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## Where Have All the Lithuanians Gone? A Study of St. Casimir's Lithuanian Parish in South Philadelphia

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The ethnic landscape of South Philadelphia has been in flux throughout the late 20th century and into the 21st century. The large groups of European immigrants who came to the city of Philadelphia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have since dispersed to other areas, and Philadelphia as a whole has seen a drastic shift in population in recent decades. The years from 1868-1914 saw 500,000 immigrants enter Philadelphia,<sup>1</sup> making Philadelphia the third largest immigrant city in the United States at that time.

The majority of these immigrants were unskilled peasants from southern and eastern Europe. Many were also practicing Catholics who tended to settle together due to their common language, culture, and faith. Patrick John Ryan, who became Archbishop of Philadelphia in 1884, took special interest in creating national parishes and encouraging parishioners to live close to their church, and he was quite successful in this effort. At the end of his tenure in Philadelphia, which concluded with his death in 1911, there were in existence 297 Catholic churches, 141 Catholic schools servicing 66,612 pupils, and the overall Catholic population in the city of Philadelphia was 525,000.<sup>2</sup> Those numbers only continued to grow after his death. In recent decades, however, many of these Catholic churches and schools, which once served as unifying forces for European ethnic groups and as a focal point for local communities, have become casualties of the changing culture and shifting demographics. Year after year, the doors of more Catholic churches and schools in Philadelphia are shuttered due to a steep decline in parishioners. The aim of this study is to investigate this societal change more closely through the study of St. Casimir's Parish, the first Lithuanian Catholic Parish ever founded in Philadelphia.

St. Casimir's Parish played a vibrant role in its surrounding community in the 20th century, through both the existence of its church and its adjoining elementary school. In 1993, St. Casimir's Church celebrated its 100th anniversary with much fanfare. Nineteen years after that celebration, the church building remains, but only as a worship site.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia closed St. Casimir's School at the end of the 2005-2006

school year. The school served the South Philadelphia community for 100 years before it closed. The parishioners of St. Casimir's once were vital participants in the life of South Philadelphia. They owned many local businesses, and actively sought ways to be involved in their local community through the development and expansion of social clubs. However, few traces of the Lithuanian presence in South Philadelphia remain in existence today. Typical societal trends such as the mass move to the suburbs and a shift in the general public towards a more secular society certainly factored into the decline of St. Casimir's, but they do not tell the whole story. The major cause that eventually led to the closing of the parish and school was the parishioners' loss of a sense of community through the demise of their social groups and the inability of younger generations to connect with the Lithuanian heritage upon which the parish was founded.

To have a better understanding of the combination of issues that led to the demise of St. Casimir's Parish and School, it is necessary to trace the history of the parish. Much of what can be learned about the early years of the parish comes from short histories written by parishioners for various anniversary celebrations. Booklets were created for the 25, 50, and 100th anniversary celebrations for the church, as well as the 100th anniversary of the school. These booklets are a rich source of information as they provide a narrative history, images of the church and its parishioners, records of some of the social groups, and advertisements for local businesses. Within their pages exists a wealth of information just waiting to be explored further. Any gaps left by these booklets are filled in by additional research and interviews with those who attended St. Casimir's and remain in the neighborhood.

The Lithuanians were one of many European immigrant groups who came to the United States on ships that landed at the Washington Avenue Immigration Station on the Delaware River, which processed approximately one million immigrants during its existence from 1873-1915.<sup>4</sup>

While many immigrants chose to board trains and make their livelihood in other areas of the country, those who elected to stay in Philadelphia did not stray far from their initial point of entry at Washington and Delaware Avenues. In 1890, a small group of passionate Lithuanian Catholic immigrants in South Philadelphia began collecting funds under the name of St. Anthony's Parish,

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1 Jaipaul, PhD, *Directory of Ethnic Resources of Philadelphia and Delaware Valley* (Philadelphia: Ethnic Heritage Affairs Institute, Inc., 1976), 94.

2 "Patrick John Ryan," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Accessed December 6, 2012, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13282c.htm>

3 A worship site is a church whose parishioners have been folded into another parish. The worship site cannot celebrate christenings or weddings. It can, however, celebrate regular masses and funeral masses. St. Casimir's Church is now a worship site of St. Andrew's Parish.

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4 Historical Society of Pennsylvania, "Washington Avenue Steamship Landing and Immigration station," accessed October 1, 2012, <http://www.philaplace.org/story/190/>

with the hope of gathering enough money to start their own Lithuanian parish. For three years they sought funding, gathered more people, and attended masses together in various places throughout the city; however, there were no priests in Philadelphia who spoke Lithuanian, and many of the immigrants had not learned English.

