

The History of St. Francis de Sales Church, Washington, DC

The history of St. Francis de Sales Church goes back to colonial times. In those days Catholics in the area of Maryland that is now the Northeast section of Washington, DC worshipped in a private chapel in the Queen family mansion--home of one of the oldest Catholic families in Maryland. According to Queen family tradition the chapel was established in 1722, moving from a wing in the mansion to a separate chapel elsewhere on the Queen family property. In the 1790s Richard Queen bequeathed it and the adjoining cemetery to Archbishop John Carroll in his will. This church, named Queen's Chapel, remained a place of worship for Catholics despite numerous times being destroyed--during the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. Worshippers included members of the Queen, Carroll, Fenwick, and Brent families. Services were presided over by Jesuit priests from Bohemia, MD and St. Mary's City. In May 1908, after being rebuilt once again it was dedicated as a parish and named St. Francis de Sales--Fr. Augustus M. Mark being its first pastor.

In 1924, Fr. Mark was reassigned and a new pastor was assigned to St. Francis de Sales, Fr. James Edward Malloy, who had a major effect on the history of the parish. In 1927, Fr. Malloy decided to move the church from its location at 20th and Evart streets to its current location on Rhode Island Avenue because it would be on a convenient trolley line and more space for a larger church. This infuriated many parishioners because he abandoned the old church that they had built with their own hands about 20 years before. At the same time Fr. Malloy was also responsible for the mission church of St. James in Mount Rainier, Maryland. His desire to be rid of the mission church led him to use parish funds to establish St. James as an independent parish with its own church and school and pastor--relieving him of that burden. This further angered St. Francis parishioners who wanted the funds used to complete the new church on Rhode Island Avenue. And then the great crash of 1929 came which halted construction leaving St. Francis with only a basement church on the Rhode Island Avenue site. Soon thereafter Queen's Chapel was torn down and the remains in the Queen's Chapel graveyard were reinterred at Mt. Olivet Cemetery to make room for extension of Evarts Street and construction of Langdon Elementary School.

Fr. Malloy was succeeded by Fr. Walter L. Read, who began his ministry by carrying out Fr. Malloy's dream of a parish school. St. Francis de Sales School opened in September 1946. At dedication services in April 1948 Most Rev. Patrick O'Boyle stated, "I am keenly aware of the sacrifices made by the people of the parish in order to have this school. In doing this you have put first things first." Rev. William McManus stated that "with the exception of a few minor contributions, all money for the new school has come from the parishioners...and this in a parish of relatively low-income families" which Fr. McManus said "entailed real hardship...This school was built by little people who gave big gifts."

In 1954 Fr. Read came to the conclusion that the dream of an upper church was one that would never be realized and any further addition was not feasible. Therefore he adorned the Church with the facade that is now still in place.

In 1963 Fr. Read died. There followed in quick succession a number of transitional pastors hardly any lasting more than two years. During this period the parish changed from a predominantly white parish to a predominantly black one; lay teachers started to replace the Sisters of St. Joseph in the school; and the birth control controversy occurred. In 1973, David Bava, a seminarian from California, was ordained a priest at St. Francis by the Bishop of Stockton, California--the first time in the history of the Archdiocese of Washington that a diocesan priest was ordained in a parish church.

Parishioners became disgruntled with the rapid turnover of pastors and in response the Archdiocese in 1975 sent Fr. Patrick McCaffrey to St. Francis where he remained for seven years. During his tenure the parish became involved in SOME (So Others Might Eat), senior citizen programs, youth ministry and ecumenical relations. Fr. Samuel Craig, the parish's first black priest was associate pastor during this time.

In 1982 Fr. McCaffrey was succeeded by Fr. John Cunico, a humble and very hard-working pastor who made greater and more extensive use of parishioners in decision-making positions on parish committees. He encouraged the "St. Francis de Sales Dinner Theater," the parish Youth Organization and Liturgical Dance Worship. During his pastorate in 1985 the parish had its second black priest, Fr. Charles Lawrence who was instrumental in including the celebration of

Black History Month as a permanent function of the Evangelization Committee. The parish also got its first permanent deacon, Rev. Mr. Wilbur Coleman in 1987 and, when Fr. Lawrence left in 1988, Fr. Carl Dianda was appointed associate pastor. When Fr. Cunico left for a new assignment in 1990, Fr. Dianda was appointed in his place.

Fr. Dianda, who as a child worshipped at St. Francis de Sales, continued the efforts of Fr. Cunico allowing the laity greater responsibilities in parish functions. He was also strong on ecumenical relations. During Fr. Dianda's tenure Rev. Mr. Floyd Agostinelli became the second resident permanent deacon. He was well known in the parish having been a parishioner since 1958. In 1991 Fr. Carl conceived the idea of celebrating the 270th anniversary of the founding of the congregation of St. Francis de Sales--using the 1722 date for the establishment of Queen's Chapel. The celebration took place in 1992 with Masses and other events paying tribute to the history of Queen's Chapel and the Queen family, as well as a formal dedication of the church by Archbishop James Cardinal Hickey.

The 100th anniversary of the dedication of St. Francis de Sales as a parish in May 2008, however, was overshadowed by the closing of the school in June 2008. After six decades of service to the children of St. Francis de Sales parish and neighborhood, the school was closed and a public charter school was opened in its place. Although there was no formal celebration of the 100th Anniversary of St. Francis de Sales as a parish it is good to look back on what was said by Rev. Dr. Edward Pace at its dedication in 1908 which is still true today:

"Through changes rapid and far-reaching she has taught her doctrines, maintained her worship, and enforced her laws just as she had done from the beginning in older hands. This power of adjustment is proof of her vitality: it is the manifestation of the Divine guidance which Christ promised, the showing forth of the spirit of God, Who abides with the church forever. However the outward form may vary, the substance endures; from age to age, from clime to clime, in catacomb or cathedral, in struggle or in peace, there is for the Catholic Church one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and the facts of the past are our guarantee for the future."

References:

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