

# ST. FINBAR PARISH

## 1880-2011

**A**s we celebrate 131 years of ministry and the 100th Anniversary of the dedication of the current parish church, we go back to a history rich in dynamic pastors, parish priests, deacons and parishioners; each with their individuality have blessed us with many different gifts.

In 1880 the land in the village of Bath Beach was sparsely populated and between occasional resort homes, farms, vacant fields, salt marshes, hotels, yacht clubs, picnic grounds and miles of clean sandy beaches. Bath Beach was a seaside resort for well-to-do citizens of New York City who spent their summers here.

The early permanent settlers in the area were Irish. To attend Sunday Mass they had to travel to other communities. As the population, jobs and industries began to grow, the demand for services began to grow and the idea was born for a parish church in Bath Beach.

The idea was given birth to by William Swayne. Mr. Swayne offered a piece of his property to Bishop Loughlin as the site and location for a new Catholic Church to be built. Mr. Swayne also told Bishop Loughlin that County Cork in Ireland was his hometown, and since the first Bishop of Cork was Saint Finbarr, he would respectfully ask that the Bishop confer the name of "St. Finbarr" upon the newly built church. In September 1880, Bishop Loughlin blessed and dedicated the first St. Finbarr, a small one-room church that faced Railroad Avenue (now Bath Avenue).

In 1893, because the growing congregation was overtaxing the limited seating space in the tiny church, a second church building twice the size was proposed. The church site was also moved to face the newly sculpted Bay 20th Street. A rectory building was also erected adjoining the little church on Bay 20th (that rectory building was razed in 1962). In 1937 the building became the convent quarters and home of the Pallottine Sisters. The Sisters remained there until the current convent building on Bay 19th Street was built. The space created after the former convent was removed was designated the

Father James Donegan Plaza in honor of one of St. Finbarr's dynamic priest.

In 1910 the cornerstone for our present stately and devotional church was laid on Benson Avenue and Bay 20th Street. The church was completed and dedicated on May 12, 1912.

A new foundation was poured and thus St. Finbar's grew larger, not only with cement and brick but also with vision, enthusiasm, love, faith and hope. This new foundation has been made stronger as we continue to bring Christ to others in the Bath Beach/Bensonhurst Community.

### ST. FINBAR'S CCD PROGRAM (1939)

During the mid-thirties parish surveys indicated St. Finbar's Catholic population was increasing and religious instruction for thousands of public grade school pupils within the parish borders was an immediate concern. In early 1939 the School of Religion, later known as the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, the building became the hub of most parish organizations, societies and sports programs. Congregation of the Catholic Apostolate (The Pallottine Sisters) formed the core of the teaching staff. Over the years, with the reassignments of the Pallottine Sisters, married and single adults, college students, and high school students have carried on their work.

The first sisters of the Congregation of the Catholic Apostolate came to St. Finbar's in 1937. Their main work at the time was to get acquainted with parish families to encourage them to attend church and to take a spiritual census of family members. The sisters visited every family in the parish at least once a year. They were assigned to work in the rectory as interpreters; they wrote letters to the armed forces; they assisted families in obtaining federal or state aid. When St. Finbar School opened in 1964 the sisters devoted their full time to teaching the elementary school children of the parish.

Since the building of St. Finbar's, the foundation of the Parish was made even stronger by the formation of many societies, organizations, programs and ministries:

*Holy Name Society*

***The Blessed Virgin Sodality***  
***The Marian Rosary Society***  
***The Rosary Society***  
***The Saint Vincent DePaul Society***  
***St. Finbar Nursery***  
***The Parish Council***  
***Boy Scouts of America***  
***St. Finbar's Sports Programs***  
***Catholic War Veterans (CWV)***  
***St. Finbar's Cadets/Drum & Bugle Corps***  
***Faith-in-Action Society***  
***Home School Association***  
***Performing Arts at St. Finbar's School***  
***Performing Arts at St. Finbar's Parish***

Although some societies are no longer in existence, some have been expanded upon and still thrive today.

Monsignor Thomas Scanlon's vision for expansion was brought to fruition by Fr. Paul McKlohr, on June 6, 1965 when three new buildings were dedicated at St. Finbar's:

#### **St. Finbar's School**

At long last the dream of thousands of parishioners to have their own school came true. They had their school. An L-Shaped two-story structure on the corner of Bath Avenue and Bay 19th Street, the main entrance faced the corner and each wing ran parallel to the respective street. The wings included a cafeteria, administrative offices, a library, teachers lounge, computer and visual aids rooms. In 2008, due to low enrollment, St. Finbar School closed and the property was leased to HeartShare Human Services of the Diocese of Brooklyn. Autistic children now enjoy the learning environment built by the parishioners.

#### **The New Convent**

The new convent was erected next to the north wing of the school on Bay 19th Street. A three-story structure, it contained living quarters for the Pallottine Sisters of the Catholic Apostolate, who formerly staffed the school. The building included living quarters, chapel, reception rooms, community room, kitchen, workrooms and several other units. In 2010, the former convent was leased to HeartShare Human Services of the Diocese of Brooklyn making it the new home of a residential program for autistic children.

