

The History of Ascension Parish, 1953-2003

A History of the People of God at Ascension Parish

After World War II, large numbers of people moved into this area from New York City and Jersey City, many of them Catholic. These people attended Mass in either St. Joseph's in Oradell, Holy Trinity in Hackensack, or the newly established St. Peter's in River Edge. The Archdiocese of Newark authorized the establishment of another parish to meet the needs of these new suburbanites.

On April 19, 1952, Reverend Thomas F. Curry, Pastor of St. Joseph's, was given permission by the Archdiocese to purchase five acres for the establishment of a parish in the southern part of New Milford to serve the spiritual needs of people in that area and in parts of Bergenfield and Teaneck. In July of 1952, Bishop James A. McNulty granted permission to construct a combination church and school building on the newly acquired property.

In the meantime, a regular Mass was to be celebrated at 9 A.M. on Sundays, beginning August 29, 1952. There was such a large turnout at this Mass that an additional Mass was added the following Sunday at 11 A.M. National attention was soon focused on the parish with a radio broadcast from Steuben School noting the fact that the Catholic community, Gloria Dei Lutheran, and the New Milford Jewish community were all using the school for worship.

On January 28, 1953, Archbishop Thomas A. Boland formally established the Ascension Mission Church of St. Joseph's as a canonical parish. The first pastor, Father Francis A. Fox, a diocesan priest for twenty-three years, was appointed on June 27, 1953. Residing at St. Peter's in River Edge, he offered Mass at the Steuben School on Sundays. Meanwhile the people of the new parish were very busy establishing and raising Catholic families.

On July 19, 1953, the first three babies were baptized: Nancy Louise Doland, Michael Robert Kelly, and Sharon Ann Pfeiffer. On May 24, nineteen boys and girls received their First Communion from the hands of Father John Cassel. Father Fox witnessed the first marriage in October, and forty-five young people were confirmed by Bishop Justin McCarthy on June 18, 1955. During all this time, the physical construction of the parish went on apace, but not without some initial difficulty.

Upon his arrival, Father Fox faced his first major managerial difficulty. Although construction was underway, the engineers recommended that construction cease, and the site be abandoned because the site was on watery marsh. With the Archbishop urging Father Fox not to abandon the site, but to find a way around the problem, Father Fox consulted and investigated the situation. Success followed; a system of drainage was built to relieve the pressure under and around the building, and construction resumed. Other priests were soon to join Father Fox at the pioneer suburban parish. Father McDonald assisted until June of 1959,

when he was replaced by Father Richard O'Donnell. Father Thomas McCarthy was added to the staff the following year. On December 19, 1962, Pope John XXIII raised Father Fox to the rank of Domestic Prelate, also known as Monsignor, in recognition of his tireless efforts in service to the people of Ascension. Father Robert Benedict, an early member of the staff, left a lasting impression on the parish, which is forever memorialized with the name of our parish auditorium and gym. These personnel changes were more than matched by the renewal initiated by the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965.

The upwardly mobile, well educated, newly urban parishioners who were creating a new life for themselves found themselves in a renewing church. The liturgy was in their own language; the priest faced them; the altar was turned around; the tabernacle was moved to the side; while the altar became the focus of our life and worship; religious education was revolutionized with a greater basis on Scripture and a recognition of the process of child development. Perhaps most startling, the people were called on to do things that they never dreamed possible.

The church locally and universally was rediscovering its communal dimension, while retaining its hierarchal dimension, but nonetheless the people and priests of Ascension began the traditional work of establishing an American parish, which meant the construction of a parochial school. This practice grew out of the nineteenth century custom of instruction in the Protestant faith in public schools, which forced Catholics in places like New York City to establish their own system of parochial schools.

On September 11, 1953, the auditorium/church- school was dedicated by Archbishop Boland. Eighty parishioners attended the first Mass, and by the end of the year there were over eight hundred parishioners. In September of 1953, Ascension School opened under the direction of the Sisters of St. Dominic of Caldwell. The first principal, Sister Mary Frederick, O.P., welcomed one hundred and fifty students, grades K through four. The following September, one hundred and twenty students enrolled in kindergarten, bringing the school enrollment to three hundred and fifty, and increase of two hundred in one year. By August 1953, the Sisters were living in the school, and the next month a house was purchased on Carnation Drive for a rectory, enabling Father Fox to move from St. Peter's in River Edge.

Father Fox had moved quickly to establish the Holy Name Society, Rosary/Altar Society; volunteers came forward to start the Confraternity for Christian Doctrine to provide for the religious education of children in the public school. Forty-five men volunteered to build tables for the school cafeteria; Frank Schaefer addressed the boxes of church envelopes, and Mrs. Lantieri helped with the publication of the first parish bulletin in January 1954. The Catholic Youth Organization under the direction of Father Robert Benedict worked hard to involve the youth of the parish in the life of the community.

With fifteen hundred parishioners by the end of 1955, it was apparent that the parish had to expand its facilities; Father Fox was given permission to begin a fund raising drive in March of 1955. Five hundred and sixty-two men came forward to conduct the drive, whose aim was to raise \$250,000 to construct a church, rectory, convent, and addition to the school. The motto

of the campaign was, "One day's wage a month for thirty months." As is often the case at Ascension, the goal was surpassed, and \$325,000 was raised, permitting groundbreaking in March of 1957.

