

SEPTEMBER 20, 1903 – First mass said at temporary Church of St. John the Martyr, 249 East 71 Street by Father John T. Prout

In May 1902 Father John Prout was assigned to St. Monica Church to work with the Czech community from Bohemia; he spoke the languages needed to proclaim the faith. In 1903 he was assigned as Pastor of the temporary church of St. John the Martyr. Since New York City already had a Catholic Church named St. John Nepomucene, the Patron of Bohemia, the alternative name for the same saint was chosen for the name of this new church, St. John the Martyr. Archbishop John Cardinal Farley bought a house for \$13,000 at 249 East 71 Street as a residence for Father Prout, and the first mass was celebrated in the house on September 20, 1903. Religious instruction for the children began at the house in October of 1903. The alumnae and students of Sacred Heart Convent and High School (located at that time on 54th Street and Madison Avenue) helped with the catechism and sewing classes at St. John's house. A bazaar was held at the Sacred Heart School for the benefit of St. John's and \$850 was acquired during a three-hour period.

Sunday, September 25, 1904 – First mass celebrated by Father Prout in the present Church structure on East 72nd Street.

The church and an adjoining private house, formerly the Knox Presbyterian Church, were purchased by Cardinal Farley on September 15, 1904 for the sum of \$39,000. A fire had destroyed part of the building and the Knox community vacated the church and put it up for sale. Some blackened wood and stone can still be found behind the organ loft walls. The interior of the Church building was in good condition so that after a thorough housecleaning by workmen and parishioners, the building was blessed and an altar dedicated on September 24 by Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Cusack. At the first mass the next day, Father Prout delivered his sermon to a standing room congregation.

Father Prout lived in the private house next to the Church on 72nd street while the Diocese proceeded to sell his former dwelling at 249 East 71st Street.

The Upper East Side neighborhood continued to receive many European immigrants, and the St. John's population of immigrants from Bohemia swelled. There was never a need for a parish parochial school,

however, because each of the surrounding Catholic churches had established their own and, as a national Parish, St. John the Martyr was able to send their children to them.

Father Prout remained as pastor until February of 1918. During his 15 years as Pastor, immigration increased and the religious needs of the Czech community in the area exploded.

February 1918 – Father John Lane appointed Pastor

At the order of Archbishop Patrick Hayes, Father John Lane became the new Pastor. Father Lane did not speak the language of the Czech people, but by that time it was not necessary since there was a second generation who spoke English. He always saw to it that a priest on his staff was of Bohemian background so that the older people were accommodated for the Sacraments and prayers in their own language.

During Father Lane's term as Pastor, it was necessary for him to move out of the rectory on 72nd street because a new apartment house at 242 East 72nd Street was being constructed. Once again the Parish priests began to live on 71st street, but this time at 259 East 71st Street in a building the Archdiocese obtained. Next door to them at 257 East 71st Street the Dominican sisters of the Sparkhill Community were in residence and in charge of a pre-school group of children, most of whom were the families of working mothers. Known as St. Rose Settlement, these nuns also commuted to the church of St. Catherine of Siena on East 68th Street for other duties with their sister nuns of the same community. Their work ended at 71st street about 1957, and the building came under the care of St. John the Martyr Parish in 1964.

1935 - Monsignor Larkin becomes Pastor

Upon the death of Father Lane, Cardinal Patrick Hayes transferred Monsignor Larkin from St. Aloysius Parish in Harlem to St. John the Martyr.

In the late thirties the parish conducted a vigorous social program for its parishioners, with parish plays, basketball teams and formal affairs at the Central Opera House on East 67th Street. A boxing ring with a gym was set up in the church basement. New altars were installed in the church and the back of the rectory was connected with a passageway to the sacristy.

