

Parish History

A New York Parish Begins in Rome

On December 8, 1854, John Hughes, the fourth bishop and first archbishop of New York, was in Rome and standing a few feet from Pope Pius IX when the pontiff promulgated the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

“Just at the moment,” Hughes later recalled, “I resolved, on my return to New York, to erect a church to commemorate the event.”

On June 15, 1855, Immaculate Conception parish was founded and the priest charged with its responsibility, the Rev. Bernard Farrell, offered Mass in a temporary chapel on 15th Street. However, the young priest’s health soon failed, and he was succeeded by a Jesuit, the Rev. John Ryan, SJ. On December 8, exactly one year after Archbishop Hughes’ resolution, a cornerstone was laid and Father Ryan began the building of an elegant Romanesque-style church on the north side of 14th Street, just east of Avenue A. On May 16, 1858, a delighted Archbishop Hughes dedicated what he claimed was “the first church on earth set apart to honor immaculate nature of the Mother of Christ.”

A School Opens

In 1861, the Rev. William Plowden Morrogh, by now pastor of Immaculate Conception, applied for three Sisters of Charity of Mount St. Vincent to open a parochial school. The school opened officially in 1864 and the sisters were joined in 1880 by the Christian Brothers, who took charge of the boys education. Father Morrogh was succeeded in 1875 by Msgr. John Edwards who also served as vicar general of the archdiocese for many years. His successor, Msgr. William G. Murphy, was pastor from 1906 to 1917. During this period, Immaculate Conception was one of the largest parishes in the Archdiocese. Nearly 3000 children, largely of Irish, Italian, and German descent, were crowded into its classrooms.

During the pastorate of Msgr. Thaddeus W. Tierney (1917-1932), the parish began to fall on hard times. As parishioners moved to other parts of the city, the school population dwindled. The Christian Brothers withdrew around 1930, but the Sisters of Charity remained. During the pastorates of Father Cornelius Fitzsimmons (1932-36) and Aloysius S. Karl (1936-48), the parish was at its lowest ebb. Then something remarkable happened.

A Renaissance on 14th Street

In 1914, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company embarked on one of the most successful urban renewal projects in the history of New York City. It created Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town to address a projected housing shortage among returning World War II veterans. The Met, as it was known in those days, bought up block after block of the area between 14th and 23rd Streets, from First Avenue to Avenue C. Included in the purchases were Immaculate Conception Church, its rectory, convent and school buildings.

The Archdiocese of New York then purchased an Episcopal mission settlement, Grace Chapel, on the south side of 14th Street, East of First Avenue. It was renamed “Immaculate Conception”

While the original Catholic buildings were lost, the move across 14th Street led to a renaissance for Immaculate Conception Parish as it prepared for the arrival of the children of the veterans. It also saved from the probable destruction Grace Chapel and its hospital, which was converted to a rectory. These two buildings are now recognized as being among New York City’s most distinguished architectural landmarks. Built between 1884 and 1897 by Grace Church, one of the foremost Episcopal Parishes in New York City, Grace Chapel was designed by J. Stewart Barney in a late French Gothic style called Francois I. Along with the brick and terra-cotta church with its freestanding bell tower, Grace Church built a hospital/ dispensary for the elderly and children. On 13th Street, Grace chapel opened a settlement house where immigrants (primarily German and Italian) learned English and job skills. To the delight of the neighborhood, this building boasted an indoor swimming pool. However, like its Roman Catholic neighbor, Grace Chapel’s mission diminished as the neighborhood changed. The great Depression struck a lethal blow and Grace Chapel closed in 1942. The buildings stood empty until the Archdiocese purchased them.

A New home for the old Parish

Under Father Karl’s Leadership, Grace Chapel was renamed Immaculate Conception Church and renovated for Catholic liturgies. The old hospital became a rectory. The settlement house was razed to make room for a new parochial school with a penthouse convent.

In 1948, Msgr. Valentine F. Snyder became pastor and reinvigorated the parish societies. He and his successor, Msgr. Charles McCabe (1952-67), cleared the debt on the new Immaculate Conception Church and buildings. In 1955, the parish celebrated its centennial.

Vatican II brings spiritual and physical renewal

Eleven years later, in order to conform to the liturgical changes mandated by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Msgr. McCabe began a renovation of the of the sanctuary, including the installation of a new, free-standing altar.

Msgr. Leonard J. Hunt was named pastor in 1967. He set out to replace the heating system, air condition the church and lay a new slate floor. A pipe organ was installed and served the churches musical needs until its replacement in the late 1980's. The lighting in the school was upgraded and the rectory was renovated. During Msgr. Hunt's administration, the sisters of Charity withdrew from the school and were replaced by a dedicated lay faculty and administration. The parish celebrated its 125th anniversary in 1980.

After Msgr. Hunt's retirement in 1987, Msgr. Francis M. Costello, the former pastor of neighboring Epiphany parish, served as administrator until 1991. With money raised by the archdiocesan-wide parish campaign, a new roof was put on the school and other repairs were undertaken. The Church carillon which had been silent since the departure of the Grace congregation, was reactivated in 1989. A great deal was done during this period, which kept the church in good condition and paved the way for years of future use.

