

A History of Holy Child Jesus 1910-Present

Our parish officially began when Bishop Charles McDonnell, the 2nd Bishop of Brooklyn, saw a need to relieve the overcrowding of our neighboring parish St. Benedict Joseph Labre Parish, located on 118th Street off Atlantic Avenue. Due to the huge influx of Catholics into this desirable neighborhood, another parish needed to be created and Reverend Thomas A. Nummey was assigned the enormous task of establishing this new parish to be called Holy Child Jesus.

The first Mass was celebrated in 1910 at 6:00am Christmas morning on the top floor of Old Arcanum Hall located on 116th Street and Jamaica Avenue. It was one of the few buildings at that time large enough to celebrate Mass for all future parishioners during the years it would take to raise the funds needed to purchase the land and construct the buildings envisioned by Fr. Nummey. Newspaper articles reveal that at first, most of the Richmond Hill Catholics refused to desert their beloved parish of St. Benedict Joseph. This defiance compelled the Pastor to draw up a map of the territory comprising the new parish which he sent to all the Catholics in the area. By June 1911, he declared that all Catholics living within the boundaries clearly outlined on the map were obliged to support their new parish. Since resistance still continued, Fr. Nummey resorted to heavy rhetoric and he reminded his flock that the Bishop was their spiritual leader and to disobey his authority one risked damnation.

Eventually, progress was made and Fr. Nummey quietly purchased the land on both sides of Orchard Avenue (86th Ave.) between Chestnut Avenue (112th St.) and Greenwood Avenue (111th St.). A magnificent Victorian house was bought for an inflated price of \$18,000. It served as the Rectory and was the center of activity for almost 20 years. A provisional basement church was built on the spot of the present day gym and on December 3, 1911, the first Sunday Mass was finally celebrated in one of the parish's own buildings. That same day, the Holy Name Society was organized for the men of the parish. In 1929 construction of the permanent Church and Rectory began, and by 1931 was completed for a mere \$75,000 reflective of the cost of materials and manual labor due to the Great Depression.

Holy Child Jesus continued to grow rapidly from 100 families in 1910 to 500 families in 1916. Therefore, a parochial school became necessary and on September 17, 1917, the 2 story brick school was opened with 11 classrooms, 132 pupils and 4 Sisters of St. Joseph who continuously educated our children until 2005. Provisions were made so that a 3rd story could be added if the need ever arose. The total cost was \$65,000 and even then parish bulletins expressed a concern for Catholic families dealing with the ongoing problems of paying taxes and supporting a Catholic school.

In September 1929, the parish was surprised by the sudden announcement that Msgr. Nummey had resigned to join a Missionary Order. A week later, our second Pastor, Fr. Allan Pendleton arrived to administer the affairs of the parish and carry on the work of erecting the new church. The beauty of the new church was recognized immediately when HCJ, then one of the largest churches in Queens, received the First Prize Award by the Queens Chamber of Commerce for excellence in design and civic value in 1931.

In 1939, the 3rd story was added to our school adding 6 new classrooms. Arriving in 1951, Msgr. James Kely saw the need to build an impressive new convent which was erected in 1952 for the many Josephite Sisters who taught in our school. A large house on 112th Street was also purchased to provide a convent for the Trinitarian Sisters who ministered to the needy of our parish for years thus creating the foundation of our present day Outreach and Food Pantry ministry.

During Msgr. William Murray's years as Pastor (1955-1966), he decided to erect another addition to the school above the old basement church using the parish funds of \$1 million. He died in 1966 before the plans were executed. Therefore, Fr. Patrick McGirr, our 5th Pastor actually initiated the new construction. He remained here for only 2 years during which time he accomplished his personal goal of taking the parish census single handedly by going house to house. Upon completion of this arduous task, he requested to be relieved of his role as Pastor and return to simple priestly tasks which he preferred.

Msgr. Raymond S. Leonard Ph.D. arrived in 1968 and the new wing of the school was finally completed by April 1969. This finally relieved the overcrowding which necessitated double classroom sessions conducted by our dedicated Sisters. Msgr. Leonard was a theology and philosophy professor at St. Joseph's College in Brooklyn for over 20 years, and since his interests were in education, he sponsored an Adult Lecture Series. During his term, a Parish Council was begun, a Folk Mass was added to the Sunday schedule, the Mini-Fair started, the elegant annual Crystal Luncheons began, Parish Pilgrimages were organized, Bingo was a Friday night ritual, and parish representatives served on several Interfaith Committees for Christians and Jews to further a spirit of ecumenism.

We cannot trace the history of HCJ without including the significant changes which occurred throughout the universal Church as a result of Vatican II, an Ecumenical Council which convened in Rome from 1962 to 1965. Sweeping changes took place in every church and Holy Child was no exception. The main tabernacle was relocated, the altar was positioned so that the priest could face the congregation during Mass, and altar rails were removed. Now instead of Latin, each liturgy would be celebrated in the language of the people. The laity were to be more involved as Lectors, Eucharistic Ministers and Ushers at Mass in addition to making home and hospital visits for the sick or elderly. The Baptistry was dismantled and face to face confessions took place in a Reconciliation Room rather than behind closed, screened cubicles.

