

St. Joseph Catholic Church

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**St. Joseph Parish is located in Champion,
Township of Green Bay, Brown County, Wisconsin, U.S.A.**

St. Joseph's Origin can be attributed to Fate and Faith

No one will ever know what fate had in mind when a little child died somewhere near the City of Kaukauna in the summer of 1853. If it were not for the death of that child, the communities of Kaukauna, Little Chute, Kimberly, Combined Locks and others nearby, would have been settled by Belgians, instead of the Champion, Brown County, Wisconsin; the Northwestern part of Kewaunee County, Wisconsin; and the Southern Door County, Wisconsin communities. As it were, fate and faith stepped in to change the events that may have taken place.

The first Belgian Immigrants sailed from their homeland on the ship "Quennebec" on May 18, 1853. On the ship, they fell in with some Hollanders, who were going to make their home in the Sheboygan area.

Most of Wisconsin's Belgians are from the Southern Provinces of Belgium, and are of Latin origin and speak Walloon (a very old form of French). The Flemish Belgians are from the Northern Provinces of Belgium, and are of German origin, and speak Flemish (a form of Dutch). Belgium does not have a language of its own. As it was, there was a bond of kinship between the Belgians and Hollanders, and the Belgian Immigrants of 1853 commonly sought Hollanders out as neighbors.

When the group of Belgians arrived at Sheboygan, the better lands were taken, and since the Hollander's didn't speak the French dialect, they decided to move elsewhere. They began to move toward Kaukauna, where the settlers, they heard, were Hollanders. They reached the area around today's Kaukauna, when a child of Philip Hannon became ill and died. They journeyed to Green Bay, to St. John the Evangelist Church for the burial. Here Father Edward Daems, (a Belgian Crozier Priest), was visiting, and persuaded them to settle near Bay Settlement, where they would be near his church, and the French speaking community. The Belgians heeded the priest's advice, and the group settled about ten miles Northeast of Bay Settlement, and bought the land for \$1.25 per acre.

The area was called "Grez-Daems", from 1853 to 1862 after the Belgian Priest Father Daems, who is credited with being the founder of the Belgian Colony in Wisconsin. In 1862, the community became known as "Aux Premiers Belges" (The First Belgians). The same area was also known as Robinsonville, after Charles D. Robinson, editor of the Green Bay Advocate, an early newspaper started in 1846.

The name Robinsonville was given prominence by Adele Brice's apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1858 at what is now the site of Our Lady of Good Help Chapel in Robinsonville. By the turn of the 20th century the community became known as Champion, named after the town of Champion in Belgium.

Due to the hardships of life of the early settlers, a church was not immediately built. In a letter written on July 5, 1855, by the Rev. John Perrodin (a missionary of Green Bay) to Rev. Charles Hanerum in Gottechain, Belgium, it is written: "No church has been erected as yet in any place, although petitions, for building a church and cemetery at Grez Daems have been forwarded to Mgr. Henri, Bishop of Milwaukee, in whose Diocese we are located." (The Diocese of Green Bay was not founded until 1868). Rev. Perrodin also stated that services were held in the house of Philip Hannon (whose child had died on the journey) at Grez Daems.

By 1862, a church had been built on 5 acres of land donated by Jean Joseph Delveaux, and St. Joseph "the mother of all the Belgian Parishes of the Door Peninsula", had been founded, named in honor of St. Joseph, the Patron Saint of Belgium. It's parishioners consisted of both Flemish and Walloon Belgians.

The first parish records are the baptismal records dated September 21, 1862, of Celia Godi the daughter of Charles Godi and Stephanie LeLous, and M.J. Eliza Evrard, the child of P.J.Evrard and J. Cequin. The baptisms were administered by Father G. Wilkens, the first resident pastor. The baptismal records show that the pastors of Robinsonville had the care of the entire Belgian Settlement until churches were built in other locations. The church continued to grow. Records indicate that from September 21, 1862 to May 1877 there were 211 baptisms.