Sister Mary Patricius, O.P. opened the school with its new addition of eight classrooms, a clinic, and faculty room in September, 1957. The convent opened in December 1957; and the first Mass was celebrated in the new church on February 9, 1958, providing seating for eight hundred and sixty-two people. The parish continued its phenomenal growth. Sister Benigna and Sister de Lourdes served as principal in the 1960's. Beginning in 1969, the six year principalship of Sister Margaret William was marked by a number of new programs and initiatives.

By the early sixties, the school had an enrollment of 1160 children, and to meet the growing needs of our children in the public school, Sister Marion Carlin, O.P. was appointed the first Religious Education Coordinator in 1973. Sister was succeeded in the summer of 1975 by Sister Marie Joyce, S.C., who initiated the Total Parish Education Program for the people of Ascension. The implementation of new methods of religious education accompanied the updating of the volunteer teachers in the program, as well as involving parents in the religious education of their children especially for sacramental preparation. During these years, Deacon Paul Davignon ably served the parish as Director of Religious Education. It was at this time that leadership of the parish changed hands.

Upon his retirement in December of 1975, Monsignor Fox was saluted by both the parish and the town of New Milford with Jan. 1, 1976, proclaimed "Monsignor Fox Day." Archbishop Gerety named Monsignor Fox, Pastor Emeritus. The new pastor was Father John A. Merity, who would remain pastor for a short period of time until June of 1978. In his brief tenure, Father Merity led the formation of the first Parish Council with committees of Christian Service, Education, Parish Life, and Spiritual Development. The first Council election was held in May 1976, with Richard Burns as its first President. One of Father Merity's significant accomplishments was the establishment of the Office of Pastoral Care in 1977 under the leadership of Sister Catherine Brian, O.P. Sister Catherine formed the Ascension Golden Ministry to serve the needs of our seniors. Visits to people who were confined to their homes and in hospitals were significantly augmented by her Office, as were works of charity to those in need. It was at this time that the Ascension Youth Ministry, under the leadership of Katherine Godfrey and Patricia de Nicolo, came into existence to serve the needs of our teen parishioners. Due to reasons of health, Father Merity resigned as pastor in June, 1978. Father Thomas E. Davis took his place as pastor on July 1, 1978, commencing fifteen fruitful years of pastoring.

One of the important undertakings of Father Davis' pastorate was the renovation of our church, which was brought to fruition through "Campaign '88." Many believed that raising \$800,000 over a three year period was unrealistic, but not to the indomitable Father Tom Davis, whose ability to dissolve fear based on the "practicality" of trusting in the Lord led to a very successful campaign, the refurbishing and repair of the church without incurring any debt. Father Davis

also initiated the reform of the Parish Council based on four ministries, which is our present structure; Worship, Word, Service, and Community Building. Deacon Harold Bates was assigned to the parish in 1978 to assist the priests of the parish with his ministry of service. Deacon Harold celebrates his Silver Anniversary as a deacon in this year. In 1979, Father Jerry Hahn was appointed Parochial Vicar, thus beginning a fruitful ministry of fifteen years. Father Jerry was noted for his work with the Youth Ministry and the Ascension Golden Ministry. He visited everyone in the hospital and was in one of the area hospitals every day; his infectious love of music and mirth, touched many people. In 1980, the parish staff welcomed Father Timothy Graf as Parochial Vicar. Under Father Tim, the Christian Foundation for Ministry was initiated, which is a three year, parish-based program to form the laity for effective Christian ministry. The program has returned to our parish in 2001 under the leadership of our present pastor, Father David Milliken. During these years Sister Margaret Scott, O.P. took over the leadership of Pastoral Care; during her tenure outreach to the needy was expanded with our involvement with the homeless shelter at St. Cecilia's and providing nourishing meals for AIDS patients at Harrison House. Our Director of Religious Education, Dr. Gene Tozzi began his long years of service to our parish. Since the initiation of the Cornerstone Retreats in recent years, Dr. Gene has devoted much time and effort to getting this experience on a sure footing. On the school front, change and time moved inexorably on under the leadership of our present school principal, Sister Jean Marie, O.P.

During the nineties, Catholic school enrollment declined everywhere, leading to school closings and consolidation. The schools were increasingly staffed by dedicated lay teachers, who ably worked with the declining number of Sisters. Under Sister Jean Marie a pre-kindergarten program, an after-school program, a school board, and computer program were brought into existence. The school has survived and prospered even with a much smaller enrollment than that of the 1960's. The school is accredited by the Middle States Association, and with its small size classes, spiritual dimension, and dedicated staff, it continues to nourish our young people. The Religious Education Program has moved into the breach of educating greater and greater numbers of Catholic children. Its staff was augmented with the services of Ms. Kathy Palumbo, who leads our Confirmation Program, which is no longer school-based, but parish-based.

