

St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church of Duquesne Marks 115 years

St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church was the first Carpatho-Russian Greek Catholic parish in Western Pennsylvania, organizing in 1890 by the Rev. Alexander Dzubay. He was a missionary priest from the Diocese of Mukachevo in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. By December of that year, the Rev. Stephen Jackovich of that same Diocese, became the church's first permanent pastor.

The Duquesne congregation marks its 115th anniversary with a variety of events. Pastored by the Very Rev. David Lesko, a Vesper service begins at 7 tonight with Divine Liturgy tomorrow at 10 a.m. that closes with the Akathist Hymn to St. Nicholas. A light brunch is served after the service in the church social hall. The Great Patronal Feast of St. Nicholas, the Divine Liturgy, is celebrated Monday at 9 a.m. and closes with the Rite of the Lesser Blessing of Water.

Other events to round out the anniversary year are planned for the fall of 2005.

Parish records indicate church membership was about 250 when founded. The first baptism and chrismation was for Maria Pirda, daughter of Peter Pirda and Maria Homjak of Homestead, Dec. 24, 1890.

A wooden church was built on Oak Street in 1891 at a cost of \$6,000; it was consecrated July 26 of that year by the pastor and visiting clergymen from Wilkes-Barre and Hazelton. The event included parades from Braddock accompanied by Wood's Cornet Band, and from McKeesport led by the Electric Band. That was the fifth Greek Catholic temple built in Pennsylvania by Carpatho-Russian immigrants and the sixth in the country. During the time of Carpatho-Russian immigration preceding World War I, it served as the mother church for congregations that developed in Pittsburgh, Braddock, Homestead, McKeesport, Clairton, and the coal mining regions of Western Pennsylvania, West Virginia and eastern Ohio.

St. Nicholas also was the mother church for two churches in Duquesne – SS. Peter and Paul Parish, which was organized in 1909, and St. Mary Parish, founded in 1915.

It didn't take long for the parish to outgrow its first worship site and in 1901 decided to build a larger one at a central location in the city. Three lots at the corner of First Street and Viola Avenue in the city's Patterson Plan were purchased July 5, 1902. The cornerstone on the new church was laid July 3, 1904. The building, was designed, by Hungarian Secessionist architect Titus de Bobula. It was consecrated Sept. 24, 1905.

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Members of the St. Nicholas parish stand outside the wooden Oak Street church in 1911; structure was destroyed by fire in 1971.

Four years later, disagreements within the congregation resulted in members leaving St. Nicholas and organizing SS. Peter and Paul Parish. This new congregation built a chapel on a vacant lot opposite the First St church. The division caused financial hardship for the original congregation and the church was sold at sheriff sale. In 1911, the St. Nicholas congregation returned to the vacant Oak Street site. The First Street structure eventually was purchased, redesigned and renamed by SS. Peter and Paul Parish.

As instability in the American Greek Catholic Mission increased and the Russian Orthodox presence in the eastern United States grew, the congregation sought acceptance into the Orthodox Church in 1917. That decision was further prompted by plans of the Greek Catholic Mission to abolish the parish and convert it into an orphanage under the guidance of women monastics.

The first Orthodox pastor to serve the St. Nicholas congregation was the Rev. Joseph Antonoff, who led the church for five years. In 1918, he blessed the parish's cemetery that was established in West Mifflin. It's now owned and operated by the St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cemetery Corp.

Two clergy associated with the parish were elevated to the rank of episcopate. Under the monastic name Stephen, Dzubay was consecrated the first bishop of the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Pittsburgh in 1916. The Rev. Orestes Chornock, who led the church from 1909 until 1911, was consecrated in 1938 as the first bishop of the Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese of Johnstown; he also presided at the 50th anniversary of his former parish in 1941.

The wooden church was deteriorating and in 1951 the congregation moved to its current site at the corner of Catherine Street and Viola Avenue. On April 12, 1971, – Palm Sunday – the Oak Street church was destroyed by fire.

A project of commissioning a series of venerational panel icons in neo-Byzantine style from liturgical artist Constantine Youssis was initiated in 1973. The patronal icon of St. Nicholas was photographed for reproduction in the *Come Bless the Lord* icon packet published by the Office of Religious Education of the Byzantine Catholic Church.

Like other churches in the area, the congregation at St. Nicholas has been experiencing the affects of social changes and the economy the past two decades. "The future is not at all clear," Lesko said of the Duquesne church. "But at all times, it is

God alone who saves his church in order to save us within it. We can trust that he will make known to us what sacrifices will have to be made, in humble obedience, for the good of the church.”