



**Love Will Find a Way**  
**INTRODUCING CLARE SUITES**  
*A new level of care within our continuum  
 focusing on the needs of those with memory*

[News](#) > [Local](#) > Honoring past with the new

# HONORING PAST WITH THE NEW

Karen Mahoney, Special to the Catholic Herald | March 17, 2016

Jerry Papa of Milwaukee was caught off guard when he walked through the doors of his parish, St. Stanislaus, and witnessed the newly renovated high altar for the first time.



**St. Stanislaus Oratory, Milwaukee is preparing** for its 150th anniversary this fall by honoring the past through a major renovation project. The renovation includes reconstruction of the church's historic windows as well as general maintenance on the building such as tuck pointing, roof repairs and heating and air-conditioning. *(Submitted renderings courtesy Conrad Schmitt Studios)*

"I was very emotional and just loved it," he said. "I had served as an altar server for the first Mass. Fr. (Richard) Breitbach, who was the pastor of St. John Nepomuc, celebrated that Mass also. So, seeing the beauty of this church being restored was wonderful. We are very blessed."

St. Stanislaus Oratory is preparing for its 150th anniversary in a big way. In a quest to honor the past, parishioners are in the midst of a major renovation project to restore the beauty of the church the Polish immigrants envisioned when it was constructed.

In 1866, 30 parish families began with a brick building purchased from St. Stephen's Lutheran Church and dedicated it to St. Stanislaus. As the Polish population grew, a new church was imperative. By July 1872, when Archbishop John M. Henni blessed the cornerstone for the new church on Grove and Mitchell streets, nearly 1,000 families called St. Stanislaus home.

St. Stanislaus was the center of Polish life in Milwaukee and was the first Polish church in urban America. The immigrants survived on low-paying, entry level jobs, but pledged \$30 per family — a month's wages — to construct the massive church.

Its two towers were topped with glimmering domes and gilded with 23-carat gold leaf in the 1960s.

HOME NEWS HERALD OF HOPE WHERE WE WORSHIP SUBMIT CONTENT SHOP SUBSCRIBE E-ED

Nicknamed the “church of the gold domes” by Milwaukeeans, its Baroque style was popular in Poland during the 17th and 18th centuries.

## Changes made after Vatican II

After the Second Vatican Council, interior changes included removal of the baptismal font, leveling the sanctuary, deconstructing the high altar and moving it to the center of the apse. The Communion rail was removed, and purple carpeting installed. Stained glass windows were replaced with ones having a modern appearance.

Many of the aesthetic changes were done in hopes of keeping the structure maintenance free. However, a declining Polish population in the neighborhood resulted in declining attendance and the building fell into disrepair.

To keep the church from becoming shuttered, Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan placed the parish in the care of the Institute of Christ the King in 2007.

In addition to an English Mass on Saturday afternoon, the Tridentine Latin Mass is celebrated twice on Sunday morning. Approximately 500-600 people attend Mass at St. Stanislaus each weekend.

In an effort to return the structure to its original look, members brought back the high altar, tile flooring, baptismal font and are preparing to install a green onyx and grey Carrara marble Communion rail.

## Community feels duty to preserve past

According to oratory rector, Canon Benoît Jayr, a native of Montauban, France, the community feels a duty to preserve the Polish inheritance at St. Stanislaus.

“In the 1960s, there was a big desire to change everything and to make it new and less classic and traditional,” he said. “So, we have many things here that were not in the style of the church. The church renovations back then were supposed to give more vitality and represent a new spring for the church.

Unfortunately, this did not happen – the modern windows and renovated sanctuary were not congruous with the original Baroque style of the church.”

Over the past two years, the restoration project has included maintenance, upkeep, tuck pointing, roof repairs, fixing water damage, ventilation, heating and air-conditioning. The final component of the project will be repainting the nave.

**Renovations should be complete this fall**

HOME

NEWS

HERALD OF HOPE

WHERE WE WORSHIP

SUBMIT CONTENT

SHOP

SUBSCRIBE

E-ED

Canon Jayr hopes the renovations will be completed by September, in time to celebrate the parish's sesquicentennial anniversary.

"We have a debt of gratitude for the Polish people who built this magnificent church in Milwaukee," said Canon Jayr. "The two towers of St. Stanislaus are symbols, and if you land in the Milwaukee airport, there is a big mosaic on the floor of St. Stanislaus. I remember when I landed here for the first time in Milwaukee and when I noticed that, I thought it was a good sign that St. Stanislaus is even present in the airport."

