

Rev. John A. Lemke: America's First Native-Born American Roman Catholic Priest

by Allan R. Treppa



Courtesy Archives of Archdiocese of Detroit

The first class at St. Francis Seminary, 1886-1889, John A. Lemke is third from left in top row.

Born on December 30, 1823, in Siepraw, Austrian Poland, Gaspar Matoga, S.J. migrated to the United States in 1848 as a Jesuit scholastic. Settling in New York City, he studied theology from 1849-52 at St. John's College (subsequently renamed Fordham University) and was ordained in 1852. He was the first Polish-born Roman Catholic to receive holy orders in the United States.¹ The name of the first native-born American of Polish descent to be ordained, however, has until now remained unknown. This distinction may belong to John A. Lemke of Detroit.

The starting point of a Polish community in Detroit was the arrival in the city during the 1850's of a number of Poles from Prussian Poland (Poznanicy and Kaszubi) who settled in Detroit's "German Quarter" on the city's northeast side. Their preference for this particular section of the city was no mere happenstance. "Prussian Poles" were likely to speak German as well as Polish, or at least to mix their Polish vernacular with Germanisms.² One of these Polish pioneers was John Lemke. Born on December 14, 1823, in Berent (Koscierzyna), he arrived in Detroit in 1859 with his wife, three sons, sister-in-law and two cousins. A tailor by trade, Lemke continued his trade in a shop on Antoine (later St. Antoine) Street near St. Mary German Roman Catholic Church, now in the heart of Detroit's "Greektown."³

On February 10, 1866, a fifth son was born to the Lemkes. Baptized John on February 18 at St. Mary, he would eventually receive the added confirmation name of Aloysius.⁴

Following his primary education at St. Albertus School,

Lemke began his studies at the Detroit College (now the University of Detroit), on January 7, 1879, where the course of instruction was divided into two departments, collegiate (Philosophy, Rhetoric, Poetry and Humanities classes corresponding to Senior, Junior, Sophomore and Freshman years) and academic (three years of senior high school).⁵ He was assigned to the third academic class.⁶

In 1884, at the College's eighth annual commencement exercises, President James G. Walshe, S.J., conferred the degree of Bachelor of Arts upon John A. Lemke and six others. Lemke received the honors of the class, a silver medal suitably inscribed.⁷

Four of the 1884 graduates — James J. Gore, John F. Kramer, Peter J. Ternes and John A. Lemke — entered St. Mary's Seminary, Baltimore, Maryland, on September 13, 1884.⁸ Eight months later, the four were admitted to the clerical state.⁹ At the Christmas ordinations on December 19, 1885, the four received minor orders.¹⁰ However, when his classmates received the subdiaconate on June 3, 1886, John A. Lemke was not among them as he was too young.¹¹

Following summer recess, John A. Lemke did not return to St. Mary's to complete his theological studies. Instead he assumed the position of professor of Latin and Greek at St. Francis Seminary, a preparatory seminary in Monroe, Michigan.¹² While there he completed his theological studies in 1889. Facing the prospect of waiting until 1890, when he would reach the canonical age of twenty-four, Lemke received a special dispensation from Bishop John Samuel Foley and his ordination soon followed.¹³



St. Mary Roman Catholic Church Southeast corner of St. Antoine and Croghan (Monroe) streets. Consecrated June 29, 1843.

On Sunday, March 10, 1889, excitement permeated Detroit's first Polish neighborhood.¹⁴ The streets were crowded with local citizenry, societies were out in uniform, and the houses were decorated with the national colors and the papal tri-color, all due to the impending elevation of John A. Lemke to the Roman Catholic priesthood.¹⁵

A few minutes after 9:00 a.m., Bishop Foley, accompanied by his secretary, Father Morgan J.P. Dempsey, arrived at the corner of Gratiot and St. Aubin Avenues. Here they were... "met by nearly two thousand Poles, about one-half of whom were in uniform."¹⁶ Escorted by the St. Michael's Commandery, the Knights of St. John, and eight other religious societies, the bishop and his secretary proceeded to St. Albertus' rectory for vesting, there joined by other clergy and the candidate himself. The ecclesiastical procession then proceeded to the church which was filled to capacity with some 2,000 people.¹⁷

Father Paul Gutowski, pastor of St. Casimir Polish Roman Catholic Church, inaugurated the Pontifical High Mass by presenting the candidate. Following the reading of the First Gospel, Lemke knelt before the bishop and pro-



