



# After 100 Years, Mission at St. Brendan's Remains the Same

By JULIANN DosSANTOS

While the patron saint of St. Brendan's parish in the Bronx is the sixth-century Irish monk and navigator known for his journeys, parishioners here do not have to search far for a safe harbor and welcoming home.

"Since its inception, this parish has always been a place for first— and second—generation immigrants, and it remains so today," said the pastor, Father George Stewart.

"The faces have changed, but the mission remains the same," he said.

What began as a predominantly Irish parish has changed dramatically over the past decade, Father Stewart said. There are now 46 countries represented among the 1,400 parishioners, he said, including a large Hispanic population and other groups that are growing, including Albanians and Filipinos.

Seven weekend Masses are celebrated, with two offered in Spanish. Parochial vicars at the parish are Father Stephen Ogumah and Father Santiago Rubio; in residence is Father Sancho Garrote. Also serving are Deacon Paul Hveem and Deacon Orlando Pascal.

The closing Mass of the parish's 100th anniversary year was celebrated by Cardinal Egan Oct. 26.

St. Brendan's was founded in 1908 in the Norwood section of the Bronx to serve the needs of many Irish, Italian and German immigrants arriving in what was then a rural area. The first Mass was celebrated in December of that year in a storefront on Webster Avenue.

Over time, the landscape of the neighborhood began to change. The subway system was extended into the area, and apartment houses were built. The population and expansion of the neighborhood continued until the Depression, when it slowed, and picked up again after World War II.

A parish school, staffed by the Dominican Sisters of Sparkill, was opened in 1912, with classes held in the basement of the church. In 1923, the archdiocese authorized St. Brendan's to buy a lot near the church for an actual school building. That same year a groundbreaking ceremony was held. There are now 342 students enrolled in prekindergarten through eighth grade. The principal is Michele Pasquale.

The religious education program, run by Judith Cordero, coordinator of religious education, has some 200 students enrolled. The parish's RCIA program has more than 30 adults registered this year.

One of the unique features of St. Brendan's is the church building itself. Dedicated in 1967, it was built not only to meet the needs of the growing parish, but also to follow the guidelines of the Second Vatican Council. Built in the shape of a ship in honor of the parish patron, the church reflects the open, modern style of the day in its exterior and interior architecture. "The new church was built with the thought that it would greater meet the needs of the post—Vatican Council growth spurt that was expected," said Father Stewart. "It was quite shocking at the time."

Today, the church is something that the parishioners are proud of. "There is no other building quite like it. When people think of St. Brendan's, they think of the architecture of the church," Father Stewart said.

The interior of the church is simple in design. Father Stewart sees it as "very contemplative and sort of monastic in its renderings."

"It is without distraction," he said. There are only two statues from the original church—one of St. Brendan, which stands outside the church, and one of the Virgin Mary, which faces the altar. There is both an upper and lower church.

An active and involved parish, St. Brendan's has 29 parish groups and programs, ranging from fraternal organizations to ministry outreach programs to senior and youth programs. Two Sparkill Dominicans are involved in ministry at the parish, Sister Catherine Naughton, O.P., who is in charge of senior outreach, and Sister Margaret Bergin, O.P., who does catechesis and baptismal preparation. There are 16 parishioners on the parish council. "The more people that participate, the better the parish can be," Father Stewart said.

While there are many groups that serve the needs of different groups in the parish, most of the groups center on family issues, the pastor said. "Working with families and trying to bring healing to families and address their spiritual needs is one of the main objectives and visions of the parish at this point," he said.

"Families are fundamental to everything we do. If you bring peace in family life and address the spiritual needs of the family, many other issues that plague us will take care of themselves," he said.

One way in which St. Brendan's has addressed family issues is by scheduling religious education classes on Sunday, which has increased family Mass attendance, Father Stewart said.

During the centennial year celebration, Father Stewart said St. Brendan's has been "looking back at our history and the foundation of this parish, which gives us a vision of how to

address the needs of the people." He said that it is important that the parish welcome the new generations that are finding their home at the church and meet the needs of the people who are there now.

He added, "We tried to really honor the past generations and appreciate the present, so we can look to the future with confidence."

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