

THE BIRTH OF A PARISH

When Father William A. O'Brien first stepped off the Q46 bus in the fall of 1948, he had little to go on other than the task that had been set before him: to start a new parish. "I stood on the corner of Peck Avenue and Union Turnpike," he later wrote, "not knowing which direction was north or south; not knowing a single Catholic in the area; not having five cents of church funds; and not knowing where I was going to live." Such a predicament might have disheartened most of us, but not Father O'Brien. To begin a parish was a challenge he had accepted enthusiastically, for he had faith that he would receive the help he needed from the people he would soon have to count on the most: his future parishioners.

In the early 1930s, Northern Queens was little more than farms and woodlands, but by the end of the decade, the area began to bud into a growing community of families due to the building of numerous new housing developments. At the time, the entire area had all been part of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Queens Village.

By 1948, however, the number of Catholic families in what is now Oakland Gardens had risen to 400 and had outgrown the Queens Village parish. Members of the community soon formed a committee to petition Bishop Thomas E. Molloy to provide a priest and a new parish for the area. Having decided the petition was justifiable, Bishop Molloy sent notification to Father O'Brien on September 23, 1948 that he was to become the first pastor of a yet unnamed parish in Bayside, Queens. Less than a week later, on September 29, the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel, the new parish was officially founded.

Father O'Brien immediately set to work. His first step was to contact all those committee members who had petitioned the bishop to create the new parish. The principal problem confronting Father O'Brien was the lack of a building in which to celebrate Mass. With no building available for rent, the first Masses had to be celebrated in Fred Kaiser's Hardware Store, located on Union Turnpike between 222nd and 223rd Streets. An altar was erected in the basement, and the first Mass was celebrated on October 10, 1948.

Meetings continued, and soon twenty-seven men joined together to form a Holy Name Society, followed by Altar and Rosary Societies. More and more parishioners were becoming involved, and Father O'Brien's next task was clear – to name the new parish. Because he had been a chaplain in the United States Armed Services, he wanted to give due recognition to those who had given the ultimate sacrifice for their country, and so on October 22, 1948, Bishop Molloy approved the name of the new parish: THE CHURCH OF THE AMERICAN MARTYRS.

On November 14, 1948, a house was purchased on the corner of Union Turnpike and Peck Avenue, which became the first rectory. Part of the house was transformed, through the talents and labors of parishioners, into a chapel where the first Mass was offered on December 3rd. Five years later, the parish school was opened with the enrollment of 375 students, grades one through six. Sunday Masses were celebrated in the school auditorium.

In December of 1954, Father James J. Devlin became the second pastor. Under his leadership and guidance, the property for the present church was acquired. Father Henry A. Byron was appointed the third pastor in 1959. During his pastorate, a substantial financial reserve was built up for the construction of the present church.

Father Benjamin S. Yander became the fourth pastor in September of 1963. Construction on the church began a few years later. The design was unique: a round church, the first in the diocese, modeled after the Shrine of the North American Martyrs in Auriesville, New York. The dedication of the new church by Bishop Francis J. Mugavero, the first to be blessed by him as the Bishop of Brooklyn, took place on Sunday, November 24, 1968.

In February of 1976, Father John J. Sullivan became the fifth pastor of American Martyrs Parish. Under his leadership, the parish hall now known as the Sullivan Center was created.

Father Kenneth J. Calder became the sixth pastor in February of 1987. He established the Parish Outreach program. His emphasis on spiritual values enriched the parish.

On May 15, 1988, Father John F. Keppler was appointed by Bishop Francis Mugavero as the seventh pastor of American Martyrs. A fund-raising campaign was begun the following year. Several projects were completed; among them were the construction of the new granite steps for the front of the church, the paving of the parking lot, a new roof on the church and school, as well as new windows for the school. A St. Vincent de Paul Society and Respect for Life Committee, a Catholic War Veterans Post, as well as a bereavement program and an in-home Pre-Cana program were also established. In 1999, Bishop Thomas Daly honored the people of American Martyrs and Father Keppler by submitting his name to Pope John Paul II to name him a monsignor. Msgr. Keppler retired in February of 2006.

Msgr. George Zatarga replaced Msgr. Keppler in 2006 as the administrator of American Martyrs. Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio appointed Msgr. Zatarga as the eighth pastor of American Martyrs in the Fall of 2006, who established a Pastoral Planning Council which has been instrumental in the life of the parish since 2006. Due to declining enrollments and increasing financial costs, American Martyrs School was closed in June of 2006. On a much sadder note Father John Murray, who was loved by all of the parishioners, succumbed to his battle with cancer and returned home to the Lord on September 3, 2007. He was admired and respected by all and he is still deeply missed.

In February 2008, Father Frank Schwarz became the ninth pastor of American Martyrs. During his pastorate, and with the generous support of American Martyrs parishioners, Father Frank was able to have an elevator installed, making both the church and Sullivan Center handicapped accessible. The church and school were renovated; this included a new roof on the church, a new air-conditioning system and a pending electrical upgrade. In addition, the Rectory Chapel was renovated and dedicated to St. Kateri Tekakwitha. As a long-standing member of the Knights of Columbus, Father Frank encouraged and supported the establishment of the Father John J. Murray Knights of Columbus Council #14666 as well as its sister council, the Columbiettes.

In July 2020, Fr. Peter Rayder succeeded Fr. Frank Schwarz as the tenth pastor of American Martyrs. Fr. Peter came to the parish at a time when our parish, our city, the country, and the entire world faced the COVID pandemic. Masses, as well as other gatherings, were suspended so as to curtail the spread of the COVID virus. Fr. Peter was able to televise daily and Sunday Mass, so that the faithful could participate in a limited way.

Under his leadership and pastoral care, the attendance at Mass, as well as at other liturgical and social events, is making a comeback. We are truly grateful for his leadership and example.

May God continue to bless American Martyrs Parish as we strive to make His name known to all the people whom we encounter in our lives.

Originally compiled and submitted by Michael Chimenti and Margaret Reyes. Edited by Deacon Stan Galazin.