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# New Jersey Catholic Records Newsletter

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## St. Thomas the Apostle Byzantine Catholic Church and its Role in Byzantine Catholic Awareness Day

As the American economy started to recover from the Panic of 1873 and the ensuing depression, observers began to note a sea change in the sources of immigration to these shores. Settlers in the United States until this time had come predominantly from northern and western Europe, with only a sprinkling of immigrants from other sources.

Now hundreds of thousands from eastern and southern Europe began to enter the country and in a short time the settlers of this "new immigration," as historians would call it,

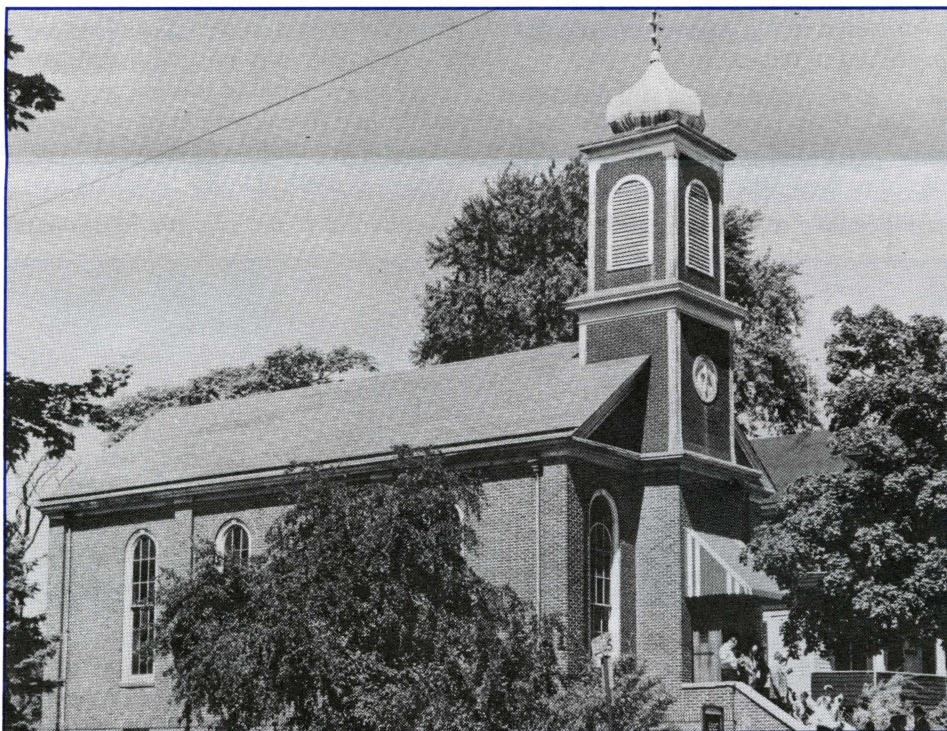
began annually to outnumber the arrivals from western and northern Europe.

Among those who comprised this mass of migrants were the Ruthenians, whose number is difficult to determine because American immigration officials kept count essentially by place of political origin. Ruthenians had no one recognized political unit as their homeland, but came from the area of the Carpathian mountains and from nearby territory divided among several political units. They were united in their religion rather than by politics.

As the economic and social disruptions caused by the increasing industrialization of eastern Europe further complicated their existing political and religious repression, Ruthenians began in the 1880s to move to the United States in rapidly increasing numbers. Many went to the coal mining regions of Pennsylvania, but substantial numbers opted for the manufacturing and commercial opportunities of the New York-New Jersey metropolitan area.

These immigrants reached Rahway in 1890. The town was growing rapidly. Its factories were close enough to the Pennsylvania railroad's tracks to give them wide access to markets. The town shipped everything from carriages and printing presses to bicycle parts and music boxes all across the nation. The economic diversity augured well for the future, and soon substantial numbers of Ruthenians settled in the area. Like millions of other immigrants they settled close to people who shared their language and culture for the security and companionship these offered in a new and often hostile environment.

Between 1890 and 1912, however, they had to travel for religious services to St. John the Baptist Greek Catholic Church in Perth Amboy. In the early days this meant eight miles each way by foot or horse-and-buggy every Sunday, until a trolley connected the two towns.



*The first parish church, when the patron was St. John the Baptist*

*continued on page 2*





*Cantor George Sabol explains a liturgical text to a visitor at a Byzantine Catholic Awareness Day.*

By 1912, at last, the community had grown large enough to be able to support its own church and a parish was organized with the consent of Bishop Stephen Soter Ortynsky, the first Byzantine-Slavonic bishop appointed by the Holy See in the United States. For \$1,500 they purchased some land where they hoped to build a church. But then they learned that a former German Lutheran Church, no longer used, was available for \$6,500, so they bought this and immediately had their church.

