

St. Mary, Help of Christians Catholic Church Loretto, Kansas

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The settlers of Loretto came to Rush County in August 1876 from Pfeifer, Russia, situated 75 miles southwest of Saratov, Ukraine, and west of the Volga River. In 1875 three explorers were sent to Kansas to locate a new home for those who would soon leave Russia. They reported that the land in Kansas was good, very much like that in Russia with fertile soil, grass and streams, but with a more moderate climate.

In August 1876, German-Russian Catholic immigrants arrived from the Russian Province of Saratov on the Volga River. Some of those families established the settlement of Pfeifer. The first church in the new settlement was a frame building erected in 1879 by Rev. Joseph Cal Mayershofer, O. M. Cap. It was named Holy Cross Church. The community soon outgrew the wooden church and they constructed a larger stone church. In 1907, the Parish erected a new stone Rectory and began plans to enlarge or expand the church. An account by Father Peter Burkard tells that in 1910 parishioners were assessed 3% of their crops until enough money was collected to pay for the church. Two years of crop failures coupled with a handful of members who refused to participate created a split among the parish.

By 1912, seventeen families of the Ellis County settlement of Pfeifer were living just over the county line in Rush County. These families had contributed money toward the construction of the church in Pfeifer with the understanding that if they chose to start their own church, they could have their money returned. Upset by the financial burden imposed upon them, they decided to establish their own congregation across the line in Rush County. In an unprecedented move, the diocese of Concordia allowed Holy Cross Parish to release the funds. Thus, with about \$3,000 in funds, the parishioners in Rush County built their own church, four and one-half miles south of Pfeifer.

Adam S. Urban and Stephen S. Urban each donated five acres of land for the town site; Martin Urban gave one acre for a cemetery; and Joseph Urban donated land for a church, parsonage, and school. They completed the two-story combination school and church in the fall of 1912. The building measured 60x28 feet and stood 20 feet high. The upper level served as the church, and the lower was divided into three classrooms. Cost of the building was \$3,387.33.

The founders of the new parish were: Peter Basgall, John W. Basgall, John K. Basgall, Casper Holzmeister, John P. Roth. Jacob Stremel, Leo Stremel, Anton J. Stremel, John R. Stremel, Adam Stremel, John P. Stegman, Adam S. Urban, George J. Urban, Joseph M. Urban, Adam Urban, Sr., Martin Urban and George G. Urban.

On Tuesday morning, June 10, 1913, Rt. Rev. Bishop Hennessy of the Concordia diocese dedicated the church with assistance from Rev. Father Stollenwerk of Liebenthal, Rev. Father Wenzel of Schoenchen, Rev. Father Reber of Clara, Rev. Father Paul and Rev. Father Reidy of Wichita, and Rev. Father Stutz of the parish. The new church was named St. Mary Help of Christians, but the settlement was yet to be named.

The following excerpt is taken from the *Golden Jubilee of German-Russian Settlements of Ellis and Rush County, Kansas* in 1926...

“Having a church, the people were anxious to secure a resident pastor, and on November 22, 1912, Father Stutz was assigned to the parish. Divine services were held in the new edifice for the first time on the first Sunday of Advent, 1912. Owing to the lack of proper accommodations, it was decided to postpone the dedication until a priest house could be built.



St. Mary, Help of Christians Church and Rectory, circa 1920.



Masses were held in the second story of the church building.



Father Stutz.

Work on the new parsonage, which measures 40x28x18 feet, was begun in January, 1913. The building was completed shortly after Easter. On the tenth of June, 1913, the church was dedicated by Rt. Rev. J. J. Hennessy, Bishop of Wichita. Toward the close of 1913 the ten acre townsite was divided into lots 50x150 feet, and these sold for the benefit of the church.

This same year, 1913, the name of the village was changed from Illinois to Marienfeld, and a short time later, to the present name, Loretto.

In 1914 the room under the church was furnished with desks and benches, and regular classes conducted. For four years laymen taught the children. In 1918, however, owing to the ever increasing number of pupils, Sisters had to be obtained to take charge of the school. In September two Precious Blood Sisters, Agnes and Servana of Wichita, arrived. In the absence of a convent, Mr. Anton J. Stremel offered his house as a temporary dwelling place for the teachers. In 1919 a convent measuring 28x26x16 feet was erected at a cost of \$5,000.00.

