

## The Parish

### A Belgian National Parish

St. John Berchmans was originally established as the sole national parish for Chicago's Belgian immigrants. In 1905 Archbishop James Edward Quigley asked Father John B. De Schryver, S.J., a professor at St. Ignatius College who spoke both French and Flemish, the languages used by Belgians, to organize a parish. Not surprisingly, this Belgian Jesuit priest chose a Belgian Jesuit saint as the new parish's patron. John Berchmans lived from 1599 to 1621, dying in Rome at the age of 22 while studying for the priesthood in the Society of Jesus. He is a patron saint

of young people, students, and altar servers. Though he longed to become a missionary, he died before he could attain this goal. His life presents an example of how sainthood can be achieved in the routines of ordinary life, without any spectacular deeds or accomplishments.



*Fr. John B. De Schryver, S.J.  
First Pastor (1905-1906)*

Father De Schryver announced the formation of the parish at a banquet held on September 3, 1905, celebrating the 75th anniversary of the nation of Belgium's political independence. This is the date commemorated as the foundation of the parish. It is why we celebrate St. John Berchmans' centennial in 2005. Fr. De Schryver literally went door to door along with a few prominent Belgian-American laymen to raise money. He baptized the first baby in St. John Berchmans parish, Florence Vermeersch, on March 18, 1906, and celebrated the parish's first wedding, between Bruno Des Plenter and Josephine Fry, in May 1906. On August 26 of that year, he laid the cornerstone of the church building at the corner of Maplewood Avenue and Logan (then called Humboldt) Boulevard. Then his Jesuit superiors called him back to his teaching duties at St. Ignatius.

Archbishop Quigley invited a Belgian missionary working in Nebraska, Father Julius De Vos, to take over as pastor. He arrived on December 1, 1906 and stayed for twenty-one years, overseeing the building of the church, school, convent, and rectory which now anchor the east end of Logan Boulevard. A single architect, John Steinbach, designed all the parish buildings in the Spanish Romanesque style. Fr. De Vos invited the Dominican Sisters of Kentucky to open a

parish school in 1907. Sister Magdalen Norton, the Dominican provincial, sent an initial contingent of five Sisters; and the Kentucky Dominicans have remained a part of the parish ever since.

Unlike many of Chicago's immigrant groups, who clustered in a few neighborhoods surrounding their national parishes, the Belgians were few in number and scattered throughout the city. They would gather at St. John Berchmans for special occasions and national holidays, but could not support the parish by themselves. So in 1916, therefore, a new Chicago archbishop, George William Mundelein, assigned St. John's a definite territory, carved out of the boundaries of St. Sylvester parish. The boundaries ran from the North Branch of the Chicago River on the east to

Washtenaw Avenue on the west, and from Wellington to Fullerton north to south. So a parish that began with people speaking French, Flemish, and English, soon resounded to the sounds of other languages. In particular, many Polish-Americans, moving out from the densely populated districts around St. Stanislaus and St. Hedwig parishes, moved into the more spacious surroundings of Logan Square.

In 1927, Fr. De Vos, a priest for over fifty years, retired and was replaced by Father Lawrence Hurkmans. Cardinal Mundelein had been impressed with the work that Fr. Hurkmans had done organizing housing for visitors to the Eucharistic Congress held in Chicago the previous year, so he asked him to leave his suburban parish in Forest Park and take over leadership of St. John Berchmans. Fr. Hurkmans had been born in Holland but he spoke fluent English, French, and Flemish besides his native tongue. He arrived in July 1927 and stayed for twenty-six years.



*Fr. Julius De Vos,  
Long-term Pastor (1906 -1927)*



*Sr. Magdalen Norton, O.P.,  
Dominican Prioress  
(1904-1909)  
Principal SJB (1914 - 1923)*



*Old School*



*Convent and Rectory*

### **A Mixed Parish with a Polish Predominance**

In the nineteen-twenties, thirties, and forties, St. John's was no longer an exclusively Belgian parish. As early as 1920, about half the marriage partners who consecrated their wedding vows at St. John's were Polish, more than the Belgians or any other ethnic group. As soon as it received territorial boundaries, St. John's became what it has remained – a mixed community with one ethnic group (in these early years, the Poles) predominating but not forming an overwhelming majority. Fr. De Vos, in a letter to Archbishop Mundelein in 1918, identified "five nationalities now represented: Belgians, Polish, Irish, German and Italian." Inevitably, then, members of these different groups intermarried. Some of them also married non-Catholics, who formed the majority of residents in

the Logan Square neighborhood. In 1940, for example, 11 of the 69 marriages (16%) solemnized at the church were mixed marriages religiously; in 1948, an even higher percentage, 15 of 61 marriages (25%) included a non-Catholic. (The average throughout the archdiocese in the latter year was 20%.)

St. John's was neither large nor wealthy, simply a comfortably average parish, during its first half century. In 1930, Fr. Hurkmans reported to the archdiocesan authorities that his parish numbered 575 families, or 3600 "souls." Fr. Hurkmans had two assistant priests that year, Fathers D. R. Harnett and A. E. O'Brien, and between them they said six Sunday Masses at 6:30, 7:30, 8:30, 9:00, 10:00 and 11:00. The Mass and all other liturgical ceremonies were conducted in Latin. Fourteen Dominican Sisters taught 508 students in the school. The parishioners contributed \$46,200 to the parish in 1930, but the Sunday collection accounted for less than a quarter of this, \$11,682. The larger sources of parish income were the "pew rent," a fee payable either annually or week by week, and a series of extraordinary fundraisers, such as the annual spring festival or bazaar. The parish carried a heavy debt load, \$134,000, with annual interest charges of \$7405.



*Early Graduating Class, circa. 1930*

Both numbers of parishioners and parish revenue declined during the Great Depression and the Second World War, but in 1948 Fr. Hurkmans reported "825 families plus Belgians" for a total of "3600 souls." This phrasing summed up the status of the Belgians in the formerly national parish. Aside from those who lived within the boundaries of the parish, Belgians from elsewhere in the city were now just an occasional presence on special occasions. Parish revenue had rebounded to \$56,265 and the debt had been wiped out. Ten sisters instructed 489 students in the parish school and 204 more children from the parish attended public school and religious education classes. Father Hurkmans had two assistants, Fr. Thomas W. Riordan and a native of the parish, Fr. Charles A. Jolie. In

addition, Fr. J. Austin Graff, an algebra teacher at Quigley Seminary, resided at St. John's rectory. They still said the same six Masses on Sundays.

Fr. Hurkmans (by now a Monsignor) left a final legacy to the parish, the expansion of the church building to the dimensions it still retains today. During the war years, the parish had purchased the two houses and lots immediately behind the sanctuary on Maplewood Avenue. After the war, these houses were demolished and the church was lengthened. This required new loans, of course, so at mid-century St. John's parish carried a debt load of \$145,000. Annual revenue, however, had increased to \$70,580 so the debt service of \$8200 was manageable. Pew rents still brought in far more than the Sunday collections, but the bazaar was now only a minor factor in parish finance.

