off to the rectory project the following April.

A ground-breaking ceremony on the lot at the intersection of Frankfort Parkway and Cottonwood Avenue was held on April 6, 2014. Construction on the new rectory progressed steadily throughout the summer. Although the plans were extensively enhanced by local contractor Earl

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Meetings held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

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Bauman, the basic layout remained the same as originally planned. The main distinction between the rectory and an ordinary family home is the chapel at the center of the main floor. In addition to being a place for adoration and for the priests to say mass, the chapel also unites pieces of parish history. The altar was made from an ornate confessional furnished in 1892 for the historic church. It had been disassembled and it sat in the basement of the old rectory until repurposed for the chapel. Included in the base of the altar is a back-lit stained glass window depicting Jesus. This glass once adorned the chapel of the 1905-built convent chapel, which was razed in 1958. At the time of the building's demolition, parishioner Clarence Eull obtained the glass and preserved it until donating it back for use in the new rectory. Resting on the altar is a tabernacle that had been used in the 1958-built convent chapel, a room currently being converted into offices for the parish school. The tabernacle had been removed in the 1990s when the room was converted into space for youth ministry. The tabernacle had been in storage in the historic church basement since then. Finally, flanking the altar are statues of St. Francis and St. Anthony that had originally been purchased for use in the historic church in 1892. Put all together, these elements create a beautiful place for adoration that also unite the parish's past and present.



The new rectory was completed by September 2014 and parishioners were invited to an open house on September 14 during the fall festival, just a year after the initial concept was put before them. While the future of the old rectory remains unsettled, the parishioners can look back with pride in providing a proper home for the pastor just as their forefathers and mothers had done in the preceding 150 years.

At left, the chapel of the new rectory which includes many historic items from past parish buildings. The photo was taken during the guided tours given on September 14.

Upcoming Events

December, no meeting

January 12, Monday, following the 7:00 PM Board meeting – “What is it?” night. Members are encouraged to bring an unusual object from the past to the meeting to try and stump the other members. Prizes will be awarded to those correctly guessing, and those who present objects that stump the membership.

February 9, Monday, following the 7:00 PM Board meeting – Trivia night.

2015 Dues Notices

It's that time of the year again to renew membership in the St. Michael Historical Society. Our dues have not changed since inception and will continue to stay at the low rate of \$10 per year for individual and family memberships. Please help us save on postage and printing costs by renewing your membership now. Enclosed with this newsletter, or attached if you are receiving your newsletter by Email, you will find the MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL form for next year. **If you do not receive such a form, our records indicate you are already paid up for 2015.** Please take the time now to fill it out and submit it with your dues payment. In advance, thank you for your prompt cooperation.