On May 28, 1877, the original log church was destroyed by fire. A dispute then arose between the Flemish and the Walloon Belgians, as to where to rebuild the church. The Flemish wanted to build the church halfway between "Aux Flamants", (the Flemish settlement, also known as Martinsville and later became known as Tonet) and "Aux Premiers Belges". The Walloons wanted to rebuild the church on the original site. As a result of the disagreement, the Flemish Belgians built their own church on the site of St. Martin Catholic Church, Tonet, (Township of Red River, Kewaunee County, Wisconsin), without Episcopal approval. Since Bishop John Henni would not give them a priest, they held their own services until about a year later when they finally were given a pastor. The Walloons rebuilt St. Joseph on the site of the original log church.

From May of 1877 until August 1881, all records were recorded at Aux Flamants (Tonet). Records were resumed at St. Joseph on April 19, 1881.

From 1882 until October 1883, there is not a record of a pastor assigned to St. Joseph's. The records are recorded at Tonet and signed by Father A. Masschelein, who also recorded baptisms there with entries from Robinsonville, Martinsville, Thiry Daems, Walhain, Dyckesville, and Humboldt.

From April 1887 until October 1893, St. Joseph was administered to by Pastors of Societas Patrum a Misericordia, (Fathers of Mercy).

In 1885 an evil hit the area with an impact that threatened the loss of faith to the Catholics. Joseph Rene Vilatte, a priest of the “Old Catholic” church established himself at Duvall (Marchant). He soon succeeded in talking many Catholic families of the area to join his church. By 1890, he had a foothold in the area. Green Bay Bishop Messmer, in order to combat the heresy, extended an invitation to the Premonstratensians of Berne Abbey in Holland. In November 1893, Father Bernard H. Pennings, Father Lambert Broens, and Brother Servatius Heesackers and an advance party of what would eventually become the Norbertine Community in North America, began their work of strengthening the faith among the Belgian Settlements, and worked to win back those who left the true Catholic Faith. Father Broens was appointed pastor of St. Joseph’s in May 1894. This began a period of 90 years, (from 1894 to 1984) of Norbertine priests serving St. Joseph Parish.

On September 28, 1908, Father Milo P. Smits, O’Praem. arrived at St. Joseph. Fr. Smits served St. Joseph and St. Martin, Tonet, with St. Joseph being a mission of Tonet. Father Smits has the distinction of being St. Joseph’s longest serving pastor (43 years).

In 1922, the priests’ residence was built for a cost of \$10,520.72.

In 1936, the church was remodeled, and with the exception of two side walls from the 1877 church, the church was practically rebuilt. The grounds were landscaped by Father Smits himself. The grotto that stands between the church and the rectory bears the name of M.P. Smits.

In March of 1951, Father Smits was succeeded by Rev. Eugene H. Berendsen O’Praem. During Father Berendsen’s pastorate, a new electric organ was installed and the furnaces of both the rectory and church were converted to oil.

St. Odile Catholic Church, located in Thiry Daems, Kewaunee County, became a mission of St. Joseph, Champion in January 1957, and was served by Rev. John Righino O’Praem. It was during Fr. Righino’s term that St. Joseph’s marked the centennial of its founding, on June 10, 1962.

The two parishes of St. Odile, Thiry Daems, and St. Joseph, Champion were served by one priest until 1977 when Fr. Christian O’Brien O’Praem., and Rev. William Donovan O’Praem arrived. Fr. Donovan left the parishes in 1978. Rev. O’Brien worked to get St. Joseph's parish activities more unified with it's mission parishes of St. Odile, Thiry Daems; St. Martin, Tonet; and St. Amand, located in Walhain, Kewaunee County. The parishes combined their Religious Education Programs and became known as the Inter-Parish Community, with Rev. O'Brien serving all four parishes. When Father O'Brien left the community in July 1984, it marked the end of the Norbertine Fathers serving St. Joseph’s.

Under Rev. Francis Kerscher, who succeeded Fr. O'Brien, the four parishes worked more closely with each other. An Inter-Parish Council and Inter-Parish Board of Education were formed.