**Pastors of St. John Berchmans Church, 1905 - 2005**

*Fr. John B. De Schryver, S.J. (1905-06)*

*Fr. Julius E. De Vos (1906-27)*

*Msgr. Lawrence Hurkmans (1927-53)*

*Fr. Thomas V. Liske (1953-64)*

*Msgr. Donald J. Masterson (1964-70)*

*Fr. Casimir Szatkowski (1970-84)*

*Fr. Walter G. De Roeck (1984-91)*

*Fr. Martin Hebda (1991)*

*Fr. Michael Rochford (1992)*

*Fr. William B. Gubbins (1992-2000)*

*Fr. Eugene Gratkowski (2000- )*

The retirement of Msgr. Hurkmans in the summer of 1953 marked the end of an era in parish life. In its first half century, St. John Berchmans had only three pastors, and all of them were born in the Low Countries of Europe, either in Holland or Belgium, reflecting the community's origins as a Belgian national parish. In August, 1953, however, the parish welcomed its first American-born pastor, Fr. Thomas V. Liske, who had grown up nearby in Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish and had been teaching English at Quigley for many years. Fr. Liske's arrival ratified a process that had been going on for

decades, the transformation of St. John's from an ethnic parish to a mainstream, middle-class parish with a diverse congregation. It also highlighted a special relationship between the parish and Quigley seminary. Because of its convenient location close to downtown, Quigley professors found living at St. John Berchmans congenial. Following the algebra professor Fr. Graff, English teacher Fr. William Flaherty took up residence in the 1950s, followed by others later.



*New School*

The most important work of Fr. Liske's pastorate was the expansion of the school and the construction of a second school building. The return of national prosperity after the Great Depression and the Second World War had encouraged the famous "Baby Boom" of the late forties and fifties. As a result, parochial schools were bursting at the seams. So on October 31, 1954, St. John Berchmans parish purchased two city lots at the corner of Maplewood and Altgeld Avenues, for \$15,000, from long-time parishioners Henry and Lillian Sophie. Fr. Liske then announced a three-year fundraising drive for the new school. A cornerstone was laid in 1957 and the new school opened for the upper elementary grades in 1958. Despite the extra space, the parish school was still overflowing and could not accommodate all the children of parishioners. In 1960, for

example, twelve Dominican Sisters and six lay teachers were instructing 812 students in the two parish school buildings and another 290 Catholic children were attending public school.

Another innovation of Fr. Liske's tenure as pastor was the regular printing and distribution of a parish bulletin. The men's Holy Name Society had been publishing a monthly bulletin for a number of years, but Fr. Liske saw the need for a more general parish publication. Just a few months after arriving in the parish, the new pastor began writing a weekly bulletin he entitled "The Parish Life." Volume 1, Number 1 was dated October 25, 1953, the Feast of Christ the King and the beginning of a new liturgical year. The Holy Name Society broadsheet was included as a supplement to the parish bulletin once a month. The publication proved so timely and informative that when Fr. Liske tried to adjourn publication for the summer of 1954, public demand encouraged him to keep it going even during the vacation months. Thanks to the copies of this weekly bulletin, we can take a glimpse at what parish life was like in St. John Berchmans during the years when its membership had reached its largest numbers.

## **Parish Life in 1960**

During the liturgical year which commenced on the Feast of Christ the King in October 1959 and continued through 1960, Fr. Liske counted about 1500 families, numbering four to five thousand individuals, at St. John Berchmans parish. Fr. Liske, his two assistants Frs. James A. Flaherty and John McLoraine, and the Quigley professor in residence, Fr. William J. Flaherty, performed 194 baptisms, 50 marriages, and 83 funerals that year. There were still six Masses on Sunday, but the times had changed to 6:30, 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, 11:15, and 12:15. Obviously parishioners appreciated the addition of a later Mass, but this posed a real hardship for priests and parishioners who received Holy Communion since church regulations still required a full fast from both food and drink after midnight until the time of receiving Communion.

The devotional life of the parish year began with First Communion for the second-graders at 9:00 o'clock Mass on October 25, the Feast of Christ the King. Ordinarily, all the schoolchildren attended 9:00 o'clock Mass together, but on this day those not making their First Communion were encouraged to attend one of the other Masses with their families. As the liturgical year unfolded, a visiting Redemptorist priest conducted an Immaculate Conception novena, starting on Sunday November 29 and culminating on Our Lady's feast of the

Immaculate Conception, December 8. Just before Christmas, a busy round of Confessions was scheduled in the church, beginning with a special hour from 3:30 to 4:30 on Sunday, December 20 when a Flemish-speaking priest stopped by to hear the confessions of Belgian-Americans. On Tuesday, December 22, priests heard children's confessions from 9:00 to 11:30 in the morning and adult confessions from 7:30 to 9:00 that evening. Finally, on the last two days before Christmas, confessions were heard in English in the afternoon and in English and Polish in the evening, reflecting the predominance of the Polish ethnic group in the congregation. Christmas Midnight Mass, marked by traditional caroling, was followed by two brief low masses at 1:30 and 2:00 in the morning and then the full roster of six Masses on Christmas day. Then as now, the parish priests must have collapsed in exhaustion by the time the last parishioners returned home to open their presents.

The parish societies made special donations to the parish at Christmastime and these plus the collections at Mass totaled \$7,133, nearly ten percent of the parish's total revenue of \$95,113 for the year. The major lay organizations of the parish were the Holy Name Society for men, the Tabernacle Society and the Mothers' Club for women, and the Youth club for high school children. In addition, the Belgian Ladies and the St. Elizabeth's Guild preserved the identity of Belgian parishioners. The Holy Name Society gathered for Mass at 8:00 on the 2nd Sunday of each month, followed by a meeting and breakfast in the church hall at 9:00. The Tabernacle Society met on the 1st Monday after the 1st Sunday of each month; its members purchased and cared for the altar vestments and decorations. In many other parishes, similar organizations were called the Altar and Rosary Society. The Mothers' Club met on the 2nd Wednesday each month to discuss school issues and organize fundraisers for the school. The high school youth club held social events on the 2nd and 4th Fridays of each month.

Both the men's and women's societies of the parish organized bowling leagues at the nearby Fireside Bowl on Fullerton Avenue. The sponsors of the St. John's teams illustrate the close relations between parish and neighborhood at the east end of Logan Square. Frequent sponsors included:

- The Bob Inn, Harold and Bob Hanson, 2609 Fullerton
- Kowalski's Service Station, 2501 California
- DeRosa Liquors, 2444 Diversey
- Walter J. DeVriendt, Funeral Director, 2708 Western
- Frank & Herman's IGA, 2425 Diversey

The new school building at Maplewood and Altgeld provided a parish amenity that had long been lacking, a fully equipped gymnasium with a small stage. Taking advantage of Fr. Liske's connections at Quigley Seminary, the parish hired one of Quigley's physical education instructors, Tom Kleeman, to offer gym classes on a part-time basis. At the end of the school year in May, Mr. Kleeman put the schoolchildren through their paces in an annual gym show. Also on a part-time basis, Loretta Henner, a parishioner at St. John's, offered dance classes to interested students. Mrs. Henner's daughter, Marilu, graduated from St. John Berchmans school and Madonna High School. She went on to become a television and movie actress, most notably as the female star of the TV show "Taxi."