During this time, Archbishop Ryan was greatly interested in developing national

parishes. It is important to note what is meant by the term 'national parish' in this context. These parishes were created to serve a specific nationality and that nationality only. For example, a person who was not Polish could not become a parishioner of a Polish parish or attend a Polish Catholic school. Archbishop Ryan supported this effort because he recognized that non-English speaking immigrants would feel more encouraged to continue practicing their faith if they could attend mass in their spoken language and live within a community of others who spoke their language and shared their customs. He encouraged parishioners to live close to their church and to sell their properties only to other parishioners.<sup>5</sup>In doing so, he played a major role in creating distinct ethnic pockets in Philadelphia neighborhoods.

Archbishop Ryan interceded on behalf of the Philadelphia Lithuanians and requested that a Lithuanian-speaking priest be sent to Philadelphia. In 1893 Reverend Joseph J. Kaulakis, who had been recently ordained in Belgium, was sent to Philadelphia to become the first Lithuanian pastor in the city. Upon the arrival of Father<sup>6</sup> Kaulakis, the parish consisted of 60 families and included 200 individuals. Though they now had a pastor, the Lithuanians still did not have a permanent building to call home. Father Kaulakis' very first mass was said at the church of St. Alphonsus, located at 4th and Reed Streets. Lithuanian masses continued to be held at St. Alphonsus for the next six months, after which they used Old St. Joseph's Church at 321 Willings Alley, about a mile away from St. Alphonsus. Finally, in 1894, the parishioners collected enough money to purchase a small Protestant church at 5th and Carpenter Streets. For the price of \$7,500, the Lithuanians were able to have their own church. Unfortunately, problems soon arose after the purchase.

First, the parishioners made the decision to grant the title of the church to the organization of St. Anthony's Beneficial Society, which was made up of neighboring Lithuanians. The parish church also took the name of St. Anthony's Lithuanian Parish. This is where the story gets a little hazy. The only currently accessible record about the ensuing legal drama between the parishioners and the Beneficial Society comes from the Anniversary booklets for St. Casimir's Parish; therefore, their account may be one sided. The official church history claims that when the number of parishioners quickly outgrew the capacity of the church, St. Anthony's Beneficial Society would not allow the sale of the property so that the parish could purchase a larger one. The narrative provided in the programs is vague, but it appears that members

of St. Anthony's Beneficial Society included non-Catholics and non-Parishioners who wanted to keep the church building for uses other than that of a Catholic church. The parishioners took the matter to the civil courts, and the courts decided in favor of the parishioners. "The courts sustained the Catholic Church, holding that an institution organized as a Catholic institution must remain one and belongs to all the Catholic parishioners."<sup>7</sup>Even though they won the court ruling, St. Anthony's was closed until it could be sold, and the parishioners were forced to travel to other churches once again to hear mass in Lithuanian.

This did not discourage the group, however. In fact, the number of parishioners continued to grow over the next five years as the parish held Lithuanian masses across Center City and South Philadelphia at the churches of Holy Trinity at 6th and Spruce Streets, St. Mary Magdalene at 7th and Montrose Streets, Old St. Mary's at 4th and Locust Streets, and St. Phillip at 2nd and Queen Streets. The five years during which the South Philadelphia Lithuanians had no permanent home were referred to as the "period of disturbance" in the parish histories.

Also during this time, under the guidance of Father Kaulakis, a second Lithuanian parish was formed to service Lithuanians in the Port Richmond, Bridesburg, and Frankford sections of Philadelphia. Some of the Lithuanians who had settled in these more northern parts of the city had been coming to the masses in South Philadelphia; but, with the instability of the situation with St. Anthony's Church, Father Kaulakis took the opportunity to form another Lithuanian congregation. They used a German Catholic school hall until they could erect their own church, St. George's, in 1902. A third Lithuanian Catholic Church was established in 1924 at 19th and Wallace Streets under the name of St. Andrew's Lithuanian Church.

The Lithuanians of South Philadelphia found their permanent home in 1905, when a large Protestant church at 326-336 Wharton Street was purchased for \$50,000, funded both from the proceeds of the sale of St. Anthony's Church and money collected by parishioners. The first mass in the new building was held on July 2, 1905; however, the church had been left in a state of ill repair, and the parishioners spent another \$25,000 remodeling and converting it into a Catholic place of worship. On May 30, 1906, Archbishop Ryan dedicated the newly remodeled building as St. Casimir's Church, named after the patron saint of Lithuania.<sup>8</sup>Now that the Lithuanians had a permanent church, they turned their attention to developing a school. The following fall, St. Casimir's began holding classes in the church basement. Two teachers taught the classes, one who spoke English and one who spoke Lithuanian. This primitive model of teaching continued for six years until the Sisters of St. Casimir took over the teaching duties. By 1918, the parish consisted of approximately 1,000 families, and over 2,000 individuals. To keep up with the demands of the parish and now the school, additional property around the church was purchased to build a convent, a rectory, and a separate school building.