**Phone call brings treasures from past**

While there are always unforeseen issues in a renovation project, no one was prepared for the phone call received last spring, explained Abbé George Baird of St. Stanislaus.

"A man called and told me that his wife passed away two years ago, that he wanted to sell his house and explained that his wife had rescued some of the windows from the 1960s and stored them in his basement. He wondered if we wanted them," said Abbé Baird.

"They were very good to help, but we really couldn't use much of the windows themselves because they were in such dilapidated condition. There were literally boxes of broken pieces, but they were helpful in terms of matching colors and things."

The original windows, removed and thought destroyed during the 1960s' renovation, had been in the man's basement for 50 years. While they were unable to salvage more than a couple of pieces in the actual stained glass renovation, they were helpful in reconstructing the historic windows, explained Heidi Emery, vice president and art director at Conrad Schmitt Studios, the company that is restoring the church.

"While we weren't able to utilize much of the glass fragments, they were very helpful in matching the replacement glass to the original opalescent glass used in the windows. The original glass manufacturer is still in business in Indiana so we were fortunate to be able to match them," said Emery. "We have used a couple of the rescued pieces into our windows, but down the road we would like to make a display with the fragments as part of some sort of historic timeline of St.



Stanislaus.”

[HOME](#)[NEWS](#)[HERALD OF HOPE](#)[WHERE WE WORSHIP](#)[SUBMIT CONTENT](#)[SHOP](#)[SUBSCRIBE](#)[E-ED](#)

Two of the new windows are installed and the rest of the project is going well, Emery said.

“We have the layouts for the rest of the glass and hope to be doing more work in the sanctuary soon. We are phasing in the project as funds and time permits, and are working to get as much done as possible to celebrate their anniversary,” she said.

Conrad Schmitt worked on the 1960s renovation; for Emery, that work has special meaning as her grandfather worked on the project.

“It is nice to work with Abbé and Canon to restore the historic beauty of the church,” she said. “Our files on St. Stanislaus are quite substantial and this project is very enjoyable. I was looking at old financial statements from the 1950s and my grandfather’s picture was there. It is special to look at this history. My dad helped to put up the bell tower that was redone – it is a special place and I love the history.”

### **Project supported by parishioners**

According to Abbé Baird, the project was supported by the parishioners and not by a foundation grant.

“People come here, middle class people, who are so very kind,” he said. “We do have some fundraising such as an annual parish dinner, which last year was for having the communion rail built, which is coming from near Florence, Italy. This year, we are trying to raise enough money for the front doors of the church.”

Members of the faith community are excited for the completion of the project to be able to worship in a space reminiscent of the past.

“It is exciting and interesting, because like me, I am always the ‘no fun’ person because I am the one who says, ‘let’s put tuck pointing on the outside,’ while others may want the Communion rail done,” said Abbé Baird. “Both are important projects and, of course, some are more visible and exciting and so it takes a little more explaining to raise funds for the more invisible projects but the members always come through.”

One of the more extensive projects was removing a large podium resting on many tons of concrete used to level the floor. The poured concrete was so heavy that support beams were installed underneath the sanctuary. Papa is impressed by the completed work and credits Abbé Baird for orchestrating efforts.

“He really was able to get the high altar up and running in July,” he said. “I was surprised because with the concrete pour to stabilize the underpinnings of the high altar, it could easily have taken 18 months to do. Everything was so spot on with deadlines and that credit goes right back to him and Canon Jayr. It has been an amazing project that has only taken two years to do what it would have taken other parishes five to six years to accomplish. That says a lot about our leaders and our members.”



Facebook



Twitter



Print Friendly



LinkedIn



## RELATED



St. Stanislaus Keeps Tradition  
While Moving Forward

July 18, 2018

In "Where We Worship"



Pipe dreams come true at St.  
Stanislaus

February 16, 2012

In "Local"



New bronze doors help Holy Hill  
mark 150th anniversary

May 23, 2013

In "Local"

Ghostery blocked comments powered by Disqus.



## Archdiocese of Milwaukee Links

[Home Page](#)

[Contact](#)

[Site Index](#)

[Events](#)

[Giving Opportunities](#)

[Resources](#)

## Quick Links

[News](#)

[Special Sections](#)

[Herald of Hope](#)

[Story Idea](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Wisconsin Pastoral](#)

[Handbook](#)

## Only in Print

[Photos](#)

[Event](#)

[Bishops' calendars](#)

[SUBSCRIBE TODAY!](#)

## Contact the Herald

3501 S. Lake Drive

Milwaukee, WI 53235-0913

(414) 769-3500

[catholicherald@archmil.org](mailto:catholicherald@archmil.org)