Besides school groups, other parish societies took full advantage of the new school's gym. The Mothers' Club held a get-acquainted party on October 21 and then a get-together dance in the gym on Saturday night, November 21. On Sunday November 8, the church ushers sponsored their annual dinner in the gym. Dances continued throughout the year, such as on St. Patrick's Day, March 17. Old-time parishioners recall these dances as festive, well-attended affairs, and even heavy rain or snow storms didn't slow the fun. By contrast, the spring festival or bazaar, which had once been a mainstay of parish financial support, drew poor attendance in 1960; and the parish bulletin stated that its gross proceeds were \$1000 less than the previous year. The pastor reported net proceeds of only \$1609 from the bazaar that year, and apparently it was soon discontinued. Other fundraisers continued, such as the Big Turkey Bingo, at which fresh turkeys were offered as prizes just before Thanksgiving and an annual Mothers' Club Bingo in February. Also in late February of 1960, on four successive nights, the 8th graders mounted a full-length play written by the pastor and former English professor, Fr. Liske. Entitled "The Maid of Lorraine," the play chronicled the life of St. Joan of Arc.



*Mass at Parish Picnic, circa. 1990*

In the summertime, the social life of the parish moved outdoors with the annual parish picnic on Sunday June 26. The Holy Name Society had been sponsoring a picnic at Fullerton Woods in River Grove since 1949. In one year, 1954, the parish bulletin reported that the picnickers consumed 2040 bottles of pop, 720 Dixie cups of ice cream, and 1200 boxes of Cracker Jack. The thousand or so parishioners at the woods ranged in ages from 6 weeks to 89 years.

The devotional life of the parish continued through Lent, with Stations of the Cross on Fridays, and a Holy Name Society day of recollection on Sunday March 13. Holy Week services were conducted according to the revised

liturgy that had been introduced in 1956 but they were still in Latin. The schoolchildren crowned the Blessed Virgin with flowers on the first Sunday of May. Then at the end of the month, on Sunday May 29, Fr. Robert Dombrowski, a St. John Berchmans boy recently ordained a priest for the diocese of Fort Wayne, said his First Mass at the parish. Towards the end of summer, on Sunday August 21, the parish began its annual Forty Hours Devotion, with services after the 12:15 Mass on Sunday, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament all afternoon and evening Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, and closing services on Tuesday night at 7:45. Then came September, the start of school, and the beginning of another year of social, liturgical, and devotional events. The parish life unrolled in a regular round of worship, education, and community sociability.

## A Cascade of Changes

On December 14, 1969, St. John's church rang out with the sounds of a "Mariachi Mass," sung in both Spanish and English to celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. A few days after Christmas another special Spanish Mass and Christmas play were held in the church hall to greet the birth of the Christ Child. Then, on May 10, 1970 the 12:30 Mass was listed in the parish bulletin as a Spanish-language Mass for the first time. These events heralded one of many changes that cascaded over the parish in the following decade, the change from a Polish predominance to a Latino majority. The transformation in the parish's ethnic makeup took place gradually, however, and was very similar to the earlier passage from Belgian to Polish predominance. Moreover, many other changes hit the Catholic Church and the parish community in the 1960s and 70s, and several of them proved more profound and challenging than the ethnic transition.



*Latin Sounds*

The source of many changes was the Second Vatican Council held in Rome from 1962 to 1965. When Pope John XXIII convened this ecumenical council he said he was throwing open the windows of the church to allow fresh air inside. At the same time, however, many familiar customs and practices flew out the same windows. The Latin Mass disappeared in 1964 along with other liturgical regulations such as abstinence from meat on Friday and the strict fasting before Holy Communion and during Lent. In early 1970 the archdiocese began allowing Catholics to satisfy their Sunday Mass obligation by attending Mass on Saturday afternoon or evening. St. John Berchmans experimented at first with two Saturday Masses, at 4:30 and 7:00, while monitoring attendance and reaction to each. The earlier Mass proved more popular so the parish scheduled just one Saturday Mass, at 5:00 P.M., beginning on May 10, 1970. Also in 1970 the parish finally removed the pew rent boxes from the church. Henceforth all donations to the parish were conveyed in Sunday collection envelopes, as had

been the general custom throughout the archdiocese for some time.

Other changes proceeded normally, unrelated to the Second Vatican Council. Fr. Liske had died on April 3, 1964, and he was replaced as pastor by Monsignor Donald Masterson who had served many years as an official in the chancery office, the archdiocese's central administrative office. Msgr. Masterson remained just six years before assuming the pastorate of a parish in suburban Park Ridge. He was succeeded on June 15, 1970 by Father Casimir Szatkowski. Ironically, St. John's received its first pastor of Polish ancestry just about the time that the parish was changing from a Polish to a Latino predominance. However, Fr. Szatkowski was qualified to preside over the transition. Though he had served exclusively in Polish parishes throughout the archdiocese since his ordination in 1950, he had recently completed a Spanish language summer course in Puerto Rico.

The reforms emanating from the Vatican Council disturbed some Catholics and the ethnic transition proved unsettling to others, but two further changes proved far more challenging. One was the decline in numbers of religious Sisters and the other the drastic increase in the financial burden of running the parish.

## The Terrible Seventies

The parish school faced a series of crises throughout the 1960s and 70s for the addition of a second school building had proven a burden as well as a blessing. First opened in 1958, the Altgeld Avenue building closed again just eleven years later. School attendance had declined from 812 students in 1960 to 544 for the 1969-70 school year. Accordingly, the school consolidated its classes back into the older building on Logan Boulevard, saving about \$18,000 per year in teachers' salaries. The parish rented out the Altgeld building to the Chicago Board of Education which used it for the overflow from local elementary schools. A drastic decline in the number of Sisters in the Dominican order, as in most religious orders right after the Vatican Council, forced even more wrenching changes. In 1970 the teaching staff at St. John's school was about evenly divided, with 8 Sisters and 7 lay teachers. On October 12, 1970, the parish school board, another innovation introduced after the Second Vatican Council, convened to discuss the future of the Sister-faculty. The Kentucky Dominicans had to make hard decisions about where to allocate their diminishing numbers of Sisters. By 1973, St. John Berchmans had only 2 Sisters remaining, along with 10 lay teachers.

The drastic reduction in the number of teaching Sisters signaled a fundamental change in the organization of Catholic education, with a large impact on the parish finances. Each teaching Sister received a small stipend, which was payable to the religious order not to them personally. Lay teachers, though underpaid by public school standards, earned something closer to a living wage. Already in 1970, lay salaries cost the parish \$28,706 in comparison to \$16,666 for religious. A decade later, lay salaries for the school had ballooned to \$93,574.

The increase in school salaries formed only part of the financial crisis of the 1970s. Utility costs soared as the Arab oil states drastically increased the price of oil in the late 1970s. The general rate of inflation in the United States increased 112% from 1970 to 1980, but prices in the Catholic parish economy went up even more. Besides the changeover from nominal salaries for nuns to real salaries for teachers, parishes also faced new requirements to provide comprehensive health and retirement benefits for the clergy. The annual expenses of St. John Berchmans parish for church and school went up from \$163,769 in 1970 to \$541,669 in 1980, an increase of 315%.