When St. Joseph's celebrated their 125th Anniversary on November 15, 1987, the interior of the church had a whole new look. The church was remodeled and repainted.

The Inter-Parish Community continued to work together until 1992, when St. Odile's, St. Martin's and St. Amand's parishes were closed, marking the end of three of the Belgian parishes that were operated for over 100 years

In July of 1993, St. Joseph's was linked with St. Kilian' Catholic Church, located in New Franken, Brown County, with Rev. Florian Resheske serving both parishes. Father Florian moved from St. Joseph's rectory to St. Kilian's rectory and the priest's residence at St. Joseph's was converted to a Parish Center and it is presently being used for Religion Education classes, and meeting rooms, as well as the parish office.

In August of 1996, Rev. Resheske resigned and St. Joseph's & St. Kilian's was assigned to the guidance of Rev. Dean Dombroski, pastor of the then Our Lady Queen of Peace church, Sugarbush (Humboldt), and Ss. Cyril & Methodius, Eaton. Fr. Dean served four parishes at this time, (temporary administrator of both St. Joseph & St. Kilian parishes while continuing as pastor of Our Lady Queen of Peace & Ss. Cyril & Methodius), until January 15, 1997.

Father Roger Zach O.F.M., Cap. (Capuchin) was appointed administrator of both parishes on January 15, 1997. Father Roger was diagnosed with inoperable stomach cancer in May of 1997. Father Roger continued to serve both parishes despite battling the cancer. Under his guidance, both parishes grew in strength, size and commitment. On January 24, 1999, Father Roger was forced to resign because of his health. He retired to [St. Lawrence Seminary, Mt. Calvary, WI](#), and spent the last two months of his life in hospice care there. Father Roger died on March 11, 1999 at St. Lawrence and is buried in the Friars Cemetery at the Seminary.

From January 24, 1999 until August 2, 1999, Father Dean Dombroski again served as St. Joseph's & St. Kilian's temporary administrator, while again continuing as pastor of the parishes in Sugarbush & Eaton. During this time, the [Diocese of Green Bay](#) was making plans for the future of it's parishes with the declining number of priests. On August 2, 1999, St. Kilian Church became linked with St. Thomas the Apostle Parish (a merger between Our Lady Queen of Peace, Humboldt and Ss. Cyril & Methodius, Eaton, created this new parish), with Rev. Dean Dombroski as pastor of St. Thomas and administrator of St. Kilian's.

St. Joseph's was linked with St. Mary's Church (officially titled Immaculate Conception Parish), located in Luxemburg, Kewaunee County, Wisconsin, with

Rev. Milton M. Suess as St. Joseph's Pastor. Father Suess also served as pastor of St. Mary's.

In the summer of 2002 a hall was built linking the church with the parish center, enabling better handicap access, along with the addition of rest room facilities. The new hall was on November 03, 2002. The Church's present status is the result of this renovation.

In January of 2005, St. Joseph Parish was linked once again with St. Kilian Parish, along with St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, located in Sugarbush, Town of Humboldt, Brown County, Wisconsin. Father Dean Dombroski became pastor of all three parishes. In 2009 Pat Ratajczak was assigned as Pastoral Associate for the three parishes.

When one stops to look back at the time that has passed, and the events that have taken place in this small Belgian Community, and this tiny church, you have to wonder how things would be now, and what would have taken place, how so very different things would be, if it would not have been for the death of one little child, so very long ago.