Although the new occupants invariably found that the building needed modifications to adapt it satisfactorily to their needs, a substantial number of parishes have used this tactic to obtain their first church. In Rahway, the remodeled church was dedicated by Bishop Joseph O'Connor of Newark in September 1913.

Reverend Peter Kustan became the first pastor of the new parish of Saint John the Baptist. He had served in Perth Amboy and so was familiar with the area and with some of his new parishioners. He visited extensively among the Ruthenian population and soon had enlisted many in the parish. He served Saint John the Baptist until 1926 and built the parish up. But his successors – Fathers Joseph Jackanich, Alexander Dolinay and John Slivka – faced very different circumstances. The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression of the 1930s severely damaged the economy of the area. Some people moved away; those who remained were much less able to contribute to the upkeep and development of the parish.

From 1944 to 1961 a succession of pastors served for short periods. While the postwar era saw the arrival of substantial numbers of Ruthenians from the coal fields of Pennsylvania to swell the number of potential parishioners, the parish seemed to make slow work of overcoming the problems left from depression and war.

The appointment of Father Emil Mihalik as pastor in 1961 marked a turning point in the growth of the parish, when the dogged devotion manifested in the depression and war years began to bear fruit.

In 1962, to end confusion with other churches in the area also dedicated to St. John, the parish was re-named St. Thomas the Apostle. To consolidate

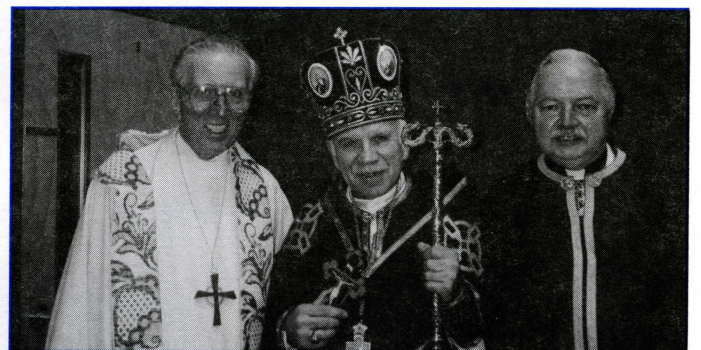
parish facilities and to replace the old church, which was rapidly deteriorating, the parish held a capital fund drive and also sold the old rectory and church. On a spacious plot along St. George Avenue they erected a new church building with adjoining parish center. Although obviously modern in materials and construction, the new church, as the architect J. Edgar Luders explained his work, "follows [the] age-old balance between simplicity in structure and glorious exuberance in [interior] art, not in the sense of copying old styles but rather re-interpreting their basic truths in contemporary techniques and craftsmanship."

Most Reverend Stephen J. Kocisko, bishop of the diocese of Passaic, blessed the church on October 6, 1968, his last official act before being installed as bishop of the Byzantine Catholic diocese of Pittsburgh. His successor in Passaic, Most Reverend Michael J. Dudick, appointed Father Mihalik Chancellor of the diocese, a post he held only until June, 1969, when he was designated the first bishop of the newly-created diocese of Parma, Ohio.

In Rahway, over the next few years, the parish freed itself of debt on the new buildings within six years and the new pastor, Father Theodore Chelena, happily burned the mortgage as a symbol of this success. The continued development of the parish saw the installation of the new Icon Screen in 1982. Unlike many of the iconostases with which western



*The new St. Thomas the Apostle Church*



*Left to right, Bishop Dominic A. Marconi, Union regional bishop, Bishop Andrew Pataki of the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Passaic and Father John Zeyack, pastor of St. Thomas the Apostle Church, at Byzantine Catholic Awareness Day, March 1996. (Photo by Steve Peter, courtesy of The Catholic Advocate.)*





*The church interior, with the doors in the iconostasis closed. The royal doors in the center bear icons of the Four Evangelists.*

Christians are familiar from seeing pictures or movies, the Icon Screen at St. Thomas is not a solid wall between sanctuary and nave; the entire sanctuary is thus always visible, although partially screened.

On October 3, 1988, the 25th anniversary of the dedication of the church, a new catechetical center was dedicated in memory of Bishop Mihalik by Bishop Michael Dudick.

Since 1975 Father John Zeyack has served the parish as pastor. In these years the parish has not only continued to serve the needs of its members but has reached out to show the riches of its traditions and the breadth of Catholicism to its Roman Catholic neighbors.

In 1976 Bishop Dominic A. Marconi, regional bishop of Union County, and the deans of Union County joined in sponsoring the first Byzantine Catholic Awareness Day, hosted by Saint Thomas parish. This event developed out of conversations between the bishop and Father Zeyack in which the unfamiliarity of Roman Catholics with the Byzantine Catholic presence in the area became apparent.

To begin to remedy the situation, each Roman Catholic pastor in the county was asked to invite his parishioners to a special Eucharistic celebration at St. Thomas Church, which would be followed by displays and demonstrations of ecclesiastical furnishings and materials, and

refreshments for the body to accompany the enlightenment for the mind.