Father Davis retired on May 23, 1993, for a richly deserved, but unfortunately too short a retirement. His untimely death a few years later greatly saddened his people of Ascension. His successor, Monsignor Thomas P. Ivory became Pastor on July 1, 1993. One of two recommendations of Father Davis for his successor at Ascension, Father Tom, as he was known, brought with him a wealth of experience from both the national and international level. One of the architects of the late 1970's Renew Program and of the Christian Foundation for Ministry Program, Father Tom Ivory strove to enliven and expand the small Christian communities, which had begun during the days of Father Davis. From the late 1970's to the very present, a small number of these communities continue to exist in Ascension Parish. These small communities were augmented during Lent with the creation of temporary communities. At present, Father Arcadio Munoz is charged with shepherding an ongoing Renew Program. Father Ivory was also concerned with the physical needs of the parish and with the

support and cooperation of the people of Ascension, launched the Ascension 2000 Program as part of our celebration of the Third Millennium. The goal was to provide needed repairs for our church and school, as well as provide additional facilities for parish meetings and programs.

The latest visible sign of the results of Ascension 2000 is our new Parish Gathering Room, which is located in part of the Convent. Our present Pastor, Father David Milliken, has initiated and overseen this project, bringing to realization one piece of the vision of Ascension 2000. During Monsignor Ivory's pastorate, a newly ordained, Father Jim Brown came to Ascension with his sleeves rolled up and ready to recruit the pastor for one of his projects, which was repairing the sidewalk around the church. Here was the Monsignor and his Parochial Vicar repairing the sidewalk; it is indeed a new church. Father Jim has vigorously pursued liturgical excellence in the parish, constantly seeking the best for our community worship. Under his and Father Arcadio's tutelage, we have witnessed some beautiful expressions of the Filipino community in our worship, including graceful and meaningful liturgical dance. The role of the laity was further heightened during Monsignor Ivory's pastorate with the active participation of our parish in the Diocesan Synod of 1993-94, whose primary recommendation was the fostering of lay participation and leadership in the church.

The demographics of our parish and of our whole region has drastically altered since the changes in immigration law in the early 1960's. A vibrant part of our parish is our ever increasing Filipino community, whose Asian spirituality and culture have enriched our Catholic life. To serve this and the parish as a whole, we have been fortunate for a number of years in having a Filipino priest as a summer assistant. The appointment of Father Arcadio Munoz as Parochial Vicar further highlights the increasing important role of the Filipino community. The Indian community provides another piece to our growing cultural and spiritual mosaic. We have benefited from the ministry of Father Joy Allapat during Monsignor Ivory's tenure, and we have provided monthly worship space for the Indian Syro-Malabar Rite, which is the rite of most Indian Catholics, who while loyal to the Holy Father are not Roman Catholics, but Syro-Malabar Catholics. In recent years two Cardinals of this rite have visited our parish. During Monsignor Ivory's tenure, the parish enjoyed the ministry of Fathers Raymond LaBranche and Joseph Scarangela.

Archbishop McCarrick asked Monsignor Ivory to take over the pastorate of Presentation Church in Upper Saddle River in 1998, and with his acceptance, Father John Mc Govern was appointed Pastor after a period of months. Father McGovern's twenty-three month tenure was marked by going forward with school repairs, one of the fruits of Ascension 2000. His subsequent reassignment after one and a half years, followed by a lengthy interim left the parish keenly looking forward to the appointment of a new pastor. In February Father David Milliken was named Administrator and this past year Pastor of Ascension Parish. Father David is the sixth pastor of our Golden Jubilee Parish and has truly rolled up his sleeves and dived right in to the task of pastoring God's People at Ascension. A man full of energy and life, he seeks to infuse as much of the same into our parish as he can. Already he has overseen the construction of our new Gathering Room, brought back C.F.M. to the parish, and tries to emphasize the open and welcoming nature of the parish. In addition to his priests, Father David is ably served by his

Deacons, of whom Deacon Paul Kliauga is the newest, ordained in 1999. Deacon Paul has led the R.C.I.A. Program along with his wife Mary; he has taught a number of adult education classes, assisted with Cornerstone while carrying out his ministry of service. Gary Tankard, a Deacon Candidate will be ordained on June 1, 2002, further augmenting the work of ordained ministry to the parish. When the parish began fifty years ago, there were no permanent deacons, no Eucharistic Ministers, no Lectors, no Parish Councils, no Directors of Religious Education, no small Christian communities, no shortage of priests and religious and we could go on.

And we will go on as the church has gone on for two thousand years. Today we face seminaries half of whose enrollment are lay people; fewer and few priests and religious; smaller Catholic families; many one parent families; a revolutionary change in the role of women in society; extensive affluence; and a neighboring city still in shock from the events of 9/11. Just as the founders of this parish moved from city to suburb, up the economic ladder, and away from the all nurturing Catholic culture of their city parishes, so will we move into the next fifty years trusting in Christ and His promise to us that He would be with us until the end of time.

This history was written, making extensive use of the work of Hilda Carden who composed the history for our Silver Anniversary. Other sources were the past parish bulletins, recollections of staff and long-time parishioners, and the personal experience of the author.

Gary F. Tankard