



In November, Our Lady Queen of Martyrs will celebrate 100 years of faithful service to its worshippers and the Forest Hills community. They say there are no coincidences, yet two of my neighbors share “firsts” when it comes to the history of their beloved church. Maggie Brady's grandmother's house on 70 Meteor Street (now 108-37 68th Drive) was often used as a place to say Mass before the little white chapel was built. Another neighbor, Robert McDonald's, parents, Margaret Owen and Edwin McDonald, were the first bride and groom married in the newly built church in 1939.

The land that OLMQ occupies today was once the farm of Ascan Backus. The only clue about the original landowner can be found in the street name where the church is located: Ascan Avenue. To accommodate the growing influx of immigrants, Bishop McDonnell of the Brooklyn Diocese saw a need for new churches and permission was thus granted to celebrate Mass in Forest Hills in 1912.

Like other denominations in the area at the time, services were held in various local homes. The first Mass took place on November 12, 1912. Records reveal that the parish officially consisted of 60 adults and 18 children. A little white chapel was built and dedicated in 1916. It stood where the current parking lot is located. A year later, the Reverend Joseph R. McLaughlin was appointed pastor and took up residence in the Forest Hills Inn.

After 12 years, the chapel that had accommodated a growing congregation tragically burned down in 1928. As horrific as the event was, some members believed it would have been sadder to see the little building outlive its usefulness. Undamaged items that remained such as the organ, altar and stained glass windows were donated to other churches including a Seminary Chapel in the Dominican Republic.

For those wondering how the parish got its name, the day that Msgr. McLaughlin became the first resident pastor was September 15, 1917, the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. During the dedication, Biblical reference was made to the Blessed Mother as “the Queen of Martyrs” while she stood beneath the cross. The complete text can be found engraved under the choir loft while looking up from the ground floor's center aisle.

It was Msgr. McLaughlin's vision to establish a permanent home for his parishioners. One of the first plots to be purchased for Our Lady Queen of Martyrs was a residence at the corner of Portsmouth Rd. and Hoffman Blvd. (later to be known as 72nd Rd. & Queens Blvd.). Other adjacent property was purchased from the Cord Meyer Co., the original buyers of the local farms. Eventually the entire square block would become property of the church.

Gradually, buildings were added. Because the members of the new church valued education so deeply, the first permanent building was the school. Construction began in January of 1928 and ended just in time for the first day of school in September. The school's desks were installed the night before.

With the chapel gone, the church held Mass in the school's auditorium. Events such as showing a movie of the Passion Play during Lent took place within these walls, as well as meetings of the Knights of Columbus, Bingo Nights, operettas and a host of various seasonal dances. Years later the school was renovated and the auditorium was renamed McLaughlin Hall after the man who spearheaded its creation.

In May of 1938, ground was broken for the new church. Children from the school sang hymns. One past student related that all her friends were happy to have the rest of the day off, but what appears to be most remembered was the lack of a formal address. Instead, as the story goes, Monsignor McLaughlin issued one short command to the construction crew: “Now do your stuff!” A more formal ceremony took place at the church's dedication. Three hundred people attended.

The architects were McGinnis & Walsh, who built a number of Catholic churches, universities and hospitals throughout the United States. A generous benefactor to the building fund was George MacDonald who lived in a mansion just across the street where The Kennedy House now stands. His brother Henry donated money for the creation of one of the stained glass windows that adorn the church. The building itself was modeled after the Durham Cathedral in England. Its design was influenced by the 19th Century Gothic Revivalist movement in America. This period also inspired St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Ave and the building over Grand Central Terminal. The Queensborough Chamber of Commerce even awarded all buildings within the OLMQ block First Prize for their added beauty to the community.

Each item inside the church is meant to educate all who walk through its doors of the great truths of the Holy Faith. The floor plan is in the shape of a cross, a symbolic reference to the Catholic faith. In keeping with a Gothic belief, the light coming through the rose and stained glass windows contains a celestial element.

The saints behind the church's altar depict a theme relating the United States to the social order of religion. St. Patrick and St. Boniface represent the many Irish and German immigrants who came to the United States. Also displayed are saints known for their strong ties to New York State: St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first American saint, St. Frances Cabrini, St. Isaac Jogues, a Jesuit Martyr, and Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, a Native American saint.