Sadly, Msgr. Leonard was ill and incapacitated for a long time and although he resided in the Rectory, the responsibilities of the parish were carried on by his pastoral assistants and a faithful laity before he died in 1989. The former convent was renamed after him and now serves as a parish center which includes a chapel, the parish office and meeting rooms.

Msgr. John J. Antoncic arrived in 1989, and during his 11 years, he struggled with fewer parishioners and a declining school enrollment, a situation faced by many parishes throughout Brooklyn and Queens. The huge buildings constructed many years ago by talented European artisans were in need of maintenance, upgrade or repair and therefore funds needed to be raised to seal the leaks, fix the roofs, upgrade the electricity and enhance the church. It was a period of

restoration. Like many other parishes, D'Ambrosio Studios was hired and our magnificent church was brightened, gilded and enhanced while preserving its original architectural integrity. Fortunately, under Msgr. Antoncic's leadership, we always met our assessment for new programs such as *Alive in Hope* and the *Bishops Appeal*- no small achievement in view of the changes in the population of our parish at that time.

Just as Fr. Nummey welcomed every citizen, Catholic or non-Catholic to an International Fair in 1911, that same spirit of welcoming continued from the first Germans and Irish then Lithuanians and Italians to the more recent immigrants of Richmond Hill. Hispanics, Filipinos and Asians became the newer residents and thus parishioners of Holy Child.

The Hispanic community has been in Richmond Hill for several years, but not until 1996 did they see a need for worshipping in their own language. A meeting was scheduled with Msgr. Antoncic and he approved for a small group to meet every Thursday night to discuss the Sunday's Gospel. These weekly meetings were followed by a monthly Mass celebrated in Spanish. Msgr. Lawrence Hinch celebrated the first Mass in Spanish on Sunday, January 2, 2000 which continues now every Sunday.

Fr. Daniel Murphy's pastoral assignment from 2000-2004 reflected the world-wide shortage of priests. For the first time in our long history, lay administrators were hired to handle the day-to-day operation of the parish. Extensive renovation took place in the Rectory and the parish grounds were lavishly landscaped. Quite unexpectedly, Fr. Murphy was transferred to St. Saviour's in Brooklyn.

Fr. James King became our 9th Pastor in June 2004. For two and a half years, he adjusted to transition in parish staff, and for the first time a layman was hired as our school Principal. A broken leg and broken pipes plagued and challenged him, but he persevered while continuing to teach at St. John's University. Once again, an unexpected transfer of leadership occurred when Bishop DiMarzio announced that Fr. King was reassigned as the new Administrator to Holy Family Parish in Flushing.

Most recently, we became one of the first parishes in the history of The Brooklyn-Queens Diocese to have a Bishop as a Pastor. On March 17, 2007 St. Patrick shared his special day with His Excellency Octavio Cisneros when he was installed as our 10th Pastor. Bishop Cisneros fled his native Cuba as a teenager and achieved freedom and the American dream envisioned by his parents. Now a Bishop, he continues the mission of the first Apostles at Holy Child.

While we have concentrated on the 10 Pastors who have shepherded this congregation for 99 years, this history would be incomplete if we failed to mention the many Pastoral Assistants and several Deacons who were our continual confessors and moderators, spiritual advisors and family counselors. They baptized our babies, presided over our marriages and buried our dead. The good Sisters, both Josephite and Trinitarian, and more recently Sisters of Charity who have resided here have all contributed to the spiritual formation of Holy Child Jesus parish.

The laity of HCJ makes us a complete community. Thousands of volunteers have given

millions, yes millions of hours of service as Rosarians, Lectors, Ushers, Eucharistic Ministers, Altar Servers, Choir members, CCD and RCIA Catechists, Fundraisers, Parish Council members, Counters, Class Mothers, Scout Leaders, Coaches, Teen Drama Club members and Decorators to name just a few.

It is who we were, this is who we are. Indeed HCJ did accomplish more than just to stabilize a neighborhood. The standard of charity, an example of morality and love of neighbor has been bestowed to the citizenry which otherwise would have been lacking had we not been here. This has been the mission of our parish known as Holy Child Jesus!

Respectfully submitted by:
Maria Palminteri Turner
Class of 1958

Pastors

Thomas A. Nummey	1910-1929	Raymond S. Leonard	1968-1989
Allen T. Pendleton	1929-1951	John J. Antoncic	1989-2000
James T. Kelly	1951-1955	Daniel S. Murphy	2000-2004
William P. Murray	1955-1966	James W. King	2004-2007
Patrick J. McGirr	1966-1968	+ Octavio Cisneros	2007-