5 Allen F. Davis and Mark H. Haller, ed., *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790-1940* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973), 243.

6 Catholic priests often prefer the title of "Father" to the more formal title "Reverend."

7 Svento Kazimiero Parapijos Auksinis Jubiliejus 1893-1943 (St. Casimir Parish Golden Jubilee) (Philadelphia, 1943), 11.

8 Casimir Jagiellon was the crown prince of Poland and the Duchy of Lithuania, and was named patron saint of both Poland and Lithuania. Lithuanians have always held a special devotion to him.

The development of social groups during this time was fundamental in keeping the community of parishioners tightly knit in support of their parish. Especially during World War I and World War II, nationalistic pride was high, and the parishioners were concerned about their fellow Lithuanians who were struggling back in the home country. For these parishioners, St. Casimir's was not just a church to worship in, it was a way to stay in touch with their roots--to remember where they came from. The 25th anniversary booklet featured an article penned by Father Kaulakis, entitled "An Appeal From the Lithuanians." Written in 1916, the article encouraged parishioners to donate to the war effort in Lithuania. He wrote: The Lithuanian nation is now passing through the most critical hour of her history! While the flower of her youth has fallen on the battlefield, while her population has been massacred, led into captivity, scattered through a country ravaged by warm fire, and plunderers, a country where the inclemencies <sic> of the season are prolonged, and while stoically supporting her suffering, she is worthy of the raising of our voices in her favor and making this appeal to generous hearts, to give assistance to her unhappy and poverty-stricken population.<sup>9</sup>

Donations were directed to The Philadelphia Central Relief Committee of the Lithuanian War Sufferers at 324 Wharton Street, the address of St. Casimir's Church, showing once again that the parish played a central role in the community.

Once Lithuanians felt confident in the permanency of St. Casimir's Church, they settled in the area and opened businesses. Evidence of these Lithuanian-owned businesses can be found in the advertisements located in the anniversary booklets. One particularly intriguing advertisement found in the 1918 booklet belonged to Petronele Lomsargis. The advertisement featured her headshot (her face is rather rotund and her countenance quite serious) and was written entirely in Lithuanian. A rough translation reveals that she was a practitioner of herbal medicine, offering relief specifically from rheumatism. She also claimed to give good advice.<sup>10</sup> Her business was located at 1814 S. Water Street, which was torn down to make room for Interstate 95.<sup>11</sup> Another advertisement in the 1918 booklet featured the Bigenis Funeral Home, which was still in business as recently as the 1990s. The building remains, and is now the Donnelly Funeral Home. Joseph Kavalasuskas owned another funeral home at 1601-03 S. 2nd Street, which is now the Rachubinski funeral home.

The number of Lithuanian owned businesses continued to expand over the next 25 years, according to the 50th Anniversary booklet. It seems as though a Lithuanian could fill almost any need he or she had by patronizing only Lithuanian businesses, the majority of which now exist only in memory. In Philadelphia: A Study of Conflicts and Social Cleavages, the authors assert that because minority groups such as the Lithuanians "...Tended to cluster in tight neighborhoods and dominate certain occupations, their presence

was strongly felt despite their small numbers."<sup>12</sup> The Lithuanian presence was certainly felt in the neighborhood surrounding St. Casimir's. Many shops dominated the area of South 2nd Street in particular. Some examples include Merkel Bakery, owned by Joseph Jakstis, and located at 1315 S. 2nd Street, Herman's Grill at 1505 S. 2nd Street, Tillie's Flower Shop at 1225 S. 2nd Street and Vasuskas Meat and Groceries at 1419 S. 2nd Street; all have since been converted to residences. Rimeika's Restaurant, which specialized in seafood, was located at 1726 S. 2nd Street, where Normans Juvenile Furniture now stands. Charles Kisielius Lithuanian Grocery Store at 301 Wharton Street now holds the offices of Marino & Associates. Two blocks west of St. Casimir's Church, a man alive in the 1940s might have gotten his hair cut by Paul Spudis at 1219 S. 5th Street; that block was razed in recent years to create a new residential development. Valaitis Motor Service,

located at 1730-34 East Moyamensing Avenue, is one of the only businesses advertised in the 1943 booklet that is still in existence; although it is no longer owned by Lithuanians, the current owners have kept the name.