A new vision for a new century

In 1991, Msgr. Kevin P. O'Brien became pastor. Three years later, the parishioners joined with the members of Grace Church to mark both the 100th anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone of Grace Chapel/ Immaculate Conception.

As visitors from both congregations toured the Church, marveling at the spectacular stained glass windows by celebrated 19th century artists Henry Holiday, Clayton and Bell, and Charles Booth, a vision formed in Msgr. O'Brien's mind. He pictured a parish ready and eager for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

He knew he would need plans and funds to execute this vision, so in September of 1996, he presented a plan to the trustees, parish council and finance committee. Titled "Making Room for the Vision," the plan called for the restoration of the church to its landmark beauty and the replacement of its 100-year-old slate roof. The long covered fresco of The Heavenly City would be restored. The windows would be cleaned, restored to their original positions and, where necessary be illuminated by artificial lighting. A shrine would be created for the Blessed Sacrament.

In the school, more than 7500 feet of brick walls and roof parapets would be pointed, repaired or rebuilt. Gutters, pipes, railings and flashing would be repaired. Every room would be painted and rewired for the new technological age of Internet connectivity, computers and instructional television. The school would have two libraries and an art room.

The \$1 million estimate for this work was a staggering amount. However, Msgr. O'Brien and the parishioners would join in making room for the vision of a 21st century Immaculate Conception Parish. The plan was approved and a capital campaign began in January of 1997. With their customary generosity and goodwill, the parishioners answered the challenge and the vision was fulfilled.

While the fabric of the church and school was being restored, the educational process prospered in the school. In 1994, under the leadership of its principle, Donna Vincent, and her dedicated faculty and staff, the Immaculate Conception School received the coveted Middle States Accreditation of Elementary and Secondary Schools, which was recently renewed. In 1998, in recognition of the fact that modern parochial schools could no longer rely on tuition for sustenance, a development office was established.

New population and old buildings

In 2001, Father Joy Mampilly was installed as pastor. Three days later, the tragedy of September 11th occurred. Dealing with this tragedy was his first challenge. Many turned to the church for spiritual guidance, consolation and comfort after this terrible event. This led to the establishment of the Interfaith Prayer Service, which has taken place every year to remember the loved ones lost on this day and pray for peace. This service also promotes understanding and tolerance for people of all faiths. In addition, a Special Events Committee was established to celebrate the significant moments in the lives of parishioners throughout the calendar year. This has invigorated the parish with social and spiritual activities.

The parish was confronted with changing demographics and an aging building in continuing need of repairs. In response, Father Mampilly developed a “Wish List” for renovations that would ensure the future of our historically landmarked church building. Due to the generosity of the parishioners, all these items were completed: the restoration of the glass window in the confessional, the installation of a wooden backdrop behind the crucifix in the sanctuary, lighting on the cross in the bell tower, stained glass windows in the grotto, and the rose window. Now parishioners can enjoy the beauty of these architectural and artistic treasures.

At the end of 2001, a surplus from the operating expense budget made possible 204 new school windows. This greatly improved the efficiency of the heating system and improved the overall comfort and safety of staff and students. Despite these accomplishments, the aging church building was still in need of a great deal more work to maintain its integrity and keep it operational for years to come. To address this matter, Father Mampilly embarked on a \$1 million capital campaign to make necessary building improvements such as the replacement of the water tank, repair and replacement of damaged termite infested floor support beams and flooring in the grotto, updating of the air conditioning system, slating of the sanctuary floor and repair of the church plaza.

To ensure meeting future needs, a Parish Endowment Fund was established with \$2 million as a start. Of this, \$1 million came from the surplus of the last four years, and another \$1 million from the sale of air rights. This is critical for the continuation of the spiritual, educational and social mission of our parish. Our parish Trustees, Finance Committee and Parish Council also found this new venture significant to ensure our financial security and sustainability as a parish and school. Thus, the very special legacy of Immaculate Conception parish handed down to us will continue to be there for future generations.

Embracing the future

Today, 150 years and a few buildings later, Immaculate Conception parish thrives and looks to its future. In many ways, New York City is America's front door, even though most of the newest residents come not only from Europe but from all over the world. This is the city's gift to the parish: a remarkably multi-ethnic, multi-cultural population, whose hearts burn with the same ambition-to create a better life for themselves, their children and their descendants.

Above the church door, there is a small but exquisite statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary from the first Immaculate Conception Church. The expression on her face is neither joyful nor sad; it is pensive. What could she be thinking? Is she calling all those men, women and children who have passed beneath her feet? Does she think about the old neighborhood, the one that preceded Peter Cooper Village/Stuyvesant Town? Perhaps she is not engaging in nostalgia at all. She might be looking ahead.

It is time for us to look ahead, too. As William Shakespear reminded us, "What is past is prologue."