

History of St. Basil Roman Catholic Church Los Angeles, California

Though it carried some of the first commercial traffic in California, the Wilshire Boulevard of today began its expansive growth only with the advent of the automobile. In the years after 1920, when upwards of 100,000 people started arriving in Los Angeles annually, practically all the acreage encircling the city achieved a relevance unparalleled in local annals.

The surprising industrial and financial importance of the boom in the twenties was especially discernable west of the downtown area. Among the first to recognize the potentialities of Wilshire Boulevard was John G. Bullock whose plans for “the most beautiful department store in the world” triggered a procession of imitators who brought to the district between Westlake Park and Western Avenue its greatest period of residential and commercial development.

Even by 1919, the rapid growth was readily discernable. Visitors and transients were becoming permanent residents; new homes were being built in such numbers that the creation of new parishes became a practical necessity.

So, in 1919, there was a “push” for a new parish among Catholics west of Hoover Street, and Bishop John Cantwell created St. Basil Parish on November 26, 1919. The bishop named Fr. William McDermott Hughes (1880–1939) as the pastor. Fr. Hughes purchased a house on the corner of 7th St. and Catalina to use as his headquarters, mobilizing the Catholic people in the area to make plans for the erection of a church.

Albert C. Martin was invited to draw up plans for the church and, on May 12, 1920 the pastor signed a contract with the builder, Edward C. English, to complete the church in 75 working days with the financial help of many generous parishioners. The contractor completed the \$20,120 project on schedule, and the formal dedication of the newly constructed St. Basil Church took place on Sunday, November 21st, 1920, with Bishop Cantwell presiding. On January 5th, 1922, Fr. Hughes was relocated to Washington, D.C. to become the Director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions.

Soon after, Fr. Edward Kirk (1884–1949), who had previously served at All Souls in Alhambra and Holy Family in Glendale, was appointed as pastor. On June 16, 1923, Bishop Cantwell divided the parish, assigning the easternmost section to a newly established parish under the patronage of the Precious Blood of Jesus. Due to the new boundaries that were established for St. Basil Parish, the bishop advised Fr. Kirk to look for a new property site more centrally located than the one at 7th and Catalina. After extensive consultation with local demographers, Fr. Kirk found that property available on Wilshire and Harvard was the most promising and he relocated the parish plant to its present site.

When title to the property had been cleared, the architectural firm of Albert C. Martin was entrusted with overseeing the formidable task of moving the existing church to the new location. The Los Angeles House Moving Company was authorized to execute the project after submitting an estimate of \$3,300. As soon as excavations could be made and foundation stones set in place, the church was cut three parts and moved in what was, at the time, one of the most celebrated displays of engineering talents ever witnessed in the city.

1943 was a particularly difficult year for the parish. About noon, on October 29th, a fire, originating in the rear vestibule of the church, spread rapidly through the wooden structure, destroying the roof, pipe organ, the windows, sanctuary furnishings, as well as the whole nave area. Of course, this was Los Angeles, and there was mystery and intrigue surrounding the blaze. Officially the cause was attributed to a possible short circuit. However, a newspaper account reported an odd circumstance in connection with the fire. "An aged man, who shortly before had visited the church for confession, was found behind a billboard across the street with his throat and wrists slashed." Did he accidentally witness something sinister? Was he in the wrong place at the wrong time? Was it arson? Those questions go unanswered to this day.

Engulfed as the country was in World War II, there was a scarcity of building materials. This necessitated rebuilding the almost ruined church rather than erecting a whole new edifice. Supplies were so limited that panel boards were, in many cases, simply reversed and heavily coated with paint. The refurbishing operation cost \$15,822.99, or almost three-fourths the price of the original building.

A wonderful ecumenical spirit led several neighboring houses of worship to offer temporary quarters. However, Fr. Kirk found it more convenient to occupy a storefront at 3584 Wilshire Blvd until the necessary repairs could be made on the church.