Disaster struck St. Casimir's Church in 1930, when a catastrophic fire burned the entire church building to the ground. Despite the fact that the United States had entered the Great Depression, the Lithuanians remained undaunted and rebuilt their church within a year under the leadership of Father Kaulakis. Shortly after the church was rebuilt, Father Kaulakis passed away, and Monsignor Ignacius Valanciunas became the new pastor. He took up the mantle of restoration and oversaw the interior work for the new church. The parish continued to flourish under Msgr. Valanciunas. In 1942 a Kindergarten was added to the school, and in 1943 there were 18 different social groups active in the church.<sup>13</sup> During World War II, 336 men and 9 women who were parishioners of St. Casimir's served across every branch of the United States Armed Forces.<sup>14</sup> The names of 27 young men who lost their lives, along with their addresses, were printed in the 50th anniversary booklet. All lived quite close to St. Casimir's Church. An honor roll list of all who served was also included.<sup>15</sup> After the war, a new wave of Lithuanian immigrants arrived, looking for freedom. These people had been taken forcibly from their homeland and coerced into working in German labor camps. Their numbers helped sustain the parish for a while; however, they did not join many of the pre-established social groups, choosing instead to create their own groups.<sup>16</sup>

Bad luck struck St. Casimir's again in 1951, when the church suffered yet another fire when a heating oil tank exploded in the church basement. This time, the bell tower and some of the walls were saved, but little else was salvageable.<sup>17</sup> Still, the tenacious Lithuanians once again rebuilt their church. St. Casimir's Catholic

9 Commemoration of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of St. Casimir's Parish, Philadelphia, PA and of the 25th Anniversary of Rev. J.J. Kaulakis' Orientation to the Priesthood, 1893-1918 (Philadelphia, 1918), 43.  
10 1918 booklet.  
11 In the Pennsport area of South Philadelphia, I-95 runs above ground, parallel to Water Street. Hundreds of homes on Front Street and Water Street were demolished to make way for the interstate. Many St. Casimir's parishioners lived in these homes.

12 Peter O. Muller, Kenneth C. Meyer, and Roman A. Cybriwsky, Metropolitan Philadelphia: A Study of Conflicts and Social Cleavages (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1976), 11.  
13 St. Casimir Church, Philadelphia PA, 100th Anniversary, 1893-1993 (Philadelphia, 1993), 18.  
14 Ibid., 13.  
15 Both of my Grandfathers were listed in the World War II Honor Roll. Stanley Aros, listed as "Airosius Stasius," served in the U.S. Navy, and Casimir Zemaitaitis, listed as "Zemaitaitis Kazys," served in the U.S. Army.  
16 Conversation with Charles and Margaret Petronis, December 8, 2012.  
17 100th Anniversary Booklet, 13.

War Veterans Post #652, which was established in 1946, played a large role in fundraising for the rebuilding efforts.<sup>18</sup>In the meantime, parishioners returned to St. Alphonsus to celebrate mass until the rebuilt St. Casimir's Church was ready for rededication on September 13, 1953. Many of the social groups remained active through the 1950s, but the church was not immune to the changes going on in the city around them.

One of the most popular events for local teenagers was the weekly dance for Catholic school students held in the school hall. Parishioners, like Stanley Aros, Sr., would volunteer to sell tickets and refreshments, chaperone, and clean up. The dances began to attract teenagers from public schools who were not allowed entrance, which sometimes led to fights outside the building. Some windows were smashed during one such altercation in 1963, and many involved felt running the dances was too much work, and they could no longer guarantee the safety of the children. The clubs began to disappear. It would be easy to attribute the marked downturn in parish activities to the overall patterns of change in the city of Philadelphia, and certainly there are overarching societal patterns that played a role. Many of the original founding generation had passed on and each subsequent generation became more and more Americanized. Additionally, many working class families moved to the suburbs either to follow their jobs or simply because they had enough money to afford such a luxury. Still, many people who live well outside the city limits travel back to the city to support other parishes, such as St. Andrew's in Fairmount; so, there must be another factor.

Upon interviewing several parishioners who lived through the changes in the 1960s and onward, it was discovered that Reverend Clarence Batutis, who succeeded Msgr. Valanciunas, was a rather unremarkable pastor during the period he was in charge of the parish from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, especially in comparison to his two very popular and charismatic predecessors. An article celebrating the 100th anniversary of St. Casimir's Parish, printed in the October 7, 1993 edition of *The Catholic Standard and Times*, seems to support this, as it simply states: "Msgr. Valanciunas was succeeded by Father Clarence Batutis who had a less dramatic pastorship,"<sup>19</sup>while the article spends much more time praising his predecessors and successor.