St. Francis Seminary, Monroe, Mich., ca. 1889

fessed his intention to serve the Church as a priest. Recommended by his superior and after receiving an admonition, he was formally accepted in the Roman Catholic priesthood and vested appropriately. Then kneeling before the bishop he promised perpetual obedience. Father Lemke then concelebrated mass with Bishop Foley. Father Peter P. Hennaert was the arch-priest. Fathers Joseph Dabrowski, rector of SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary, and Father Lemke's former classmate Peter J. Ternes, assistant pastor of St. Joseph German Roman Catholic Church, were deacons of honor. Father Hugo J. Erley, S.J. and Mr. William Hornsby, S.J. of the Detroit College were deacon and subdeacon. Also present in the sanctuary were Fathers Edward D. Kelly, rector of St. Francis Seminary; Witold Bukhaczkowski, professor at SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary; Vincent Bronikowski, former pastor of St. Albertus; and twelve seminarians.¹⁸ The sermon, preached in Polish by Father Gutowski, dealt with the dignities and duties of the priesthood. After mass, Father Lemke gave his first blessing to his parents, brothers, and sisters.¹⁹ The



Bishop John Samuel Foley

following day, he celebrated his first mass in St. Albertus; his second was in the chapel of St. Francis two days later.²⁰

After Bishop Foley closed St. Francis Seminary in June, 1889, Father Lemke was appointed assistant pastor of St. Casimir in Detroit, the city's first westside Polish Roman Catholic parish.²¹ In February, 1890, he succeeded Father Francis Kroll as pastor of St. Edward in Mendon, Michigan, and its nearby mission in Bronson.²² Located on the southern shore of the St. Joseph River, twenty-one miles southeast of Kalamazoo, Mendon had a population of 808 in 1890.²

In late April, Father Lemke caught a severe cold while on a sick call. A short stay at Kalamazoo's Bishop Borgess Hospital followed. He returned to Mendon in early May, but frail in body, he suffered a relapse after being caught in a storm while returning from the Bronson mission. Despite the efforts of Drs. Adolph Hochstein and Irwin Simpson,

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²⁰ *Detroit Free Press*, 11 March 1889; *Monroe Democrat*, 7 March 1889.

²¹ *Michigan Catholic*, 8 August 1889.

²² AAD, Bound Volumes, Episcopal Registers, Vol. 3, p. 203. The first Roman Catholic Church in St. Joseph County, St. Edward was dedicated by Bishop Capsar Henry Borgess on October 4, 1872. Father Lemke was the fourth resident pastor of St. Edward. See George Pare, *The Catholic Church in Detroit 1701-1888* (Detroit: Gabriel Richard Press, 1951), p. 504.

²³ U.S. Census Office, Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890; XV, 193.

²⁴ *Detroit Evening News*, 31 May 1890; *Kalamazoo Gazette*, 1 June 1890; *Kalamazoo Weekly Tribune*, 4 June 1890; *Mendon Weekly Globe*, 30 May 1890; *Michigan Catholic*, 5 June 1890.

²⁵ The first Polish-born Roman Catholic to receive holy orders in the Diocese of Detroit was John Peter Dziurawicz. He was ordained by Bishop Capsar Henry Borgess at the Cathedral (SS. Peter and Paul) on December 10, 1872. See AAD, Bound Volumes, Episcopal Registers, Vol. 2, p. 248.

Father Lemke, fortified with the Sacraments of Holy Church, died at 1:00 a.m., on Saturday, May 31, 1890 in Borgess Hospital.

On Sunday, June 1, at 3:00 p.m., a funeral procession headed by a band and consisting of different church societies and a large number of carriages left Kalamazoo's St. Augustine Roman Catholic Church and proceeded to Borgess Hospital. There Father Lemke's body was placed in a hearse, and with the band playing a dirge, the procession returned to St. Augustine where a Requiem Mass was celebrated. Father Lemke lay in state until it was time for the last train to leave for Detroit. Escorted by his father and a brother, the late priest's body was returned to his parents' house at 799 St. Aubin Avenue that evening.

On Wednesday, June 4, at 10:00 a.m., a Requiem Mass was celebrated by Bishop Foley at St. Albertus. Peter P. Hennaert was the arch-priest; former classmates Ternes and Gore were deacons of honor and two unnamed Polish priests were deacon and subdeacon respectively. Father Lemke was laid to rest in Detroit's Mt. Elliott Cemetery.²⁴

Despite an all too brief priestly career, John A. Lemke's significance lies in his being the first native-born American of Polish descent to be ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood.²⁵

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Miecislav Haiman, *Polish Past in America 1608-1865* (1939; reprint ed., Chicago: Polish Museum of America, 1974), p. 67; Francis Bolek, ed., *Who's Who in Polish America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Habinger House, 1943), pp. 289-90; Joseph A. Wyrwal, *Poles in American History and Tradition* (Detroit: Endurance Press, 1969), p. 117.