Previous to the 1970s, the finances of St. John Berchmans had been often challenging but generally manageable thanks to the generosity of the parishioners. From the 1970s on, however, the financial burden exceeded the capabilities of the parishioners to meet it. The parishioners' generosity did not diminish. In 1970, 1500 families had contributed about \$60 a year to the Sunday and holyday collections, a little more than a dollar a week. Fewer families, about 1000, remained in the parish ten years later, but they donated nearly twice as much yearly per family, just about keeping up with the general rate of inflation. Yet this level of giving could not match the huge runup in costs during the terrible 70s. The parish, therefore, began receiving loans and subsidies from the archdiocese and "sharing" contributions from wealthier parishes. The archdiocese formally classifies its parishes

into three groups: parishes earning a surplus, those breaking even, and those requiring a subsidy. During the terrible decade of the 1970s, St. John Berchmans moved from the break-even to the subsidy category. It became officially a "poor" parish.

## Rising to Challenges

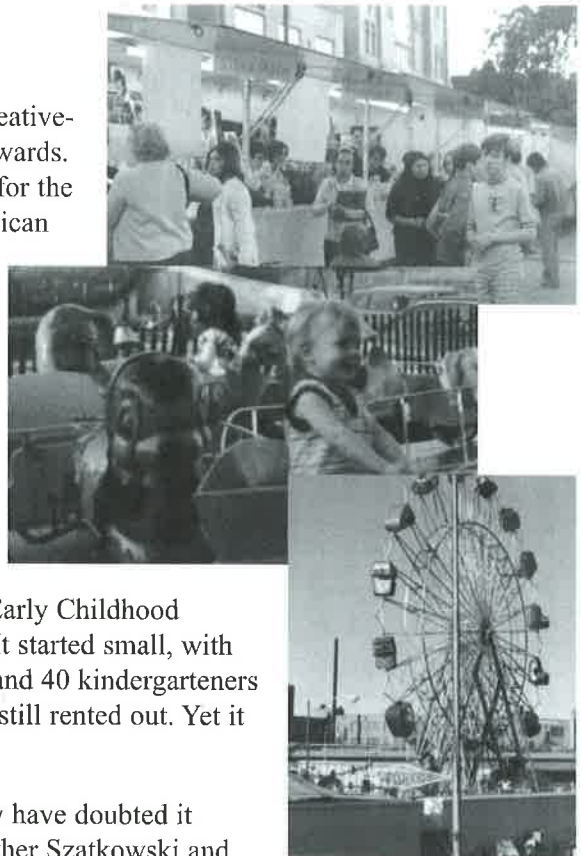
The parishioners of St. John Berchmans, however, responded creatively and generously to the challenges that appeared from 1970 onwards. The Dominican Sisters could no longer provide all the teachers for the school, but they had not abandoned the parish. In 1980 a Dominican remained as principal and another served as full-time director of religious education in order to reach the many students attending public school. Two other sisters pioneered innovative parish programs. In 1977 Sr. Theresa Grossman organized a community service project and began serving as the "Parish Friend" of St. John Berchmans, visiting the sick, the elderly, and the poor of the parish in order to help them with chores and errands. Sr. Joyce Montgomery, who had been teaching in the primary grades since 1969, saw an increasing need for day care as more and more mothers were working full-time outside the home. In 1979 she spearheaded the organization of an Early Childhood Center in part of the newer school building on Altgeld Avenue. It started small, with two full-time and two part-time staff teaching 30 pre-schoolers and 40 kindergarteners in the basement of the building while the rest of the school was still rented out. Yet it expanded year by year to meet the needs of the neighborhood.

When the parish marked its 75th anniversary in 1980, some may have doubted it would survive to celebrate another significant milestone, but Father Szatkowski and the parishioners were still looking to the future. The parish mounted a diamond jubilee campaign to raise money for a new roof on the church. Laboriously, week by week throughout the year, small pledges and contributions mounted up until the \$42,000 required was collected. By this time, too, the parish carnival on the boulevard in early summer had become a crucial piece of the parish financial puzzle, and a weekly bingo helped raise money for the school. In the year 2000, Fr. Eugene Gratkowski arrived as pastor and took a hard look at the parish carnival, noting that it netted only about \$20,000 per year and yet it irritated the neighbors with its noise and crowds. At his suggestion, the parish replaced the carnival with a quieter, block party in June and a dinner-dance in the fall.

None of these fundraisers were sufficient to erase the necessity of a subsidy from the archdiocese but they did show the archdiocesan authorities the good faith and generosity of the parishioners. In a parallel gesture of good will to mark the Millennium Year, the archdiocese forgave the entire parish debt of St. John Berchmans, totaling about \$400,000. The archdiocese also made a large grant to the parish for necessary structural work on the church roof. Debt forgiveness plus capital grant amounted to a million-dollar vote of confidence in the parish.

The Archdiocesan School Board, however, lost confidence in the viability of St. John's school during the 2004-05 school year. On February 23, 2005 board officials informed the pastor and principal that the school would have to close due to its accumulated debt of \$240,000. The parish received a brief reprieve and mounted a furious fundraising campaign among parents, parishioners, alumni, and neighborhood friends. By raising about 60% of the funds needed to erase the debt in just over five weeks, the parish campaign convinced the archdiocesan authorities to keep the school open.

As the end of the twentieth century approached, staffing parishes throughout the archdiocese became increasingly difficult and many parishes were closed in 1989 and in subsequent years. By the year 2000 the archdiocese



*Parish Carnival, 1974*



counted just half the number of active priests that had labored in Chicago fifty years previously. When St. John's only assistant priest was re-assigned in 1990, he was not replaced immediately, but eventually the parish did receive another assistant because of the special language needs of the area. Presently, however, the number of parishioners hovers just below the threshold of 1000 families that the archdiocese requires before it will send a second priest, so the current pastor, Fr. Eugene Gratkowski, labors alone.

An important reform instituted by the Second Vatican Council, the permanent diaconate program, has mitigated this lack of priests to some extent. Since the 1970s married men have been eligible to commit themselves to ordination as deacons and assist in the preaching, teaching, and caregiving ministries of the church. St. John Berchmans received its first permanent deacon in February 1980 when Virgilio Bonifazi moved to the parish with his family and began his ministry which terminated only with his death in 2004. Currently two other deacons, Guillermo Mendizabal and Jorge Cabrera, assist Fr. Gene in the work of the parish. Sr. Joyce Montgomery, after many years of work with early childhood education at St. John's, became the school principal in 2003. A dedicated corps of Eucharistic ministers, lectors, and cantors assists the congregation in its Sunday celebrations. There are fewer priests at the present time, but lay people, deacons, and religious have taken up the slack and are rising to the challenges of worship, education, and community-building in a new century.



*Pastor and Principal, Fr. Gene Gratkowski and Sr. Joyce Montgomery, O.P.*

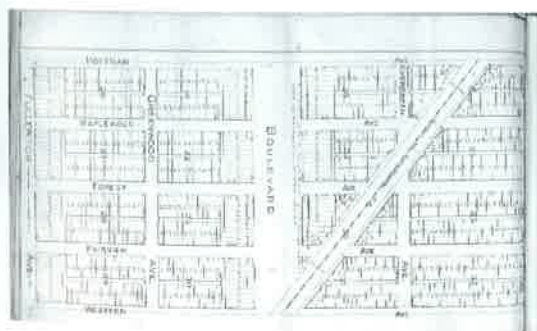


*Parish Block Party, 2005*

## The Neighborhood and the People

### Maplewood and Logan Square

The Logan Square neighborhood is much older than St. John Berchmans parish and the area has never been predominantly Catholic. A New England widow, Maria Adams, purchased a quarter section of land (160 acres) from the U.S. government on the prairie northwest of Chicago, for \$200 in 1838. In 1854 Adams sold this land to a syndicate of Yankees who named the area Maplewood, carved it into small building lots, and opened it for development. Besides Maplewood Avenue (where St. John Berchmans church now stands), other streets had leafy names such as Fairview (now Artesian), Forest (now Campbell), Evergreen (now Schubert), and Greenwood (now Altgeld). That same year, 1854, the developers decided a right of way through the property to the Illinois and Wisconsin Railroad (later the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad.)