As in all neighborhoods, young men from St. John were called into the Armed Services during World War II. Several were killed in action, while the majority returned to an upper East Side that was soon to

undergo sweeping changes. The Czech population of the area gradually dispersed and the newcomers to the upper East Side began arriving, not from Europe but from other parts of the City. Old tenement buildings were torn down as New York Hospital and Memorial Hospital sought extra property for expansion and for new buildings to house doctors and nurses and their families. The advent of a new set of high rise luxury apartments changed the complexion of the neighborhood.

1950 – Father Edward McGrath appointed Pastor

In 1950 with the death of Monsignor Larkin, Father Edward McGrath was appointed by Cardinal Spellman as the fourth pastor of St. John the Martyr. Father McGrath previously was an Army Chaplain during World War II and then was Pastor at Croton-on-Hudson.

During his tenure, the Church building underwent extensive renovation. The “small austere interior” was renovated. A polychrome rood screen and gilded canopy was the artistic center of the chancel, and a row of angels holding the shields of six Anglican Cathedrals was put at the base of the ceiling arches. Why Anglican shields? The architect who did the designs had a brother who was an Anglican priest and, in honor of him, he put Anglican art in any church he renovated. The shields on the rood screen all deal with the instruments of the Passion of Jesus. The large crucifix with Mary and St. John tower over the “Passion Screen” as it is referred to in Anglican art. Note the four symbols of the evangelists on the cross proper.

There was no longer need for a Priest of Czech background to be on the staff for purposes of language since English was spoken by all parishioners. During this time the Ushers, the Nocturnal Adoration and the Holy Name societies were very active. The Women’s Altar and Rosary Society enjoyed its most active days during and immediately after World War II. You can still see the stained glass windows they gave during the church renovations.

1961 - Monsignor James Nash appointed to St. John’s

In 1961 Monsignor McGrath was transferred to the St. Philip Neri parish in the Bronx. Monsignor James Nash who had spent many years in the New York Chancery Office and had been a pastor in the Bronx was welcomed to St. John’s. His term as pastor was brief due to an untimely death on March 10, 1964 at the age of 58.

March 1964 – Monsignor Stanislaus McGovern arrives at St. John’s

Monsignor McGovern had spent 25 years in Rockland County as pastor of St. Joseph Church. Under his administration, the outside of the church building was refurbished and an air conditioning system was installed. The interior of the rectory also underwent extensive improvement.

In 1964 St. John lost its status as a national Church for Bohemian people and received definite boundaries as a Parish. Officially the Parish boundary is made up of fifteen square blocks:

North:

74th Street – South side from Lexington Avenue to East River

South:

70th Street – North side from Lexington to Second Avenue

71st Street – North side from Second Avenue to First Avenue

72nd Street – North side from First Avenue to East River

East:

West side of Second Avenue between 70th and 71st Streets

West side of First Avenue between 71st and 72nd Streets

East River Drive between 72nd and 74th (south side)

West:

East side of Lexington Avenue between 70th and 74th Streets

This change to boundaries for national Parishes was becoming the trend in many Dioceses of the country. With the ruling from Rome for compulsory retirement for Priests and Bishops at 75 years of age, Monsignor McGovern was required to retire in 1969 as Pastor.

December 1969 – Monsignor Daniel Donovan becomes Pastor

Monsignor Donovan was not a newcomer to the neighborhood, having lived in the rectory on 71st Street from 1941 to 1948 while he held the office of Director of Insurance at the Chancery Building. He had also previously been the Pastor of Holy Innocents Church on West 37th Street before becoming the seventh Pastor at St. John.

Soon after Monsignor Donovan’s arrival, extensive work was accomplished in the Church and rectory buildings, due mainly to the generosity of the parishioners backing up their Pastor’s efforts. During this time the Father Tom Murphy Golden Age Group and the Legion of Mary were formed. The yearly “Irish Night” always displayed a talented group of performers.

During the tenure of Monsignor Donovan the church building was updated to fully implement the liturgical changes of Vatican II. The main altar was removed from the rear wall of the sanctuary to the main floor so Mass could be said facing the congregation. This also necessitated the raising of the rood screen main beam for better sight lines. Some of the riddle posts of the screen, along with the drapes of the posts were also removed. During these improvements the wood paneling was added to the rear walls to give a warmer glow to the Church. Additional statues were added to the rear wall in the back of the Church near the confessionals. The St. John the Martyr statue was installed.

