

St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Catholic Church in Sobieski 1884-1984 – (Charlotte Czech)

This is the first in a series of articles featuring one of the many Polish churches across the State of Minnesota. Most of the information for the first part of this article is taken from the historical, 68-page book that Gene Retka, Sobieski resident, put together in 1984 to commemorate the Centennial of St. Stanislaus Parish in Sobieski. The information is taken from a variety of historical documents and personal accounts of many contributors, some of whom differ from each other in facts and opinions.

Naming the Church

Why start with St. Stanislaus in Sobieski? First, it was my parish until 1970 when I left the area and moved to the Twin Cities. Second, it is located in central Minnesota, and I am interested in featuring central Minnesota Polish families, communities, structures, and culture. But besides these reasons, St. Stanislaus is one of the oldest Polish churches in Minnesota in a community that has largely maintained its Polish identity from when it was first settled. The early Polish immigrants chose to name their church for Saint Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr (also known as Stanislaus of Szczepanow) who was martyred in the 11th century, most likely for being an outspoken critic of King Boleslaw II. Saint Stanislaus is the patron saint of Poland.

Naming the Town

The original name of the village where St. Stanislaus Catholic Church is located was LeDoux, named for Franl X. LeDoux, the first store owner and postmaster. The community of LeDoux had a post office in the locality from 1875-1904. In 1898, it was renamed Swan River. In 1916, it was changed to Sobieski after Jan III Sobieski, King of Poland from 1674-1696, who drove back the Ottoman Turks in the Battle of Vienna and briefly restored the kingdom of Poland-Lithuania to greatness for the last time. Jan III Sobieski's military achievements are many. During its heyday in the 1930s, 250 people lived in Sobieski.

1872--Polish immigrants began arriving in North Prairie and the surrounding area in 1870-72. In 1872 Frank LeDoux arrived from eastern Canada. He was given a piece of land. He opened a small store, a post office, and a stage station that ran a route between LeDoux and Little Falls, which was eight miles to the northeast.

1876--Simon Tillman was the second Polish settler to arrive. His family would be instrumental in establishing and growing this church in Sobieski.

1882-85--The Polish Catholic immigrants of LeDoux were a missionary church of North Prairie.. The people had been traveling 15 miles to North Prairie to attend Mass. One time a month for several months a priest, Rev. C. Greenholtz, traveled with a team of horses from his parish in Gilman to say Mass in someone's private home, always on a weekday.

1882--They were granted permission to build their own church and began organizing.

1884--St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr painting

It was at this time that an oil-on-canvas, original painting of St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr by the famous Polish painter Jan Matejko, was given to the Polish immigrants in Sobieski in remembrance of their homeland. It is six feet high and 3.5 feet wide and is a treasure that hangs above the church altar today. Not realizing the value of the painting, someone applied varnish over it in the 1930s to preserve it. It has caused the painting to darken. over time. Jan Matejko is considered by many the most celebrated painter of Poland, and sometimes as the "national painter" of Poland. He died in his home of Krakow at the age of 55 in 1893.

1885-- The first church was a log structure built under the direction of Rev. Peter Chowaniec, by the people themselves for under \$100. It was located close to the present cemetery and next to the Swan River.

1894--As more Polish parishioners arrived, they outgrew the log church and erected a second church east of the original.

1896--As they grew, a third church was built. The contractor was Alex Wochnich. It is the structure that is there today. It was one of the largest churches in the St. Cloud Diocese at that time.

1897--The first Mass was celebrated in the new church with Rev. S. Suszczynski as their pastor..

1898--The town's name was changed from LeDoux to Swan River.

Names of the early trustees: Joseph Wozniak, Frank Sobiech, Anton Koziol. Peter Knopik, Peter Kokett, John Czech, Stanley Zak, Stanley Boros, Joseph Boros, John Pierzina, Mike Sobiech, John Kuka, Simon Tillman, Joseph Trutwin I, Alois Osowski, Lawrence Siminski, Frank Ringwelski, Peter Wozniak, Isadore Ringwelski, Frank Retka, Joseph Kaiser, Jacob Kuklock, Gunda Skwira (Mrs. Paul), Leo Polasek, Clara (Czech) Kliber (Mrs. Leo), Betty Lashinski (Mrs. George Sr.), Edmund Kaiser.