The following is a list of Priests, or pastors that served St. Joseph:

- 1. Rev. G. Wilkens – Sept. 1862. (First resident pastor)**
- 2. Rev. M. Hens - Feb. 1864 (He named Tounhout, Belgium as his home.)**
- 3. Rev. Philip Crud - Nov. 1864 (He was pastor of the entire Belgian Colony and the Irish Congregation of Casco. He served 10 missions besides St. Joseph. He attended regularly all the missions every month for six years, building churches at Rosiere, Walhain, Thiry Daems, Delwich (Namur), Little Sturgeon Bay, Dyckesville, Marchand (Duvall), and erected the convent at the Robinsonville Chapel (Our Lady of Good Help). Father Crud had brief absences in 1866, when he was replaced by Fr. Mazeaud, and in 1868, when Fr. Pernin replaced him from Dec. 7, 1868 to Sept. 6, 1869.**
- 4. Rev. J. Gauche - Oct. 1870 (He served only a couple of weeks)**
- 5. Rev. J. P. Guillaume - Oct. 31, 1870 - Dec. 1870**
- 6. Rev. Albert Wubbles - Dec. 24, 1870**
- 7. Rev. Cajetan Delouw - June 8, 1873**
- 8. Rev. Eramas Leccia - June 4, 1874 - May 25, 1877 (original log church burned down and from May 1877 to April 1881 records were at Tonet.**
- 9. Rev. Athanasius N. Buschle - May 19, 1881 - April 16, 1882 NO RECORD OF PASTOR ASSIGNED FROM APRIL 1882 TO OCT. 1883.**
- 10. Rev. John A. Selbach - Oct. 1883 - April 1887**
- 11. Rev. H. Bruns S.P.M. - April 1887**
- 12. Rev. P. Rocagel , S.P.M.- May 2, 1887 - Jan. 1888**
- 13. *Various temporary assignments of Fathers of Mercy: Fr. J.B. Martin, L. Martin, Jos. Darche, and A. LeBras.***

- 14. Rev. Victor Deby, S.P.M. - Nov. 4, 1891**
15. Rev. P.J. Van Heyster, S.P.M. - Feb. 28, 1892
16. Rev. P.H.B. Hoevermans, S.P.M.- July 24, 1892 - March 2, 1893
17. Rev. A. Dikmans, S.P.M. - March 25, 1893
18. Rev. Victor Schir, S.P.M. - Oct. 15, 1893
19. Rev. Lambert Broens, O’Praem - May 20, 1894 - Sept. 1898 (There is a period from Oct. 1894 to Sept. 1895, that shows records signed by Rev. R.J.A. Rooy).
- 20. Rev. B. J. Schevers, O’Praem - Sept. 16, 1898 - Sept. 28, 1908**
21. Rev. P.M. (Milo) Smits, O’Praem. - Sept. 28, 1908 - March 1951
22. Rev. Eugene H. Berendsen, O’Praem - March 1951 - Sept. 11, 1956
23. Rev. John A. Righino, O’Praem. - Sept. 11, 1956 - 1962 (Fr. Righino was born in Taganrodd, Russia).
23. Rev. Hugh Mc Donnell, O’Praem - 1962 - 1969
24. Rev. Damien Weiber, O’Praem. - 1969 - 1977
25. Rev. Christian O’Brien, O’Praem. - Oct. 11, 1977 - June 17, 1978, was administrator. Fr. O’Brien was appointed Pastor June 17, 1978. He served with Fr. William Donovan O’Praem who was associate pastor (Oct 1977- June 1978). Fr. O’Brien served until July 1984.
- 26. Rev. Francis Kerscher - July 1, 1984 - Oct. 1989**
Rev. Milton M. Suess, Temporary Administrator – Oct. 1989 to Dec. 1989.
27. Rev. Florian Resheske - Oct. 1989 - Aug. 1996
Rev. Dean Dombroski - (Temp. Administrator) Aug. 1996 - Jan. 15, 1997
28. Rev. Roger Zach, O.F.M., Cap. - Jan. 15, 1997 - Jan. 24, 1999
Rev. Dean Dombroski - (Temp. Administrator) Jan. 24, 1999 - Aug. 1, 1999
29. Rev. Milton Suess - Aug. 2, 1999 – Jan. 2005
30. Rev. Dean Dombroski – Jan. 2005 – June 30, 2010.
31. Rev. William G. O’Brien – July 1, 2010 -

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History taken from Parish Directory July 1995, article written by Pat Ratajczak