One of the assistant priests under Father Batutis was the young, energetic priest, Reverend Eugene Wassel. Father Wassel was very interested in encouraging the community relationships, especially among the youth. According to parishioner Stanley Aros, Sr., "Father Wassel...was the best one. He run the dances, he run the basketball, he run the Boy Scouts, the Girls Scouts-he run everything! And he was always around. He was always around to help you out if you had a problem."<sup>20</sup>Father Wassel was integral to the

creation of the Ladies Guild in 1960, which became vital to parish and school fundraising, and he helped oversee many of the other clubs that had already been in existence. However, parishioners report that when Father Wassel was called upon by the Archdiocese to become an assistant at another parish, Father Batutis did not want to put the time and effort into maintaining these groups, and summarily disbanded quite a few of them. Among the many groups that ended while Father Batutis was pastor was the Young Knights of Lithuania, which educated the youth of the parish about Lithuanian traditions and customs.<sup>21</sup> With the younger generations already losing touch with their national roots, the effect that losing this club had on a generation of parishioners is incalculable. For example, James and Elizabeth Aros (Zemaitaitis) graduated from 8th grade at St. Casimir's School in 1964. They later married. The Young Knights of Lithuania and the parish dances had both ended before they reached 8th grade, and out of their class of 18, they are the only ones who remained in the neighborhood and stayed active in the parish. While they do believe that a lack of Lithuanian heritage tying people to the parish played a huge role in the decline of the social groups, they also pointed out that their generation was the first to have large numbers of high school graduates go off to college. Many of their classmates met their future husbands and wives in college, and chose to settle in other areas rather than return home to South Philadelphia.<sup>22</sup>

The increasing tendency of the younger generations to marry outside the parish only added to the estrangement of the parishioners from their Lithuanian heritage. For many immigrant nationalities, there was once a stigma attached to marrying someone who was of a different ethnicity. This was not true of the Lithuanians. They often married people of a different ethnicity, and as a result, their progeny became less likely to identify themselves as Lithuanian. It became necessary to change the nationality rule that required a person to be of Lithuanian descent to become a member of the Parish or to attend the school. Father Wassel had lobbied for this change while he was assistant pastor under Father Batutis, but Father Batutis did not want to stir the pot and upset other neighborhood parishes. During this time, St. Alphonsus closed.<sup>23</sup> The two parishes had a rich history, even sharing school buildings for a time, but because of the nationality rule in place, St. Casimir's lost the opportunity to welcome former St. Alphonsus parishioners to their church and school.

One of the more remarkable facts about St. Casimir's Parish is that in its 118 year history, it only had five pastors. Father Wassel returned to St. Casimir's in 1975 to succeed Father Batutis as pastor. Father Wassel remained a dedicated and beloved leader of the church, who did all he could to bring life back to the parish. The celebration of the 100th anniversary, which lasted from 1992-1993, was perhaps his crowning achievement. Many

18 Conversation with Charles Petronis. Mr. Petronis is a former Post Commander of St. Casimir's Catholic War Veterans Post #652 and current Commander of the Philadelphia County Catholic War Veterans. Charles and his wife Margaret are also two of the few remaining South Philadelphia who are still active with the Knights of Lithuania.

19 Lou Baldwin, "At St. Casimir's: A Turbulent Century of Faith," *The Catholic Standard and Times*, October 7, 1993, 11.

20 Stanley J. Aros, Sr., interviewed by Maryanne A. Morrison, March 31st, 2011, 42-43.

21 Many adults in the parish were active in the Knights of Lithuania, a national organization that will be celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2013. The group was quite active in the parish at one time, but very few South Philadelphians remain active in the organization today.

22 James and Elizabeth Aros are my parents. Four generations of my family have belonged to St. Casimir's Parish. These details come from conversations with them.

23 St. Alphonsus closed in 1972 and most of their parishioners went to Sacred Heart Parish.

parishioners were involved in planning the year long celebration, which consisted of multiple concerts, an “oldies” night, a country western dance, an Oktoberfest event, a Valentine’s Day breakfast, and a spaghetti dinner, among many other events. The celebration culminated with the Jubilee Mass, which was held on October 3, 1993. Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua was the main celebrant, and was accompanied by thirty other members of the clergy. There was not an empty seat in the church. Despite all of the excitement surrounding the 100th anniversary, the numbers of parishioners still continued to decline. Unfortunately, so did Father Wassel’s health, as he began to fall under the grips of the unrelenting disease known as Alzheimer’s. Parishioners did all they could to assist him as he struggled to preside over mass, but eventually everyone had to face the truth and admit that it was time for Father Wassel to retire as Pastor.<sup>24</sup>

The Archdiocese asked Reverend Peter Burkauskus, who was already the pastor of St. Andrew’s Lithuanian Parish in Fairmount, to take on pastoral duties at St. Casimir’s as well. Some parishioners did not immediately welcome Father Burkauskas, due to his decision to remain loyal to St. Andrew’s and reside at their rectory instead of St. Casimir’s. For over a century, the parishioners of St. Casimir’s had a dedicated pastor living on premises; now, they had to share one with another parish located across the city.