With the sudden death of Msgr. Kirk in 1949, Monsignor Henry Gross (1891-1973) became the third pastor of St. Basil Parish. He arrived from Anaheim where he had been serving in the parish of St. Boniface. In the aftermath of WWII, the population of Los Angeles burgeoned beyond imagination or expectation. It became obvious that a more spacious house of worship was needed in the Wilshire area. Msgr. Gross concentrated his early years at St. Basil on securing additional property and accumulating the necessary financial resources.

Msgr. Gross engaged many people in the discussion of building a larger church. On November 15, 1952, he circulated a letter regarding the future expansion. He announced that the existing rectory, located just north of the church, would be demolished, and the residence moved to 628 S. Harvard. In subsequent years, other parcels of real estate were gradually purchased in order to acquire a two-acre site on which to erect the permanent church.

On August 9, 1965, Msgr. Gross announced that preliminary plans were underway for a new combination church, hall and rectory, a 40,000 square foot complex, on the new location facing Wilshire Boulevard at Kingsley Dr. This new vision was sketched into existence by the Albert C. Martin architectural company, and from those sketches the Pozzo Construction Company erected the new St. Basil Church. The parish church, as we know it today, was opened on June 26, 1969.

Msgr. Gross later retired and on December 15, 1969, Cardinal McIntyre appointed Monsignor Benjamin Hawkes (1919-1985) to be the fourth pastor of St. Basil Parish. Msgr. Hawkes was entrusted with the actual planning and supervision for the new church. He continued to serve as its pastor until his death in 1985.

The newly installed Archbishop of Los Angeles, Roger Mahony, then appointed Fr. M. Francis Meskill (1934-1998) to be the fifth pastor of St. Basil Parish. About this time the demographics of the parish underwent significant change as Asian immigrants from the Philippines and Korea began to settle the area. Fr. Meskill died suddenly in September, 1998, after serving for 13 years as pastor.

Monsignor Charles Hill was then appointed as the sixth pastor. However, after eight extraordinary years he retired for medical reasons.

In July of 2006, Fr. Frank Hicks was appointed as the next administrator of St. Basil Church. Born and raised in Providence, R.I., he graduated from Providence College in 1963 and attended graduate school at the University of Rhode Island. In 1965 the Peace Corps selected him as a community development volunteer in Thailand where he served for three years until February of 1969.

Following his return to the United States, Fr. Frank received an appointment as a Patrol Agent with the United States Border Patrol in Texas. In November of 1971, he transferred to the Los Angeles District as a criminal investigator for the Immigration Service rising to the position of Deputy to the Commissioner for Criminal Investigation for the Western Region. At the time of his retirement in June of 1993, he was attached to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

After completing a year of discernment at St. Gregory's Abbey in Shawnee, Oklahoma, Fr. Frank entered St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, to study for the priesthood. He graduated from St. John's in December of 1999, with a Master of Divinity Degree and a Master of Arts in Theology. He was ordained by Cardinal Roger Mahony on January 15, 2000 for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Prior to his appointment to St. Basil parish, Fr. Frank had served at Holy Trinity Parish in San Pedro and St. Mel's in Woodland Hills.

Fr. Frank is a chaplain and reserve officer with the Los Angeles Police Department, and a supply chaplain at the Federal Correctional Center, Terminal Island. He is also chaplain for the Emerald Society of the L.A.P.D., and chaplain to the Victor McLaglen

Motor Cycle Stunt and Drill Team (Fr. Frank rides a Harley). Fr. Frank has served on the Personnel Board of the Archdiocese and was recently appointed by Cardinal Mahony to head the Cardinal McIntyre Fund for Charity. He is a board member of FedONE Federal Credit Union.

Fr. Frank's hobbies include motorcycling, music, reading, stamp collecting, cooking and gardening.

After two years as administrator he became the seventh, and current, pastor of St. Basil Church.