*Maplewood subdivision, circa. 1880*

Maplewood took off as a railroad suburb in the years just before and after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. The Northwestern Railroad opened a commuter station at Diversey and Rockwell in 1870, and that same year the North Park Commissioners marked out the lines of a grand boulevard named for the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. After the fire, the city of Chicago enacted strict building regulations requiring brick or stone construction in the area devastated by the disaster. Maplewood, however, stood outside the city limits, in the township of Jefferson, so less expensive wood-frame construction was still permitted. Chicagoans who couldn't afford brick buildings erected modest wooden cottages near the railroad and wealthier suburbanites raised stately mansions along the boulevard. By 1884, the population of Maplewood had reached about 6,000.

General John A. (Black Jack) Logan, a Civil War veteran and Republican stalwart, died in 1886 and the intersection where Humboldt Boulevard changed from a north-south to an east-west direction was named after him. Curiously, Logan Square is not really a square, but a circle, the only European-style traffic circle in Chicagoland. Gradually, the term Logan Square came to be applied to the whole area. In 1889 the city of Chicago annexed the township of Jefferson, taking in the entire northwest side including Maplewood and Logan Square. In 1910 the east-west leg of the boulevard was renamed Logan Boulevard. Another transportation development, the completion of the L-line to Logan Square in 1895, made the neighborhood even more desirable as a residence.



*Victorians on the Boulevard*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the neighborhood's people were overwhelmingly of northern European, Protestant origins. The 1900 census affords a close look at the population of the residential block where St. John Berchmans church would soon be constructed. Maplewood Avenue, from the present-day Altgeld Avenue to Logan Boulevard, listed 13 addresses numbering 24 households. These included 6 German families, 8 Scandinavian, 7 British, and 2 Irish. There was one Dutch family but no Belgians or Polish. The majority of household heads listed their occupation as skilled craftsmen, with a smattering of clerks and salesmen. This block was obviously one of working class or lower middle class residents. The seven buildings along the south side of the boulevard, from Maplewood to Western, also housed Scandinavian, German, and British families; but the occupations of the household heads – insurance agent, manager of a publishing company, real estate investor, bookkeeper – sound more substantial.

## Belgian Church and People

Belgium is a small country, carved out of the Low Countries of northwestern Europe by the Great Powers in 1830. Overwhelmingly Catholic, it embraces two distinct, and sometimes antagonistic, linguistic groups, the Flemish who speak a language akin to German or Dutch and the French-speaking Walloons. Relatively few Belgians emigrated to the United States, though there were small settlements in Iowa, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Texas. The 1910 census counted 2665 foreign-born Belgians in Chicago plus 1266 others whose parents were born in Belgium. These 3931 individuals made up one of the smallest ethnic groups in the city. Roughly 70% of these Chicago Belgians spoke Flemish, with the rest speaking French. It's almost miraculous that such a small foreign-born group could form its own parish. If they had waited another decade, they never would have succeeded; for Archbishop Mundelein, who arrived in Chicago in 1916, was a confirmed Americanizer who did not support national parishes. His predecessor, Archbishop Quigley, however, believed that no Catholic ethnic group, no matter how small or poor, should be left wandering around looking for a church to feel at home in. One historian has described Archbishop Quigley's administration of the Chicago archdiocese as "one long peace treaty."

There's no conclusive explanation why Archbishop Quigley and Father De Schryver chose the residential area of Maplewood in Logan Square for the first and only Belgian parish, for no documentation survives. One may speculate, however. The Belgians did not cluster in any one neighborhood as many larger immigrant groups did. Many Belgian men worked as janitors so they tended to live throughout the city in the buildings where they worked. An 1898 school census, however, did reveal that more Belgians lived on the west and northwest sides than elsewhere in the city. No Belgians lived on the immediate block where the church eventually was built, but the Des Plenters and a few other Belgians, such as the families of Joseph Jolie and Antoine Del Fosse, already lived nearby. The Maplewood subdivision of Logan Square was a pleasant residential area, with vacant land still available, and it was relatively easy for the scattered Belgians to reach by public transportation. Whatever the reasons, the Catholic Bishop of Chicago purchased four city lots at Maplewood and Logan for \$4500 on October 8, 1904, nearly a year before the official announcement of the new parish's formation. A small brick rectory was built first for Fr. De Schryver and then the church of St. John Berchmans rose over the boulevard in the latter months of 1906.

The church immediately acted as a magnet for the Belgian community throughout Chicago. The 1910 census counted 7 Belgian families among the 26 households (27%) on both sides of the 2500 block of Maplewood Avenue, where not a single Belgian had been found in 1900. The remainder of the residents on Maplewood were still predominantly German or Scandinavian, but the Belgians seem to have replaced the earlier British-

American residents. The Belgian household heads listed such occupations as tile-maker, motorman on the street railway, and car cleaner on the railroad. Remarkably not one of the seven was recorded as a janitor.



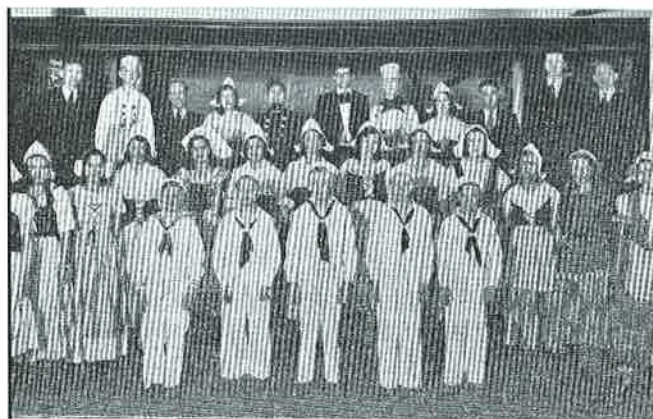
*Belgian Hall*

There were never enough Belgians to approach a majority in the neighborhood or even on an individual block. The census tract encompassing most of St. John Berchmans territory recorded a population of 3099 individuals in 1920. Only 90 of these had been born in Belgium; presumably an equal or slightly larger number were American-born Belgians, still comprising a tiny percentage of the area. Yet numbers don't tell the whole story. An ethnic neighborhood is a state of mind, a cultural phenomenon, more than a mere population cluster. Besides the church, other Belgian institutions located in the east end of Logan Square. A Belgian Hall was constructed on the southwest corner of Fullerton and Talman Avenues, and it became a social center for Belgians from all over the city.