Father Burkauskus tried to reinvigorate the parish. At St. Andrew’s, there is still a mass said in Lithuanian. Father Burkauskus attempted to introduce some Lithuanian elements of the mass at St. Casimir’s, but it was not a popular move. He also purchased a new organ and had the interior of the church renovated for the first time since the 1970s. Even though many praised the outcome of the renovations, it became a sore subject with some parishioners who felt that the money should have been spent on other things. Some of the more popular moves he made were to introduce “Fellowship Sunday” which is a reception held in the church basement after 9 O’clock mass on the second Sunday of each month, and to commission the construction of a beautiful Lithuanian Wayside Cross<sup>25</sup> that now stands next to the rectory.

In 2000, St. Casimir’s held a homecoming celebration to celebrate the rededication of the remodeled church. The event was very successful as many former students of St. Casimir’s School returned to see the results of the renovation and attend a dinner following mass. An attempt was made to hold a similar celebration each year thereafter, but interest petered out as the years went on. It was simply impractical to rely on a once-a-year event to maintain funding for the church and the school.

A Lithuanian festival held on the 300 block of Wharton Street in front of the church in 2005 was quite popular; however,

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24 During this time, I was a lector at St. Casimir’s, and I remember the downturn in his health quite vividly. Fr. Wassel was the pastor who baptized me in the hospital when I was a very sick newborn. I had been given a grave prognosis, but the day after my baptism, I was removed from ICU and on the path to recovery. Due to this personal connection, I may have a biased perspective, but I have only fond memories of Father Wassel as being friendly and approachable, and as someone who really became the heart and soul of the parish.

25 For more on the history of the Lithuanian Wayside Cross, visit <http://sacredsites.com/europe/lithuania/hillofcrosses.html>

many of the dancers and other entertainers, as well as most of the attendees, were from outside of the parish and came only to celebrate that one day. This successful one-time fundraiser and its participants provide an interesting juxtaposition to the newer St. Casimir’s parishioners and school children who had no Lithuanian heritage whatsoever. As much fun as it was for the old timers and those coming in from other areas, it was impossible to engender any sort of real Lithuanian pride in people who did not have that shared heritage.

Unlike other nationalities that are visibly celebrated in America (for example, the saying that “Everybody is Irish on St. Patrick’s Day” or the proliferation of “Italian” style restaurants), Lithuanians do not share a widespread cultural recognition. Part of this problem is simply in the number of immigrants. In the 1920 census, which followed one of the largest periods of Lithuanian immigration to Philadelphia, there were 4,392 Lithuanians living in the city, making it the 10th largest immigrant group. For comparison, there were 64,500 Irish and 63,223 Italians living in the city at the same time.<sup>26</sup> To know how many there are nowadays is practically impossible as most of these European groups have become grouped together as “Caucasian” or “White” and are no longer categorized by their individual ethnicities.

In a 1976 publication by the Ethnic Heritage Affairs Institute in Philadelphia, author Jaipaul had already noted that some ethnic groups had begun to Americanize. He calculated that at the start of the 20th century there were about 30 different Lithuanian organizations active in Philadelphia, but that they were mostly buoyed by a nationalistic renaissance. Their memberships declined as the older generations died off and their increasingly Americanized offspring did not replace them in the ranks of the groups.<sup>27</sup> This pattern was certainly followed at St. Casimir’s. Though the youth groups were not ended due to a lack of interest, as those youths grew up they would be the ones to replace their parents and grandparents as important members in other social groups. Due to disinterest and declining membership, the dwindling of two clubs in particular really hit St. Casimir’s hard: The Ladies Guild, and the Catholic War Veterans post. The Ladies Guild was disbanded in 1984, mostly because the increasing numbers of working mothers did not have enough time to devote to the planning and execution of the fundraisers. The Post, while still active, has seen the loss of most of its original members, and by the end of the 1990s, the younger members were no longer active in supporting the church.