#### **The Baptistry**

The Baptistry was erected on the corner of Benson Avenue and Bay 20th Street adjacent to the main entrance of the church. It was designed to create a devotional setting for the administration of the

Sacrament of Baptism. This new structure covers 98% of the original corner stone. Since the Second Vatican Council, the baptistry is no longer used for baptisms.

## **St. Finbar's Second Century**

St. Finbar's has always been the center of vision and innovation in the Faith Community. It has spiritually and materially touched not only our own faith-filled parishioners but also any human being in need. A sense of family became the trademark of St. Finbar's. Many priests, nuns, deacons and lay ministers at St. Finbar's have built and continue to build upon the foundation set 131 years ago. As the parish entered a new century in 1980, a broader vision was extended far beyond the normal parish life. This was made possible through the involvement of parishioners who formed the following new groups: *The Liturgical Committee, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, Lector, Ministers of Hospitality, Plant, Decorating and Altar Linen Committee, Music Ministry, La Lega Del Sacro Cuore (Sacred Heart League), La Societa Del SS. Rosario (The Rosary Society, Il Terzo Ordine Di San Francesco (The Third Order of St. Francis.* This vision continued to expand in the 1990's with the creation of the *Hispanic Ministry, Altar Bread Bakers, Public Relations that helped publish in the 1930's the St. Finbar Courier, the Parish Clubmate, Century II Magazine and the weekly Church Bulletin.*

Other ministries that were also created in the second century included:

- ***Hands-In-Need for Exceptional People***
- ***Love Builds***
- ***St. Finbar's Homeless Residence***
- ***PRE-K at St. Finbar School***
- ***RCIA Program***
- ***Pre-Cana Classes***
- ***Expectant Parents Classes***
- ***Faith Healing and Prayer Group***
- ***Golden Age Club***
- ***Travel Group***
- ***Our Lady of Guadalupe Committee***
- ***St. Michael Society***
- ***Gruppo Spirito Santo***
- ***Hispanic Charismatic Prayer Group***
- ***Knights of Columbus #354***
- ***Cub Scouts #86***

In October 1983, St. Finbar Parishioners were informed of plans to renovate our beautiful

church. The first phase was to raise \$400,000 to complete the task of painting, electricity, lighting; restoring pews, the stained glass windows, replace the floor and roof, as well as work on the walls and main entrance. A professional firm was retained to direct this renovation, which was begun in the Spring of 1984 and completed in the Fall of 1984 under the direction of Father Anthony Faila.

The renovation in 1984 was successful in many ways; but there were still some lingering problems. So, in early 1995 after the Monsignor Scanlon Confraternity Center (built in 1936) was renovated by volunteers, the idea of renovating with parish volunteers was born, and 100 volunteers answered the call. Money and materials were donated. And so started the work in the Spring of 1995. Although we had some craftsmen, most of the patching, painting, tiling and restoring were done by accountants, teachers, students, housewives, artists, sanitation men, bankers, retirees; all on a learn-as-you-go basis. Scaffolding was built to paint the ceilings and day or night some brave volunteer would be up there painting. Four Foot long reliefs of the 14 Stations of the Cross were taken down, restored and repainted. The many murals and paintings were cleaned and restored. The windows were scraped, primed and caulked. The task was completed.

Fr. Luke Wei, parochial vicar, was the driving force in the renovation of the Church, which took three years with the volunteers of the community working alongside him.

In 2001, Fr. Joseph Holcomb started a campaign that raised over \$500,000, installing a new roof and renovated parts of the interior of the Church. With the onset of a changing demographic again, St. Finbar School began to struggle financially.

In 2006, Fr. James Mueller worked to keep St. Finbar School open, however, due to the decreased enrollment, the school closed in 2008. With the parish in serious financial difficulty, the possibility of reconfiguration became a reality. On March 31, 2010, Fr. James Mueller died opening the church, as he did each morning. Fr. Andrew Vaccari, pastor of St. Mary, Mother of Jesus was appointed Temporary Administrator. Msgr. Vaccari began to work with the Parish Pastoral Council in response to the real possibility of the parish closing.

On June 30, 2010, Fr. Michael L. Gelfant was appointed Administrator. He worked to finalize and submit a Strategic Action Plan and a

Financial Recovery plan both accepted by the Bishop of Brooklyn later that year. In his one year as administrator, Fr. Gelfant air conditioned the lower church and began to restore the space for worship, in particular during the summer months. New confessionals were built in the main church and the sacristy was expanded. Major projects continue today, as the parish buildings are repaired and restored. Currently, the Stations of the Cross have all been removed as they have fallen in disrepair. They are being restored and will be remounted in their original location. The church is scheduled to be restored to her original appointments in particular with the recent discovery of the marble from the High Altar. Father Gelfant was appointment the twelfth pastor of St. Finbar Parish October 2011.



*St. Finbar's Parish is unique. We've been blessed with many generous and loyal people. God has blessed our past. May God Bless our present and our future with people who follow their hearts to be involved in our parish family.*

*Original Frame Church  
Railroad Avenue*