On July 1, 1984 Monsignor Daniel Donovan retired as Pastor. He continued to live in the rectory as a source of inspiration to the priests and people of the Parish. The church hall was designated as "The Donovan Center" in his honor. He died peacefully on November 4, 1986.

1984 – Father Walter Niebrzydowski comes to St. John's

Father Niebrzydowski was ordained in 1958 in Rome. He came to St. John from Cathedral Preparatory Seminary in Manhattan where he had taught Latin. He increased the Parish ministry to Marymount College just down the block and to the St. Mary Residence across the street. A Sunday coffee hour was introduced. The Homeless Luncheon Program began serving guests on Saturdays and holidays. The Church was thoroughly renovated to include new electrical equipment to provide a warm and prayerful environment for all who came to pray throughout the day.

The Donovan Center was also remodeled and equipped to handle the increased activity. These activities included an Actors' Workshop and the formation of the Lenox Hill Artists Forum. Worktalk, a program to aid people seeking employment, began here but became too successful so it had to seek bigger quarters at St. Jean Baptiste Church. The Donovan Center was also used for frequent concerts, lectures and art exhibitions. The Polish Catholic Discussion Club held a bi-monthly Liturgy and lecture. Members came from all over the metropolitan area to participate.

Following the success of the Advent and Lent Prayer services, a TV program series was developed and NB Productions was begun. This

meant a weekly Catholic presence on Manhattan Cable (now Time Warner Cable). The series, still being produced, is called “Waiting for God, Oh”.

Monsignor Niebrzydowski completed his twelve-year term as Pastor on June 30, 1996. He then became Pastor of Epiphany Parish on Second Avenue.

July 1996 – Monsignor John Woolsey appointed Pastor

Monsignor Woolsey had been a Parish priest, a teacher and for 20 years head of the Family Life/Pro Life Office. During his tenure, the church was repainted and the physical plant was also improved. When the sisters moved out of the Convent, Focolare, a lay religious group, rented the building to be a house for its members.

In 2004 due to fiscal irregularities, Monsignor Woolsey was removed from the parish by the Archdiocese of New York. Father Joseph Baker who was the Parochial Vicar for 23 years was appointed Administrator of St. Johns.

July 1, 2007 – Order of Carmelites appointed to run the Parish

Fr Sean Harlow O.Carm appointed as Pastor and Fr Sunny John, O.Carm appointed as the Parochial Vicar of the Parish.

February 2, 2008 – The Focolare religious group left the rented building and turned it over to the Carmelite community.

Who was St. John the Martyr?

St. John the Martyr is usually known by his official name, St. John Nepomucene. In his early childhood, John Nepomucene was cured of a disease through the prayers of his good parents. In thanksgiving, they consecrated him to the service of God. After he was ordained, he was sent to a parish in the city of Prague. He became a great preacher, and thousands of those who listened to him changed their way of life. Father John was invited to the court of Wenceslaus IV. He settled arguments and did many kind deeds for the needy people of the city. He also became the Queen’s confessor. When the King was cruel to the Queen, Father John taught her to bear her cross patiently. One day, about 1393, the King asked Father John to tell him what the Queen had said in confession. When Father John refused, he was thrown into prison. A second time, he was asked to reveal the Queen’s

confession. “If you do not tell me,” said the King, “you shall die. But if you obey my commands, riches and honor will be yours.” Again Father John refused. He was tortured. The King ordered that Father John be thrown into the river. A strange brightness appeared upon the water where he drowned. He is known as the “martyr of the confessional.” He is the patron of Czechoslovakia, where he is invoked against floods and against slander. His feast day is May 16.

Since there was a church called St. John Nepomucene located on East 66th Street and First Avenue, our church on 72nd Street was named St. John the Martyr to avoid confusion between the two churches.