



Carmelite Spiritual Center

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Life is Worth Giving

OLD ST. PATRICK'S IS NEW YORK'S FIRST CATHEDRAL

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

Although St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in New York, whose cornerstone was laid in 1858, has long been considered a religious icon for the Irish and other 19th Century immigrants in the U.S., there is another St. Patrick's Cathedral not far away which is also dear to Catholic hearts and memories, and still thrives as an active parish even today.

The cornerstone of this "first" cathedral was laid in 1809, and the parish is already gearing up for its bicentennial in 2009. It is New York's oldest standing Catholic church.

And when it was first dedicated on May 14, 1815, the New York "Gazette" described it as "a grand and beautiful church, which may justly be considered one of the greatest ornaments of our city...."

In the early days of our nation, Old St. Patrick's served as New York's first cathedral, and is the first such church to be named in honor of Ireland's patron saint in the U.S.

And in an ecumenical outreach, the parish church grounds host New York's only Russian ~~Orthodox~~ Catholic Church, St. Michael's, which celebrates its ancient liturgies each week. The parish complex also includes six National Historical places.

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They ^(INCLUDE) ~~was~~ St. Patrick's School which served as a hospital during the American Revolutionary War, and later as an orphanage where St. Elizabeth Seton, America's first native-born saint, founded the Sisters of Charity. The building itself ^(A) was gift by Cornelius Heeney, an early 19th Century Irish philanthropist who had a great love for children.

Over the years Old St. Patrick's Cathedral has been the site of important events in U.S. History. As early as 1835, the then Bishop John Hughes was forced to gather the parishioners to defend the church against an anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant mob that threatened to "burn her to the ground."

When the then New York Mayor James Harper informed Bishop Hughes that he could not guarantee the safety of Catholic institutions in the city, Hughes armed the members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and wrote to the mayor: "Should one Catholic come to harm, or ⁷should one Catholic business be molested, we shall turn this city into a second Moscow."

The reference to the earlier burning of Moscow in the Napoleonic Wars was ^(C)enough of a warning to avoid any serious confrontations or damage.

In more pleasant times, St. Patrick's witnessed the ordination of St. John Neuman on June 25, 1836. He would later become bishop of Philadelphia, and ^(WAS) declared a saint in Rome on June 19, 1977.

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And in 1875, Archbishop John McCloskey of New York received the "red hat" as America's first cardinal. The ceremony at Old St. Patrick's was attended by the future U.S. President Chester Arthur and other notables.

The tragedy of the American Civil War had a great impact on the parish. President Abraham Lincoln asked Archbishop Hughes to be his personal envoy to France, Spain and England to convince these nations not to support the Confederacy. And when President Lincoln asked for volunteers, the "Fighting 69th" Regiment marched off to defend the Union. Some 75% of the regiment died in battle, and the end of the Civil War left an abundance of widows and orphans in the parish to be cared for by the charity of St. Patrick's.

Not many years later, Old St. Patrick's witnessed to first large influx of Italian immigrants as the Irish began to move to more affluent areas of the city. The newcomers made Old St. Patrick's their spiritual home in America, especially since they claimed St. Patrick as being of Roman descent. Not only did they give the neighborhood a new name, "Little Italy," but also gave many religious and priestly vocations to the Church. They also left their mark by contributing some of the finest stained-glass work in the U.S. to Old St. Patrick's.

A Spiritual Haven

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Over the years of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the parish has provided a religious haven for successive waves of Irish, French, German and Italian immigrants as they began their American experience. The parish today is primarily composed of Italian and Spanish-speaking Dominicans, in addition to a Chinese-American group. Liturgies are regularly celebrated in English, Spanish, Chinese and Russian.

As the first cathedral of the Irish immigrants in the New York area, Old St. Patrick's continues the Lord's work to this day, and is looking forward to the celebration of its bicentennial in the not too distant future.

(Fr. Kevin is a staff member of the Carmelite Spiritual Center in Darien, Ill.)