About this time a dispute arose concerning the boundary between the parishes of Loretto and Pfeifer. A number of people who had moved to Loretto after the town was founded still continued to attend Holy Cross Church at Pfeifer, and refused to help maintain the church at Loretto. After years of wrangling, the Bishops of Wichita and Concordia (Loretto being in the Wichita Diocese, and Pfeifer in the Concordia Diocese) called a conference at Hays to hear both sides of the question. Those concerned in the dispute assembled in the Capuchin Friary at Hays, December 28, 1923, and after thoroughly considering the matter the Bishops set the county line, which is at the same time the diocesan line, as the boundary. Even this measure failed to bring about peace, and the case was appealed to the Apostolic Delegate at Washington, and from him to Rome. However, both the Apostolic Delegate and Rome upheld the decision of the Bishops fixing the county line as the limit of the two parishes.

In the years immediately following the founding of the town, Loretto developed rapidly and in 1916 had a population of about sixty families. Continued crop failures between 1918 and 1924 greatly reduced the population, but since 1925 the number of inhabitants has been again increasing. At present about fifty families dwell in the little village."

At first, the settlers could not decide on a name for the new community. In 1913, they named the town Illinois, after the township in which it was located. Later that same year, they changed the name to Marienfeld. Marienfeld, Russia was a daughter colony of Pfeifer, Russia founded in 1852. It was located about 30 miles southwest of Pfeifer, Russia and about 107 miles southwest of Saratov. This seemed to be an appropriate name since Loretto was a "daughter colony" of Pfeifer, Kansas. However, the naming issue was still not settled.

Finally, that same year, Father Joseph Stutz suggested the name, Loretto and townspeople agreed. Loretto was named after the town of Loreto, Italy, located in the Marche region of Italy near the Adriatic Sea in the province of Ancona. It is the home of the 16th century Basilica della Santa Casa (Basilica of the Holy House). The Basilica enshrines the relocated house where the Blessed Virgin Mary is believed to have lived. The Basilica also houses the sculpture of the Madonna and Child, "Our Lady of Loreto."

In 1915, the parishioners adopted a plan to pay for constructing a new church. "Two percent of the wheat crop from all farmers was to be paid to the pastor for every successful crop. In spite of a number of crop failures, the plan raised \$9,859.95 from 1915-1924.

From 1918 to 1924, the parish dropped from 60 to 40 families. Nevertheless, after an inspiring mission preached by Rev. Francis Hoefliger from Switzerland, the parish decided to proceed with building a new church. The parishioners pledged \$12,000 and agreed to help with construction.

Work commenced on the building in spring 1927. Despite a hail storm that destroyed most of the crops, financial difficulty, and some opposition to

construction of the new church, they completed the building and the first service was conducted on Good Friday, April 6, 1928. On May 24, 1928, the Right Rev. Bishop Schwertner dedicated the new "Mariahilf Kirche" (St. Mary's Help of Christians Church.) Solemn Mass was performed by Rev. Oenbrink, with assistance from Rev. Aloysius Clupny of Timken, and Rev. Alex Stramel, son of Anton Stramel of Loretto. Father Ildephonse O. M. C. gave the dedicatory sermon in German. The church was filled to capacity.

The church is Spanish Mission style architecture, buff brick, with a red tile roof. Cost of the new structure was \$23,800 plus architect's fees and heating system. The windows were imported from München (Munich), Germany. A triple glass window above the altar depicts the crucifixion scene. Windows on each side of the sanctuary depict the sacrifices of Abraham and Melchisedech. Other windows depict the fall of the first parents, the rebirth of man, and "Mary Help the Christians." Leaded-glass windows along the sides complement the others. Native sons and seminarians Jacob Stramel and Rev. Alex Stramel raised funds for the high altar. Reverend Joseph Stutz, pastor of the church donated the communion rail and Guardian Angels for the altar. The two side altars and other furnishings were also donated by parishioners.

Although the church, rectory, school, and sisters' convent was prominent, encompassing over a quarter of the town site, the community was also well known for music and baseball. Loretto had a marching band during the years from 1916-1936 that proudly entertained at baseball games and celebrations in Loretto and the towns in surrounding counties. Music was in the heart of all the families. For years, Loretto was also known for its winning baseball team playing teams from as far away as Wichita. In 1920, Loretto managed to defeat Fort Hays State College, 10-8 in a dramatic upset. For a time, the Loretto club played semi-professional baseball in a lighted ballpark across the road from the church. In 1950, the National Baseball Congress awarded Loretto a district tournament.