1906--Benedictine nuns were engaged by the pastor to teach in the district school. Between 1906 and 1969, 67 nuns served at St. Stanislaus Parish. A nun who served almost 26 years and is well-remembered in Sobieski is Sister M. Avelline, O.S.B. She was Victoria Mrozla from North Prairie.

1916--Sobieski was incorporated as a village. The first officers were Rev. A.J. Gospodar, W.H. Thompson, Frank Sobiech, Andrew Gusten, and Anton Koziol.

1919--A Polish post-WWI celebration was held in Sobieski because it was the most concentrated Polish community in mid-Minnesota. People wore traditional Polish attire. The women wore long white dresses with red vests and hats. It was a great success as 4,000 people showed up to celebrate!

1920--The school was bought by the parish and became a parochial school.

1923-24--A convent was built.

1932--A Golden Jubilee was celebrated on a Monday morning at St. Stanislaus Church with the Rt. Rev. Bishop Joseph F. Bush saying Mass at 10:00 a.m. About 30 visiting priests were present along with hundreds of Morrison County residents. Confirmation was held after the Mass. Those confirmed were: Celia and Frank Oldakowski, Dorothy Krottoschinsky, Felix and Stanley Siminsky, Joe and Conrad Polluck, Clarence and Helen Kliber, and Daniel Lund. The celebration continued until after supper. The evening was spent in dancing.

1945--All sermons had been preached in Polish until this year when English was introduced.

1955--A new ranch-style rectory that was attached to the church sacristy was built with Rev. Anthony Lamusga as pastor. No contractor was hired.. .

1970--The first parish council was formed with members. Rev. Tony Kroll, Leo Polasek, Dan Lund, Clarence Knopik, Marcella (Sobiech) Kaiser, Jerry Yorek, Audrey Kaiser, and Gene Retka.

1980--First Polka Mass was held to coincide with Sobieski Polish Days. Around 700 attended the Mass. Afterwards, the crowd lined up along the main street to watch the 75-unit parade.

Vocations from St. Stanislaus Parish over the years: Father Peter J. Juba O.S.B, Father Casimir Plakut O.S.B, Father Peter Plakut, O.C.S.O, Father Raymond Ringwelski, Brother Romanus O.S.C, Father Eugene Beniek. Sister M. Dora Plakut O.S.B, Sisters Eileen, Constantine Puchalla, Hedwiga, Alcantara Knopik, Claudia, Benet Juba, and Cantia Juba, and Sister Loretta O.S.B.

To conclude, you can find the full article on St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Parish on the PGS-MN website under, "From Poland to Minnesota" – Minnesota – Central Minnesota – Morrison County. This is one of the beautiful Polish churches in the St. Cloud Diocese selected to be closed at the end of this year. Michael Retka who is the son of Gene and Janet Retka--and also a church historian--will inform in the Spring 2026 PGS-MN Newsletter about the history of the past 40 years, and what the future holds for this parish.

2026 PGS-MN Spring Program Meetings

- March 7, 2026 – Terry Kita presenting "The Poznan Marriage Project with FamilySearch"
- April 11, 2026 – Polish American Cultural Institute (PACIM) and Sister City Columbia Heights
- May 2, 2026 – Mary Soroko presenting "Forged in Iron – A Minnesota Rusyn Immigrants Tale"

These programs will be held from 10:00 am until noon at the Minnesota Genealogical Center, 1385 Mendota Heights Road, Mendota Heights, MN in the Mississippi Room. There will also be a ZOOM option for members to participate in on the day of the program. The program meetings will be recorded and saved in the Members Only section of the PGS-MN website for later viewing.

The Fall 2026 Program Meetings will be held on September 12th, October 3rd and November 7th. Details on topics for these program meetings are in the planning stage. Once they are available, they will be posted on the PGS-MN website and included in the Spring Newsletter.