² Joseph Swastek, *Detroit's Oldest Polish Parish: St. Albertus 1872-1973 Centennial* (n.p. [1973]), p. 34. (hereafter cited as *Detroit's Oldest Polish Parish*.)

³ This information comes in various fragments from several sources: Sister Mary Regimia Napolaska, O.F.S. *The Polish Immigrant in Detroit to 1914* (Chicago: Polish Roman Catholic Union, 1946), pp. 28-29; Lawrence D. Orton, *Polish Detroit and the Kolasinski Affair* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), pp. 11-12; Poles in Michigan, Vol. 1 (Detroit: n.p. 1953), pp. 42-43; Swastek, *Detroit's Oldest Polish Parish*, pp. 34-35.

⁴ A fourth son, Francis, had been born in Detroit on December 5, 1860. Baptized at St. Mary, on December 9, 1860, he died on March 23, 1868. He was buried in Mt. Elliott Cemetery, Single Grave, Tier 24, Grave 4.

⁵ *College register: August 21, 1877-February 15, 1918*, p. 5. Archives of the University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy (hereafter cited as A-UD); Herman J. Muller, S.J., *The University of Detroit 1877-1977: A Centennial*

History (Detroit: University of Detroit, 1976), p. 22.

⁶ *College Register: August 21, 1877-February 15, 1918*, p. 5. A-UD.

⁷ *Detroit Evening News*, 25 June 1884; *Detroit Evening Journal*, 26 June 1884; *Detroit Free Press*, 26 June 1884; *Detroit Post and Tribune*, 26 June 1884; *Michigan Catholic*, 3 July 1884.

⁸ *St. Mary's Seminary Registration Book, Vol. II*, p. 18, Sulpician Archives, Baltimore (hereafter cited as SAB). Lemke in an August 12, 1884 letter was informed that "your application for adoption as a student of the Diocese of Detroit, has been favorably considered, and I entered you upon the record as such. You will please make ready to commence your course of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary Baltimore, Md..." See Maes to Lemke, 12 August 1884, Archives of the Archdiocese of Detroit, Bound Volumes, Letterbooks, Vol. 21, p. 13. (hereafter cited as AAD).

⁹ *Michigan Catholic*, 11 June 1885; Ordinations, *St. Mary's Seminary (1792-1893)* SAB.

¹⁰ *Michigan Catholic*, 24 December 1885; Ordinations, *St. Mary's Seminary (1792-1893)* SAB.

¹¹ Ordinations, *St. Mary's Seminary (1792-1893)* SAB. Peter J. Ternes was also not called because he was too young. See *Calls to Orders, St. Mary's Seminary (1879-1902)* SAB.

¹² *Monroe Democrat*, 9 September 1886. Established by Bishop Capsar Henry Borgess in September, 1886, this diocesan preparatory seminary closed in June, 1889. See Allan R. Treppa, "Seminary training in the Diocese of Detroit During the Episcopate of Capsar H. Borgess," *Chronicle, the Magazine of the Historical Society of Michigan*, Volume 21, No. 1 Spring, 1985 pp. 7-10. Ann Arbor.

¹³ AAD, Bound Volumes, Episcopal Registers, Vol. 2, p. 263.

¹⁴ Known among Detroiters as "Poletown," it was called "Wojciechowo" by its Polish residents.

¹⁵ Accounts of Lemke's ordination may be found in: *Detroit Free Press*, 11 March 1889; *Detroit Evening Journal*, 7 March 1889; *Detroit Tribune*, 11 March 1889; *Michigan Catholic*, 14 March 1889.

¹⁶ *Detroit Tribune*, 11 March 1889.

¹⁷ The second edifice of Detroit's first Polish Roman Catholic parish the church was dedicated by Bishop Capsar Henry Borgess on July 4, 1885. See *Detroit Evening News*, 4 July 1885.

¹⁸ James A. Halley and J. Kennedy were seminarians from St. Francis Seminary in Monroe. The ten others were seminarians from the recently opened SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary in Detroit.

¹⁹ The newspaper reference to "sisters" is erroneous. Contemporary census tracts and parochial baptismal records contain no evidence of "sisters." The reporter may have met sisters-in-law, since two of Father Lemke's brothers were married at that time. Mrs. Lemke was the former Mary Reske, a widow, who John Lemke had married on November 11, 1879, following the death of his wife, Dorthea, on November 23, 1878.

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