The Belgian-American Janitors' Club was established there in 1915, and one later organization took the fascinating name of "All Belgians Are Equal," in an attempt to heal the division between Flemings and Walloons. Between the church societies at St. John Berchmans and the secular organizations headquartered in Belgian Hall, Logan Square formed a kind of "Belgian downtown," a magnet for the whole immigrant community. When Belgians stepped off the boat at Ellis Island, they sometimes told the immigration officers they were headed for "Rockwell," one of the residential streets in the Belgian parish and neighborhood.



*Belgian Heroes and Saints, Parish Pageant, November, 1907*



*Tulip Time in Holland, Parish Play, February, 1932*

## Polonia

Polish-Americans called the neighborhoods they lived in Polonja Amerykanska, or simply Polonia for short. "Polonia" was fundamentally different from the Belgians' "Rockwell." Unlike the Belgians who were few in number and scattered across the city of Chicago, Polish immigrants were very numerous and they tended to cluster in several areas of heavy industry. Their communities were villages transplanted nearly intact from the old country, with churches, schools, shops, newspapers, fraternal organizations, and social clubs providing an all-encompassing Polish cultural experience. Belgians came to their Hall on Fullerton Avenue and their church on Logan Boulevard for a few hours of sociability and remembrances of home, but Polish-Americans could live their whole lives in Polonia hearing nothing but the Polish language and meeting no one except other Poles.

The largest and most important village of Polonia lay directly south and east of St. John Berchmans. St. Stanislaus Kostka, near Division and Noble, was the mother church of Poles in Chicago, founded in 1867; and it

was soon surrounded by other Polish parishes, such as Holy Trinity, Holy Innocents, St. John Cantius, St. Mary of the Angels, and St. Hedwig. The neighborhoods along Milwaukee Avenue from Chicago Avenue up to about Fullerton formed a solid wedge of Polish settlement. The 1898 school census found that the half-mile area around St. Stanislaus church housed only one non-Pole out of thousands of residents. He was listed as Chinese, presumably the cook in the parish rectory.

Logan Square, though it was home to numerous Poles from the 1920s onwards, was never part of Polonia. Polish-Americans who moved into Logan Square were entering a different world, a more diverse, Americanized, middle-class world. The Logan Square neighborhood was fully built up by the 1920s, reaching its peak population of 114,174 in 1930. The neighborhood was thoroughly mixed, with 33,856 (30%) foreign-born residents, 53,968 (47%) American-born with foreign parents, and 26,262 (23%) American-born with American parents. Poles were the largest group among the foreign-born, numbering 11,328, about a third of the foreign-born group but only ten percent of the whole neighborhood. Logan Square also housed many Germans, Scandinavians, and Russians. No other community area in the city counted more foreign-born Belgians than Logan Square but this small group numbered just 413 individuals. The federal census never records religious affiliation, but it is clear that most of the Scandinavians and many Germans would have been Lutherans and most of the Russians were Jewish.



*St. Hedwig's Mission Church*

Poles who wanted to escape the congestion of the older neighborhoods but still remain part of Polonia would simply leap over Logan Square and settle in St. Hyacinth parish in the next neighborhood north, Avondale. After 1940 they had one other option, a Polish mission church on Washtenaw Avenue within the boundaries of St. John Berchmans but not officially part of the parish. The Resurrectionist priests, a Polish religious order that staffed St. Hedwig's and other large Polish parishes on the northwest side, established St. Hedwig's mission as a service to the Polish-speakers of Logan Square. At mid-century, when St. John Berchmans counted 1100 families and 3300 souls, St. Hedwig's mission, a few blocks away, served an additional 245 families with 700 individuals. In 1950 the mission church celebrated three Masses every Sunday, and registered 26 baptisms, 17 marriages, and 14 First Communions. The Resurrectionists eventually stopped staffing St. Hedwig's mission in 1978, but the archdiocese kept it open with various expedients for a dozen more years before closing it permanently in 1990.

Poles retained their status as the largest single ethnic group in Logan Square right up until 1970, when they still numbered about 28% of the foreign-born. Yet they never dominated the neighborhood as they did throughout Polonia. At St. John Berchmans parish, they were Catholics and Americans first, and Poles second. St. John's did not have a pastor of Polish origin until 1970 and it only occasionally offered services in Polish, such as a visiting priest who would hear confessions in Polish for a few hours just before Christmas. Polish-Americans intermarried freely at St. John's. In 1950, 20 of the 53 weddings performed in the church involved at least one partner of Polish background. In six cases, the Polish individual was marrying a partner from another ethnic group; in an amazing nine cases (nearly half) the partners belonged to another religious denomination.

Twenty years later, St. John's marriage register tells an even more remarkable story. The parish celebrated 55



*Polish Booth, Parish Block Party, June, 2005*

weddings in 1970; 32 of them (58%) were ethnically mixed and 21 marriages (38%) were religiously diverse. The marriage partners in 1970 belonged to 15 different ethnic groups – Belgian, Polish, Italian, German, Irish, Hungarian, Filipino, Puerto Rican, Ecuadorean, Romanian, Ukrainian, Slovak, Mexican, French, and Greek. At St. John Berchmans, diversity was not a pious phrase but a living reality.

## Pan-American Panorama

In the years after 1970, the Spanish language became increasingly common on the streets and boulevards of Logan Square. The 1970 census-takers identified 15,765 of the community area's 88,395 residents (18%) as Spanish-speakers. Ten years later, the Spanish-speaking had increased to 29% of the neighborhood's population, and by 1990 this percentage had mounted to 65%. Unlike the Poles in earlier decades, the Hispanics actually formed a majority of the neighborhood's population by the end of the twentieth century. Yet one of the distinguishing features of Latino immigration to Chicago is the plurality of its sources. The terms "Latino" or "Hispanic" conceal the fact that Spanish-speaking migrants include Mexicans, Cubans, Central-Americans, and Puerto Ricans (who are American citizens by birth, not foreign-born immigrants).

A few Spanish names appeared on the marriage register of St. John Berchmans parish as early as the 1940s and 50s but they did not become numerous until a decade or two later. In 1970 18 of the 110 marriage partners at the parish (16%) had Spanish names. Similarly, about 20% of the grade school graduates that year were Hispanic. Ten years later at least half the marriage partners and two-thirds of the school graduates had Spanish names. By 1980 St. John Berchmans had become a parish with a Hispanic majority, yet it remained diverse. Hispanic Catholics who celebrated their weddings in the parish in 1980 identified their places of birth as Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Guatemala. The parish bulletin became fully bilingual about 1990 and the parish has employed both Spanish and English music directors for the past decade or so. All of the permanent deacons who have served St. John's parish have been Spanish-speaking.



*Puerto Rican Booth, Parish Block Party, June, 2005*



*Parish Block Party, June, 2005*

## Logan Square Legacy

If Chicago is a city of neighborhoods, as is so often said, Logan Square counts as one of the more remarkable and livable examples. Originally laid out in the nineteenth century as a leafy suburb, by the early twentieth century it had become a vibrant, middle-class urban community, well-served by public transportation. Though there are stately mansions, some of historical or architectural significance, along the boulevards and a smattering of large apartment buildings on several streets, the predominant housing stock of Logan Square is the owner-occupied two or three flat. This housing type offers many advantages. It has afforded generations of upwardly striving immigrants and their children an opportunity to own property, with family members or other tenants renting one of the apartments and helping to pay the mortgage. Though the housing stock presents a dense, urban face to

the street, it also provides back yards for amateur gardeners. The two-flat may also have been Logan Square's salvation when the neighborhood experienced tough economic times in the latter third of the twentieth century.