In the evening of March 3, 1948, a fire destroyed the old combination church and school building. About 8:00pm, as Father Russell Simms was celebrating Lenten devotions, parishioners noticed the fire raging in the school building. The men of the church formed a bucket brigade from a nearby hydrant to save the school building. Realizing the school was beyond rescue, they concentrated their efforts on saving the rectory that stood 35 feet to the north of the school. They were able to save the house with only minimal scorching on the south wall.

The parochial school had operated since September 1914 and at the time of the fire had 41 pupils enrolled. Classes resumed a short while later in a former residence across the street from the church. In 1933, the school became a public school, but the sisters continued to teach.

In August 1955, parishioners built a new parochial hall on the site of the burned school. The cement block building included a 40'x80' combination gymnasium-auditorium, 30'x35' dining hall, and 30'x15' kitchen. Completed at a cost of \$16,750, Leo Orth Construction Co. of Hays was the general contractor. The Christian Mothers and Altar Society of the church donated kitchen equipment with installation by Alvin Herrman and Alfred Urban of the parish.

In a town of only 30 residents, the future of the parish was promising. In 1955, the parish had 42 families with Father George M, Konda serving as pastor. There were 32 students in the elementary school with two Sisters Adorers of the Most Precious Blood as faculty.



The 1928 brick church as it appeared in 2022.

The Loretto church sent five native sons to the priesthood: Msgr. Alex G. Stremel, Fr. Joseph Stremel, Fr. Adolph Stremel, Fr. Peter Stremel, and Fr. Reggie Urban. At least 17 young ladies from the parish became Nuns. In 1962, church records had recorded 476 baptisms and 111 marriages.

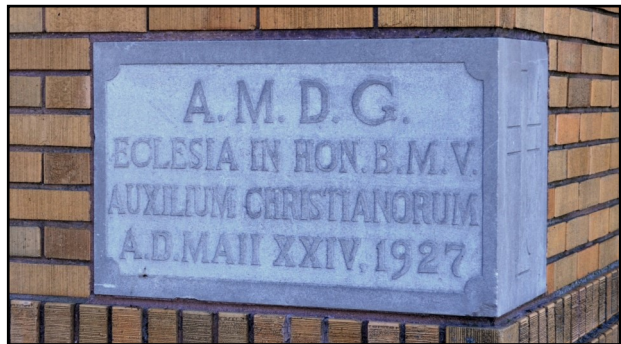
Twelve priests served the parish: Fr. Joseph Stutz, 1912-1932; Fr. Theodore Hard, 1932-1937; Fr. Arnold J. Weller, 1937-1941; Fr. Robert A. Herklotz, 1941-1942; Fr. Albert F. Esswein, 1942-1947; Fr. Russell J. Simms, 1947-1952; Fr. George M. Konda, 1952-1960; Fr. Ultan Murphy, 1960-1965; Fr. Walter Weiss, 1965-1967; Fr. Joseph E. Bahr, 1967-1970 (shared with Liebenthal beginning in 1969); Fr. Wenzel L. Birzer, 1970-1893; and Msgr. Anthony Dziemian, 1983-1987.

Unfortunately, change was on the horizon for the small community. In 1963, the Kansas Legislature passed the Unification Law mandating schools to significantly reduce their number of districts. Two years later, the Loretto school became part of the Otis-Bison Unified School District and closed permanently in 1968. Loretto's only store closed in 1972. The sisters' convent became a private residence and without a resident priest, the rectory was sold at auction on September 12, 1971. No priest was assigned to the church after 1987.

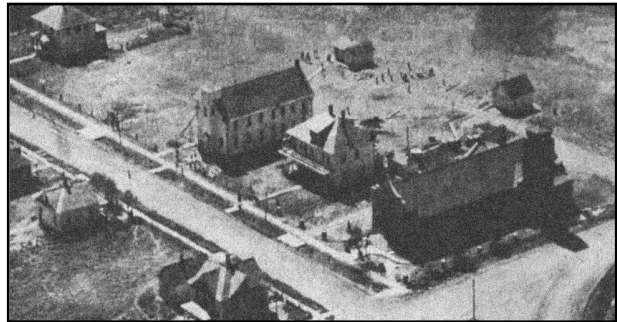
On June 29, 1997, Father James Dieker celebrated the final mass before a capacity crowd, many of them descendants from the original founders of the town. The diocese of Salina re-designated the church as a shrine. By 1999, less than a dozen people remained in the community.



Interior of St. Mary Help of Christians in 2020.



Cornerstone with the Latin inscription. Translation: "For the Greater Glory of God, Church in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary Help of Christians, A. D. March 24, 1927."



An aerial view of Loretto around 1930. From top left: sisters' convent, school, rectory, and church.

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