

Church of Nativity Celebrates 100 Years of Catholic Worship in San Francisco

First dedicated in June of 1904, the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord at 240 Fell Street in downtown San Francisco has been the gathering place for Croatian, Polish and Slovenian immigrants, their descendants and other Slavic Catholics for more than one hundred years.

Centennial Highlights

Saturday, June 5th, 2004

6pm-12, Centennial Banquet, Mark Hopkins Hotel

Sunday, June 6th, 2004,

11:00 a.m., Solemn High Mass, Nativity Church

Celebrated by His Excellency Archbishop William Levada and many other invited guest bishops and priests from the Croatian, Polish and Slovenian communities.

Make your reservation now for the gala Centennial Banquet - a once-in-a-lifetime social event to meet old friends and relive old times. May 1st deadline.

Additional information will be coming soon from Nativity's Centennial Committee on these special events. For more information, speak with Father Jerzy Frydrych, S.Ch., Nativity's pastor, at (415) 252-5799.

History of Church of Nativity

During the 1850s, many Croatians (primarily from Croatia's Dalmatian coast) and Slovenians from lands in the Austro-Hungarian Empire followed thousands from around the world to California's goldfields seeking their fortunes. The first Poles came to the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1840s. By 1860 seven hundred and thirty Poles resided in California, the majority in the SF Bay Area. They all formed fraternal and benevolent organizations for mutual aid and comfort and often, sadly, as burial societies. Once they began to marry and have families, their desire for a church where they could hear God's Word in their own languages, and praise Him in songs from their own traditions became even more powerful.

By the turn of the century, through their societies and leaders, Slovenians and Croatians were regularly petitioning San Francisco's Archbishop Riordan to "find a piece of land where they could build their church." Eventually, their petitions were answered and the Archbishop established the parish of Church of the Nativity of Our Lord, purchasing the lot on January 6, 1903. The Croatians and Slovenians, through their societies, began to collect money for the land and church building. During this time they were attended by Father Bontempo, S.J., a Jesuit priest who was fluent in the Croatian language and serving as shepherd to Croatians and Slovenians in the Bay Area and as missionary to all other Slavic Catholics in California. He established a mission at Nativity parish for all Slavic-speaking Catholics including members of the Polish community.

Eventually, Archbishop Riordan arranged for a young Slovenian priest to take the assignment as first Pastor of Nativity. When Father Turk arrived in San Francisco he began the work of raising the money and organizing the community to build the church they had wanted for so long. The first Nativity church was dedicated on June 5, 1904 and burned to the ground in the great San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906. Father Turk immediately began the task of rebuilding the church on the very same spot. The congregation first worshiped in a basement church but in not too many

years after, there was a grand celebration of the newly-rebuilt Nativity dedicated once more as God's house on January 21st, 1912.

Through two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the Cold War, Nativity continued to be a haven and home for Slovenian and Croatian immigrants and refugees and their descendants as well as Polish, Czech, Slovak and other Slavic Catholics. In 1955 Archbishop Mitty proposed the establishment of three liturgical centers for Polish immigrants, namely Nativity Church in San Francisco (Frs. Wajda and Kruk), St. Columba Church in Oakland (Frs. Degner and Stasiak), and St. Anthony Church in Redwood City (Frs. Kopania and Dobkowski).

Later the first Polish Pastoral Mission in San Francisco was founded on February 4, 1976 choosing the martyr St. Wojciech as its Patron Saint. From 1980 until 1990, the Polish community celebrated their masses at Nativity Church. From 1990 to 1996, the Polish community gathered at St. Thomas Apostle Church in the Richmond district. It was during this time that disaster struck in 1994 when Archbishop John J. Quinn closed nine churches in San Francisco, Nativity among them.

Nativity's Croatian and Slovenian parishioners held prayer vigils in front of the closed church each Sunday morning for two and a half years until, under the newly-appointed Archbishop William Levada, their prayers were answered. In September 1996, Archbishop Levada assigned Fr. Czeslaw Rybacki, S. Ch., chaplain of the St. Wojciech Polish Pastoral Mission, as the new pastor to serve all three groups: the Polish, Slovenian and Croatian communities. Nativity was reopened in December 1996 just in time for Christmas services.

And now, together we are celebrating Nativity Church's 100th Anniversary.