



Sacred Heart's First Administrator and Pastor
Monsignor John J. Sonefeld
1886-1966

Monsignor John Joseph Sonefeld was born in Stronach, Michigan on March 5, 1886. He was the sixth of eight children born to his Polish parents, Joseph Sonefeld and Wilhelmina Szlagowska Sonefeld. He was baptized on March 21, 1886 at Saint Joseph Church in Manistee, Michigan.

John Joseph attended seminary at Saint Francis in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 1905 after graduation from the seminary, he traveled to Rome to complete his studies. He attended the North American College, Rome followed by studies at the University of Propaganda Fide, Rome. He graduated with Doctorates in Divinity and Philosophy. His time in Rome ended with his ordination on September 24, 1910 at Saint John Lateran Basilica, Rome by Cardinal Pietro Respighi. The now Reverend Sonefeld celebrated his first Mass as an ordained Priest at the tomb of Saint Peter on September 25, 1910.

Father Sonefeld returned to Grand Rapids, Michigan from Rome in June of 1911. From July 1911 until July 1919 he served in Grand Rapids as an Assistant at Saint Andrew, a Professor at Saint Joseph's Seminary, and as Chancellor and Secretary to the Bishop of Grand Rapids. This time was well spent as it provided the Reverend Sonefeld with the tools that he would need to guide the early members of the soon-to-be *Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Hungarian Church*, as it was officially named on November 24, 1915.

In August 1919, the Most Reverend Edward D. Kelly, Bishop of the Grand Rapids Diocese, appointed Father Sonefeld to be the Administrator of Sacred Heart. In September of 1919, he was also appointed as the Chaplain at Mercy Hospital in Muskegon. (He held this position until December 1921, at which time he was able to turn his whole attention to the building and organization of Sacred Heart Parish). This was a very happy development for the young congregation. Their Masses and Sacramental events from September 9, 1919 were held at a rented hall above a meat market on what is now Broadway Avenue. According to the *Federal Writer's Project*, the July 18, 1936 publication of *News of the Churches* stated there were 375 registered as members of the new congregation. The cornerstone of the new Parish was laid on May 13, 1920, and in December of that year, the congregation was beginning to meet in the basement of the new church. In 1921, the basement of the new church was finished and blessed. Now the congregation had a church of their own. Masses and Sacraments could now be celebrated in their own building. By special dispensation of Bishop Edward D. Kelly, the first Mass was celebrated in the Sanctuary on Christmas of 1921. Finally, in 1924 the upper structure was finished and blessed. The formal dedication of the Church was held on June 1, 1925.

Although the new church proudly proclaimed itself Hungarian (understandably so, as the architects of the plan to create this parish were primarily Hungarian in heritage) the original congregation also included Austrian, Slavic, Polish and Lithuanian Americans. As might be expected, one of Father Sonefeld's earliest tasks was to introduce ways to knit this diverse group of people into one harmonious congregation. Father Sonefeld was talented in learning languages, which is illustrated by the addition of Hungarian to the other languages he spoke...English, German, Polish, Italian,

French and Bohemian. He heard confessions in all these languages, but his sermons were given in English.

During his tenure at Sacred Heart, he encouraged the creation of *The Children of Mary Sodality*, as well as a social group for the young men of the parish. His intention being creating groups for social gatherings within the Parish, which allowed the young and the old opportunities to interact with their fellow parishioners. Other groups that were active in the parish were the *Sacred Heart Society of Muskegon Heights* (which is the group that was instrumental in the founding of this parish), the *Holy Name Society*, *Saint Vincent De Paul Conference*, the *Rosary Society*, and the *Sacred Heart Altar Society*.

His success in melding a congregation of differing backgrounds and cultures can be seen in the growth of the parish during his tenure. In 1919 there were approximately 100 families registered as Sacred Heart parishioners. The formal dedication of the church took place on June 1, 1925. When Father Sonefeld was appointed Pastor of Sacred Heart in 1925, there were over 300 families (approximately 1500 people) registered as members. The growth of the parish required an expanded Mass schedule. At first, Assistant Pastors from the area helped with the expanded schedule, but in June of 1928 help was sent in the person of Father Jerome Szyolowski, who was assigned as the first of a long line of Assistant Pastors to serve this parish.

Father Sonefeld saw Sacred Heart Church grow from a dream to the largest of the Catholic faith in Greater Muskegon. On September 29, 1935 the members of Sacred Heart parish honored Father Sonefeld on his silver anniversary of his ordination into the priesthood. He was considered an outstanding student and linguist, as well as a foremost authority on canon law. Felicite Richardson, Muskegon County Supervisor, wrote in the *Federal Writers' Project* in May of 1936 that "plans are underway for the first unit of a school for this parish to be built before the opening of the school year in the fall". But the Bishop had other plans for Father Sonefeld. His talents were recognized and Father Sonefeld was transferred to Saint Peter and Paul Church in Saginaw, Michigan. And on June 6, 1938 he was appointed as the first Chancellor of the newly created Saginaw Diocese.

Monsignor Sonefeld died July 21, 1966 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida and is interred in the Priest's Circle in Mount Olivet Cemetery in Saginaw, Michigan.

Sources cited for this article: [The Muskegon Chronicle](#) - November 29, 1919; May 13, 1920; January 1, 1921; June 4, 1938

[News of the Churches](#) - July 18, 1936

[The Federal Writers' Project](#) - May 1936

Historical documents from the offices of Sacred Heart Church and the Diocese of Grand Rapids