St. Casimir’s School finally closed in 2006, having just celebrated its 100th anniversary. The reasons for the closing of the school are less complex than the reasons for the parish. Beginning in the second half of the 20th Century, the Catholic Church as a whole has seen a marked drop in men and women who are called to the priesthood and sisterhood. For many years, students in the Catholic schools in Philadelphia were taught by nuns, which helped keep the cost of running the schools very low. As the nuns grew older, and not enough young women were entering the convent to replace them, the schools had to turn to lay teachers. In 1990, St. Casimir’s School had to deal with this exact problem, as the Sis-

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26 Davis and Haller, 204-206.

27 Jaipaul, 94.

ters of St. Casimir withdrew from the school after 78 years, choosing to send the few nuns they had remaining to schools in other areas of the country that were still flourishing, such as Chicago.

The added expenditure of paying a reasonable salary to lay teachers has made the cost of running a Catholic school skyrocket, and many just cannot keep up with the expense. In the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, parish schools also have become a drain on the parishes themselves because they must help to subsidize the school largely through parish donations. According to an article printed in the South Philly Review, the school's projected budget deficit at the end of the 2006 school year was \$300,000, and this was in spite of a \$200,000 donation given by an anonymous donor.<sup>28</sup> The cost of attending St. Casimir's School in its last year was \$1,950 for parishioners and \$3,000 for non-parishioners and non-Catholics. This cost, regrettably, became too prohibitive for many of the families who now live in the area. St. Casimir's School had an enrollment of only 99 students during its final year in operation. One reason why parents continued to send their children to Catholic schools despite the cost of tuition, was because they saw Catholic schools as the safe alternative to the troubled Philadelphia public school system. Over the past decade, however, Philadelphia has seen a dramatic rise in Charter schools. These schools are proving to be another safe alternative to the public school system, and are free. The same story is happening to Catholic schools across the city, though South Philadelphia has been hit particularly hard. In 2012, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia closed Sacred Heart of Jesus School and Mount Carmel School, the only two Catholic schools that remained in St. Casimir's neighborhood. In the area of South Philadelphia bordered by South Street to the north, 6th Street, to the west, Oregon Avenue to the south, and the Delaware River to the east, there are now zero Catholic schools.<sup>29</sup>

Once St. Casimir's School closed, however, the debts to the Archdiocese did not go away, and the parish simply could not remain solvent. Father Burkaukas and the St. Casimir's parishioners put up a valiant effort, but with the loss of the support of a strong local community, it was only a matter of time before reality caught up with them. On August 1, 2011, St. Casimir's Parish ceased to exist, and the church was designated as a worship site of St. Andrew's Lithuanian Parish. Taking a look at the number of parishioners from each church, it was evident that St. Casimir's had been limping along, while St. Andrews continued to increase their numbers. The South Philly Review noted that "From 2000 to 2010, St. Casimir's parishioner count fell from 195 to 182, a 7 percent decline, while St. Andrew's experienced a 59 percent bump by going from 479 to 761 worshippers."<sup>30</sup> Other churches have faced similar problems. In Philadelphia, 14 parishes were closed during the eight years Justin Cardinal Rigali was in charge of the Archdiocese, including St. Casimir's. Of the 14, two were renamed

and became combined parishes, and St. Casimir's was one of only three churches to remain open as worship sites. The others include St. Stanislaus, which was a Polish parish in Queen Village, and Immaculate Heart of Mary serving Northern Liberties.<sup>31</sup> The remainder of those churches were closed entirely. Since that time, many more schools have been closed and rumors abound that many more parishes will be receiving the axe once a current feasibility study is completed.

The makeup of the neighborhood surrounding St. Casimir's Church today is quite different than it was in its heyday due to the groups of people moving in and out. After the initial immigration boom at the turn of the 20th century, immigration to Philadelphia experienced a few more waves but remained largely stagnant. Not only were new immigrants not coming to city, the old residents were leaving and dying out. From 1970-2000 Philadelphia lost 22% of its total population. A study by Good and Schneider in 1994, cited in Global Philadelphia, found that between 1970 and 1980 Philadelphia lost more jobs to its suburbs than any other major U.S. city.<sup>32</sup> Immigration did begin to pick up in the 1990s, and the decade from 1990 to 2000 saw the foreign born population grow by 30%, even though the overall population of the city actually decreased by 4%.<sup>33</sup> For South Philadelphia in particular, the Vietnamese and Cambodians have developed the largest presence, followed by Latin American groups and other Asian groups.<sup>34</sup>

Many of the factors that contributed to the demise of St. Casimir's Parish and School are common societal trends that are mirrored not only across the city of Philadelphia, but in many major cities in the United States. These include the rise in suburbanization, relocation of jobs, secularization of society, and changes in immigration patterns. Nonetheless, the most striking cause for the downfall of this particular parish and its surrounding community as it existed in the first part of the 20th Century is certainly the loss of their Lithuanian roots, which in turn led to the loss of the community. Looking at the Catholic landscape of Philadelphia, the few parishes that remain vibrant all seem to maintain great pride in their national roots. Even though many parishioners have moved out of the city, they keep returning to their parish church because they are passionate about their community. The best way for such pride to be maintained is likely through a constant flow of new ethnic immigrants to keep the heritage alive.