Frederick de Henwood, the artist commissioned for these panels, designed the

Stations of the Cross as well. His work has long been praised for its beauty and spiritual quality. De Henwood also designed the statue of Captain Gerald MacDonald in its namesake's park further down Queens Blvd.

The placement of some items may seem puzzling. For instance, if you've ever walked over to the left side of the back of the church, you may wonder why there's a window depicting St. John the Baptist. It turns out that this area was originally designed to be the Baptistry. Later on, the Baptismal Font was moved to the center of the Church.

Much care and thought also went into the church's exterior artwork. The figures and symbols adorning the church's portals are, in a sense, sermons in stone. Their purpose is not only to add ornamentation to God's House with human skills, but like its interior, offer instruction and inspiration. Adolph Weinman, the sculptor and medalist who designed the War Memorial in the nearby Flagpole Green and the Mercury Dime, and his son, Robert Weinman, produced the figures over the church's doors along Ascan Avenue.

While conducting research for this article, an interesting story was discovered. During the time that the parish was being built, there was serious talk of widening the roadway of Austin Street. OLQM, along with nearby merchants, was most certainly against this plan. Their viewpoint was expressed by Msgr. McLaughlin. In a Letter to the Editor of the Forest Hills-Kew Gardens Post he stated, "Our parishioners will fight to the finish any proposal to cause the destruction of their property values." Needless to say, nothing changed and the church lived happily ever after.

Several famous folks have attended OLQM church over the years. A funeral for Edward Mowery, a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter who lived on Ingram Street, was held in the church. Other noteworthy parishioners included Geraldine Ferarro, writer Jimmy Breslin and even Bob Keeshan of Captain Kangaroo fame.

The school was also attended by several celebrities. They include Ray Romano, David Caruso, Pia Zadora and Jack Zeigler, the cartoonist from The New Yorker Magazine.

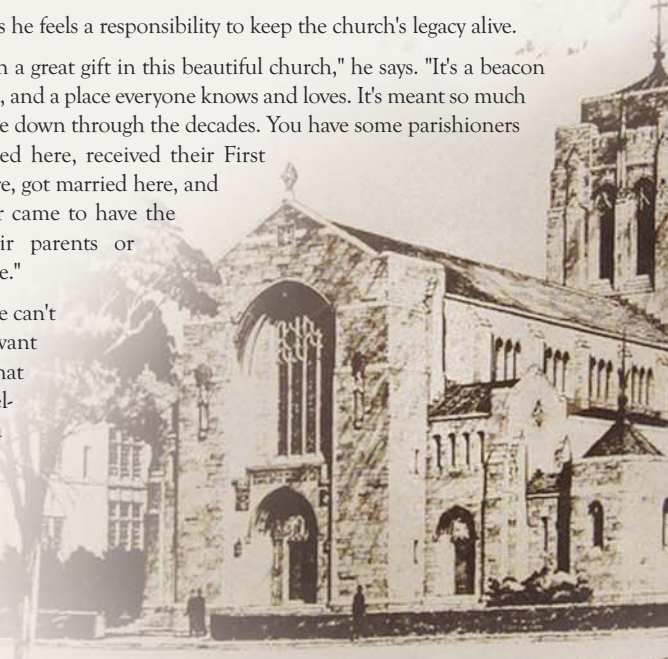
This summer, the parish has gained another high-profile member as Brooklyn Auxiliary Bishop Paul Sanchez succeeds Msgr. Joseph Funaro as Pastor. Msgr. Funaro is stepping down after 12 years but will remain as Parish Administrator. The Centennial Year will culminate in a dinner dance celebration at Russo's on the Bay on November 12.

Yet, for all that, the parish's biggest celebrity may well be the church itself, which has stood as a defining landmark on Queens Boulevard for over seven decades. To help maintain this local treasure, the parish recently launched a capital campaign which will help restore its beautiful stained glass windows, repair the elegant stonework and upgrade the electrical wiring to insure that the church will endure well into its next century.

Msgr. Funaro says he feels a responsibility to keep the church's legacy alive.

"We've been given a great gift in this beautiful church," he says. "It's a beacon on the Boulevard, and a place everyone knows and loves. It's meant so much to so many people down through the decades. You have some parishioners who were baptized here, received their First Communion here, got married here, and then maybe later came to have the funerals of their parents or grandparents here."

And he adds: "We can't forget that. We want to make sure that people are welcome here for a long time to come." ■



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