The first Byzantine Catholic Awareness Day in 1976 was a great success in opening some doors and windows; Roman Catholics in Union County did become more aware of their Byzantine fellow-Catholics and their rich traditions. One evening, however, was not enough. So Byzantine Catholic Awareness Day became an institution in the life of both Churches: every two years since then a similar gathering has focused on some aspect of the liturgy and traditions of the Byzantine Catholic rite and further opened the doors to mutual understanding.

Although this series began before Pope John Paul II issued his encyclical *Orientale Lumen* (Light of the East), as Bishop Marconi noted at the 1996 meeting, it perfectly exemplifies two activities the Pope urged upon Catholics of Eastern and Western rites: that "all should grow in mutual understanding and unity by improving our knowledge of each other," and that we should "meet one another regularly."

For more than a millennium there has been division within the one Church of Christ. If mutual ignorance has fostered that division, the existence of several parishes of Byzantine Catholics in Union County opens the way to developing better understanding of each other's rituals and traditions. Americans in this respect are fortu-



*Crowds examine displays of icons and liturgical accessories at an Awareness Day.*

nate, for Eastern Rites are generally (not always) widely separated from areas of the Roman rite in Europe, so that opportunities for mutual understanding and mutual visitation are harder to come by.

There are five Byzantine Rite parishes in Union County. St. Vladimir's in Elizabeth and Immaculate Conception in Hillside belong to the Ukrainian Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Ss. Peter and Paul in Elizabeth, St. George in Linden and St. Thomas the Apostle in Rahway belong to the Byzantine Catholic Diocese of Passaic.

## **Oops! Sorry!**

In the account of some of the developments in the history of Sacred Heart Church, Vineland, in the Winter 1999 issue of this newsletter, we omitted a current item of great importance. Monsignor Joseph G. Stoerlein, P.A., who has been pastor of Sacred Heart for 32 years, will celebrate the golden jubilee of his ordination to the priesthood this spring, and then will retire.

Monsignor Stoerlein came to the parish as Vatican Council II was closing and has been at the helm as the parish charted its course through the roiled waters of the past 30 years. His leadership through this critical generation has been a significant factor in the successful adaptation of the parish to the post-Vatican II world. We apologize for the omission and congratulate him on his long and worthy career.



# Gerety Lecture Announced

The Archbishop Gerety Lectures were inaugurated on November 3, 1986, when Monsignor John Tracy Ellis spoke on "The Catholic Church and Her Universities – A View from History." In the intervening dozen years they have ranged widely over the field of ecclesiastical history. Next year's sessions give promise of continuing that happy trend.

Reverend John Jay Hughes leads off on October 14, 1999, with a lecture entitled "A Mass Murderer Repents: The Case of Rudolf Höess." Father Hughes is the author of *Pontiff: Popes Who Made History and Stories Jesus Told: Modern Meditations on the Parables*.

On March 1, 2000, Dr. R. Scott Appleby, director of the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at Notre Dame University, will address the topic: "Catholicism in American Society at the Dawn of a New Millennium." Doctor Appleby is the author or editor of numerous works on American religious history, including *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*.

Gerety Lectures are held in the Chapel of Immaculate Conception Seminary on the campus of Seton Hall University and begin at 8 p.m. unless otherwise noted. Save these dates for some intellectual treats!

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Most Reverend Dominic A. Marconi, D.D., *Chairman*; Reverend Monsignor Joseph C. Shenrock, *Vice Chairman*; Barbara Bari; JoAnn Cotz; Reverend Augustine Curley, O.S.B.; Reverend Daniel A. Degnan, S.J.; Reverend Monsignor William N. Field; Reverend Monsignor Charles J. Giglio; Reverend Michael G. Krull; Reverend Raymond J. Kupke; Joseph F. Mahoney; Sister Margherita Marchione, M.P.F.; Elizabeth Milliken; Reverend Monsignor Robert G. Moneta; Allan Nelson; Sister Irene Marie Richards, O.P.; Mark W. Rocha; Sister Thomas Mary Salerno, S.C.; Reverend Monsignor Francis R. Seymour; Reverend Joseph D. Wallace; Peter J. Wosh. Joseph F. Mahoney, *Newsletter Editor*

## Ad Multos Annos

Most Reverend Peter Leo Gerety, D.D., Archbishop Emeritus of Newark, will celebrate the 60th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood on Sunday, June 6, 1999, at the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Newark. In the course of his 60 years Archbishop Gerety performed notably as a parish priest in New Haven, as bishop of Portland, Maine and as Archbishop of Newark. Others will better recall these services than we can.

The Commission lauds him particularly for his understanding of the pastoral role of church history, which led him to open the Archdiocesan archives to researchers, to help establish the Commission and to chair it after his retirement, and to establish the Gerety Lectures in Church History and the Gerety Seminar-ian Award. Ad Multos Annos.

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