There are still a handful of Lithuanians left who regularly attend mass at St. Casimir's Church, and Fellowship Sunday is still held and receives a decent amount of participants; yet, some of the St. Casimir's crowd can't help but feel like they are being left behind. Already a year and a half has passed since the merging of the Parishes, and no member of St. Casimir's has been asked to come to St. Andrew's for parish council meetings, as had been promised.

Those who are left in South Philadelphia admit that they never felt like they fit in with the parishioners at St. Andrew's. When St.

28 Fred Durso, Jr., "Unanswered Prayers," South Philly Review, January 25, 2007, accessed October 1, 2012, [http://www.southphillyreview.com/news/unanswered\\_prayers-73729002.html](http://www.southphillyreview.com/news/unanswered_prayers-73729002.html)

29 Shaj Matthew, "Hundreds in South Philly Protest Plan to Close 2 Catholic Schools," February 23, 2012, accessed December 3, 2012, [http://articles.philly.com/2012-02-23/news/31091540\\_1\\_catholic-schoolsmount-carmel-sacred-heart](http://articles.philly.com/2012-02-23/news/31091540_1_catholic-schoolsmount-carmel-sacred-heart)

30 Joseph Myers, "Changing Times at St. Casimir's," South Philly Review, July 14, 2011, accessed October 1, 2012 <http://www.southphillyreview.com/news/cover-story/Changing-times-at-St-Casimir125525408.html>

31 Philadelphia Church Project "Closing the Book on Cardinal Rigali," August 1, 2011, accessed December 5th, 2012 <http://phillychurchproject.blogspot.com/2011/08/closing-book-on-cardinalrigali.html>

32 Ayumi Takenda and Mary Johnson Osirim, ed. Global Philadelphia: Immigrant Communities Old and New (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 5.

33 Ibid., 1-2.

34 Ibid., 12.

Casimir's and St. Andrew's first began sharing Father Burkauskas as their pastor, some of the St. Casimir's parishioners wanted to see what St. Andrew's was all about. St. Andrew's appears to have received the bulk of the new Lithuanian immigrants who started coming over to the United States after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some of their members are quite wealthy, and have a very particular way about how they want things to be done owing to their large investments in the parish. Elizabeth Aros relayed a story about her father, Casimir (Charles) Zemaitaitis, who was quite excited about the prospect of once again belonging to a community that embraced its Lithuanian heritage. With their Lithuanian choir, Lithuanian dance troupe, Lithuanian masses and other groups that met and encouraged speaking in the Lithuanian native tongue, perhaps Charles saw in St. Andrew's a place reminiscent of what it was like to belong to St. Casimir's in its earlier days. He was dismayed to find that "outsiders" were not treated warmly by many of the parishioners, and he never felt comfortable there. Even though he was a so-called "blueblood," (100% Lithuanian), he felt partly shunned by his supposed compatriots.<sup>35</sup> Charles and Margaret Petronis report similar stories, as do others who prefer not to be named.

Father Burkauskas, speaking to the South Philly Review on the merging of the parishes and the change of St. Casimir's Church to a worship site, said: "Change can bring sadness no matter how firm one's faith is."<sup>36</sup> One cannot help but feel the sadness in the voices of the few Lithuanians who remain in South Philadelphia, and wonder if this change was inevitable, or if anything could have altered the fate of their beloved parish. They speculate as to whether the Lithuanians could have formed a stronger coalition had they stuck together in one neighborhood and at one parish. Considering the dispersion of members amongst the three parishes, it stands to reason that if they had combined, they would have been more productive and financially stable; however, there is no way of ever knowing a definitive answer to this question. All that can be known is that the small Lithuanian population that still remains in South Philadelphia have great pride in their heritage. Though they wish things would have turned out better for their parish, they are quite thankful that they still have St. Casimir's Church to worship in.

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Zemaitaitis passed away in 2006. This is a recollection of the conversation by his daughter, Elizabeth Aros.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Myers, "Changing Times at St. Casimir's," South Philly Review, July 14, 2011, accessed October 1, 2012 <http://www.southphillyreview.com/news/cover-story/Changing-times-at-StCasimir-125525408.html>