Logan Square's population peaked at 114,174 in 1930, then declined steadily after the Second World War as large families moved to the suburbs. The Northwest Expressway (later named the Kennedy Expressway) sliced through the east end of the neighborhood in 1957, symbolizing the race to the suburbs and more importantly, displacing some families and cutting the parish of St. John Berchmans in half. Fr. Liske, the pastor at the time, was so disturbed by the expressway's impact on the parish that he lobbied Mayor Richard J. Daley to open a pedestrian tunnel through the expressway embankment in 1960. Unfortunately, however, the tunnel became too dangerous for pedestrians and was closed a number of years later. The urban riots in Chicago during the 1960s, including one not too far away along Division Street accelerated the exodus from inner-city neighborhoods and hastened the population transition from a Polish plurality to a Hispanic majority in Logan Square.

As the neighborhood declined in population and socio-economic status, a Logan Square Neighborhood Association was founded in 1964 to combat urban blight and "fight City Hall." The neighborhood's situation had become so threatening by 1970 that the Neighborhood Association conducted a series of six workshops on Monday nights at the YMCA on Fullerton Avenue, discussing the subject "The Big Picture - Is Logan Square Dying?" The area continued to decline in population to 84,768 in 1980 and 82,906 in 1990, but it refused to die. The community area had a median income of \$13,934 in 1980 and a poverty rate of 18.8%, but this was only slightly worse than the city-wide average of \$15,301 median income and a 16.8% poverty rate. Significantly, the poverty rate in Logan Square was lower than the 22.6% poverty rate for Spanish-speaking residents in the city as a whole. Logan Square was poor but not too poor. Though it suffered from gang violence, it largely escaped the terrible plague of arson fires that devastated other neighborhoods in the 1970s, particularly Humboldt Park just to the south. Logan Square has not carried the burden of burnt out buildings and numerous vacant lots that so blighted Humboldt Park. The owner-occupied two and three flats may have been its salvation. However poor the neighborhood became, it remained a neighborhood of resident property owners rather than absentee landlords.



*Parish Mother's Club, 1974*




*Parish Dinner Dance, October, 2004*

The housing stock of Logan Square remained so attractive and desirable that it captured the attention of historical preservationists. In 1980 the Logan Square Preservation Society was established to focus attention on the large houses and apartment buildings along Logan and Kedzie boulevards. For many years, the Society has sponsored an annual house walk in September, showcasing the real estate to interested outsiders. In the final years of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first, their efforts have paid off with drastically increasing property values. Younger white couples have snapped up single-family homes and two flats, and developers have begun converting apartment buildings into condominiums. These changes are both a blessing and a challenge to the neighborhood and the parish. Although economic development and prosperity are always welcome to property owners, they tend to push out many renters, particularly those with large families, who cannot afford increased rents. St. John's school has felt the impact with fewer children in the neighborhood, and the

Spanish-language Sunday Mass has experienced a decline in numbers as Hispanic families have been pushed out by higher rents.

The Logan Square neighborhood has never been a utopia but it has provided a legacy of solid, comfortable housing for a diverse and ever changing population. Any neighborhood that embraces both an activist organization such as the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and a real estate oriented promotional group such as the Logan Square Preservation Society must have a lot going for it.



*Thank You  
Fr. Gene for  
the last 6 years.*

*Good Luck  
at your  
New Parish.*



## The Church

### Here We Are

A church building is an act of faith and a work of art, but it is also a community statement. When a parish congregation builds a church, they are proclaiming to God and mankind, "Here we are!" Catholic communities throughout the United States, which were often small, suspect minorities in a Protestant society, have frequently announced their presence by building on prominent sites, such as hilltops. There are no hilltops in prairie Chicago, yet Catholic churches still command attention in many neighborhoods. The massive Polish churches that line the Kennedy Expressway are outstanding examples. In Logan Square the Catholic community was a distinct minority, yet it built its two neighborhood parishes in conspicuous locations along the boulevards – St. Sylvester at the east end of Palmer Square and St. John Berchmans at the foot of Logan Boulevard.



New parishes in Chicago in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often began with a combination school/church building, essentially a boxy classroom building with a large hall downstairs to serve as a temporary church. If the parish remained small, it might never outgrow this combination building and erect a full-scale church. St. Bonaventure parish, directly east of St. John's on Diversey Boulevard, provides a nearby example. Fr. De Schryver and his Belgian compatriots, however, decided to build a full-scale church at the start and worry about the school building later. They were announcing the presence of their tiny immigrant community to the rest of the city, "Here we are!"

The archdiocese had purchased four city lots at Maplewood Avenue and Humboldt Boulevard (as it was called then) in 1904 for \$4500. Early in 1906 the new parish built a small brick rectory for Fr. De Schryver on one of the lots, and on August 26, 1906 the cornerstone of the church was laid. Antoine Del Fosse, a parishioner who lived just a block east of the church site on the boulevard, served as general contractor for the construction work. By the time Fr. Julius De Vos arrived from Nebraska on December 1, 1906, the basement of the church was sufficiently finished for church services to commence. The church was completed a year later and dedicated on December 15, 1907. In the meantime, the parish had purchased one and a half adjacent lots along the boulevard for \$6500 and began using the wood frame house which stood on the property as a convent and temporary school. When the altar was moved upstairs to the completed sanctuary in December 1907, the church basement was subdivided into classrooms as a "temporary" school. The Sisters and their pupils remained downstairs for eighteen years.

Catholic church architecture in Chicago exhibited certain characteristic patterns that expressed the history of the various ethnic communities. Poles built most of their churches in a grandiose Renaissance or Baroque style, recalling the churches of Poland's golden age in the 16th and 17th centuries. German churches, both Catholic and Lutheran, were almost exclusively Gothic, harking back to the days of unified Christianity in the Middle

Ages before the Reformation. Italian churches, for obvious reasons, reflected the classical past of Rome. The Irish, territorial churches were more varied than most. As the “mainstream” churches of the archdiocese they tended to reflect the artistic trends of the times in which they were built. The Irish would never admit it, but in their own version of “Here we are,” they were trying to keep up with the English Protestants. Even so, territorial churches often incorporated artistic flourishes that reflected an Irish heritage, such as the handsome Celtic cross on the pinnacle of St. Sylvester church.

So far as we know, there is nothing distinctively Belgian about St. John Berchmans’ architecture. The architect, John J. Steinbach, was a prominent German Lutheran who built numerous churches for various denominations, usually in partnership with Henry Worthmann. A number of Polish parishes on the northwest side employed Worthmann and Steinbach to build their impressive Baroque edifices, most notably, St. Mary of the Angels, whose massive dome recalls St. Peter’s in Rome. At St. John Berchmans, Steinbach built a much simpler, smaller church in the Romanesque style. Historically, Romanesque was the style of the early Middle Ages (roughly 600-1100) that preceded the Gothic era. This style is marked by rounded arches and window openings, rather than the distinctive pointed arches of the Gothic; and in medieval Europe Romanesque churches tended to be fortress-like and heavy.

In Chicago, however, Romanesque churches were usually small and simple, noted for their practicality and ease of construction. They were, in short, a least common denominator for small congregations of many different ethnic backgrounds. That doesn’t mean that a Romanesque church was ugly. Another prominent architectural partnership, James J. Egan and William Prindeville, produced many fine examples of Chicago Romanesque, most notably St. Vincent de Paul and St. Sylvester’s. John Steinbach’s church for St. John Berchmans parish is simple but elegant. Steinbach also had the opportunity to build all the other parish buildings along Logan Boulevard over the following two decades. The resulting architectural ensemble is not overbearing or ornate, but impressively harmonious.



*Parish Plant, shortly after completion, late 1920s*

## Adorning the Sanctuary

The interior of St. John’s church was originally very plain, with ordinary glass windows, a small altar, and a simple metal altar railing. Erecting the structure of a full-scale church exhausted the finances of the small parish congregation for nearly two decades. There was nothing unusual in this, for the adorning of a church sanctuary ordinarily took a long time and the artistic look of a church constantly evolved. Preservationists who wish to go back to a church’s original style are often hard pressed to define what they mean by “original”. For example, Old St. Patrick’s church, the oldest surviving church building in Chicago, dating back before the Chicago Fire, did not commission its distinctive Celtic interior ornamentation until the second decade of the twentieth century, about 75 years after the church was built. When the parish recently underwent a revival, it was this twentieth century decoration by artist William O’Shaughnessy that the rehabbers highlighted, not the “original” style.



*High Altar, circa 1922*

The interior of St. John Berchmans was “finished” for the first time in the 1920s. Mrs. Margaret Gearon donated an ornate marble altar, with angels holding candelabras on either end, in memory of her husband, wealthy lawyer J. Ambrose Gearon who had been killed in an automobile accident in 1921. Mr. Gearon had served Mass for Fr. De Vos as a young boy growing up in Nebraska. The high altar was dedicated on July 24, 1922. At roughly this same time a pipe organ was installed in the choir loft at the rear of the church, a marble altar rail was erected, and a handsome mural was painted over the archway of the sanctuary. Stations of the Cross and a large Crucifix behind the altar, sculpted in a graphic, bloody style, were installed in 1927; and the elegant chandeliers were hung a year or two later.



*Postcard View of Sanctuary, circa. 1920*



*Postcard View of Nave, circa. 1920*

The most beautiful artistic adornments of St. John Berchmans church, however, were the stained glass windows donated by various parishioners and dedicated on January 23, 1921. Interestingly, just one of the church windows has a distinctively Belgian theme, the rose window over the choir loft depicting John Berchmans as a teacher of schoolchildren, contributed by the De Jonghe family. Only one other window was donated by a Belgian parishioner, the Nativity scene on the east side of the church in memory of the Des Plenter family. Though Catholic ethnic groups were fiercely proud of their Old World heritage and liked to exclaim “Here we are” at any opportunity, they also shared a common Catholic devotional heritage. For example, the archdiocese of Chicago in the early twentieth century had 6 parishes named Sacred Heart, each representing a different ethnic group. Similarly, there were 6 churches called Immaculate Conception, from 4 different ethnic communities.

Because of this common devotional heritage, the adornments of Catholic church interiors looked more alike than distinctive or dissimilar. The stained glass windows at St. John Berchmans include one picturing St. Patrick with a shamrock, a striking window with two portraits of Joan of Arc, one as a simple shepherd girl and the other in military garb, and another window depicting St. Helena discovering the True Cross of Jesus Christ. The Nativity, Last Supper, and Holy Family windows portray common themes of Catholic faith. The 1920 adornment of the sanctuary included three stained glass windows behind the main altar, chronicling the entire sweep of salvation history. The triptych portrayed the Fall of Mankind on the left, the Crucifixion of Jesus and thus the Redemption of Mankind in the center directly behind the altar, and the Triumphal Ascension of the Savior into Heaven on the right. These window openings were closed when the church sanctuary was extended in 1949. The Ascension window is now located on the far right of the sanctuary, next to the side altar, and the Crucifixion has been moved to an interior chapel, but the Fall of Man window has been lost.

All of the church windows installed in 1921 were manufactured by the John J. Kinsella Company, a prominent Catholic ecclesiastical art firm



*Last Supper Window*



*St. John Berchmans Window*

that produced leaded stained glass in what was called the "Munich school" style. Kinsella himself designed the crowning glory of St. John's sacred art, the Noah's Ark Flood scene in the eastern transept, shortly before his death; and the window was dedicated to his memory. The rainbow over Noah's Ark captures the morning sunshine in spectacular fashion. This window really is distinctive, for Old Testament scenes are relatively rare in Catholic churches. Perhaps the flood scene had special meaning for Belgians whose Low Country homeland was constantly threatened by the sea. When all the stained glass windows were inspected in the year 2000 by companies specializing in the preservation and restoration of such glass, the Hauser Art Glass Company appraised the replacement value of all the windows at \$2,900,000. Noah's Ark and the Last Supper window on the opposite side of the church were each valued at \$432,000 each. In fact, the windows are beyond price, an irreplaceable legacy from the first adornment of the church in the early 1920s.

## Before and After Vatican II

The first major renovation and re-design of St. John Berchmans interior occurred more than a decade before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council when the church building was extended to the south, enlarging the seating area and the sanctuary. The three windows behind the main altar were removed, but four new windows depicting Church Fathers Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, and Gregory were added on either side of the sanctuary. The mural in the archway over the front of the sanctuary disappeared. Whether it was intentionally painted over or simply didn't survive the renovation work is unknown. A much larger mural filled the back wall of the sanctuary behind the altar, depicting the broad sweep of salvation history as the former windows had previously done.

The liturgical reforms of Vatican II drastically affected the look of churches throughout the Catholic world. The priest now faced the community, celebrating a Eucharistic meal on a simple table rather than offering sacrifice on a high altar with his back turned to the congregation. Devotions to the Blessed Virgin and the saints were downplayed or discouraged altogether. At St. John Berchmans, the interior renovations were extensive, but the decoration of the church retained a certain balance between old and new. The high altar disappeared, the sweeping mural at the rear of the sanctuary was painted over, and the altar rail was removed. The Stations of the Cross, the stained glass windows, and a number of statues, however, were retained from the earlier devotional era. A particularly striking panel in the west transept portrays four images of the Blessed Virgin, according to several different ethnic traditions. This nicely reflects the diverse and ever changing makeup of St. John Berchmans' congregation.



*Mural in the Sanctuary, 1950s*

A church building, even a relatively simple one such as St. John Berchmans requires constant maintenance that can burden a small parish. The parishioners scrimped and saved for a new roof during the diamond jubilee year of 1980, yet this proved insufficient to halt further deterioration of the church's fabric. Fr. Walter De Roeck replaced the boiler for the parish plant in 1990 and Fr. William Gubbins commissioned more roof repairs in 1996. The front steps of the church have continued to deteriorate, despite extensive patching over the past two decades. When Fr. Eugene Gratkowski arrived as pastor in 2000 he was able to secure a



*Sanctuary, 2005*

large capital grant from the archdiocese in order to repair the stained glass windows and complete major structural work on the roof of the church. At the time of the parish centennial, the pastor and congregation hoped to finally replace the front stairs and also make the church building accessible to the handicapped.



*Noah and the Flood Window*