

A Brief History of Holy Family Church – The United Nations Parish

“Religion adorns and beautifies whatever it touches. Faith can work miracles and devotion can achieve wonders. The faith and devotion of the people of Holy Family Church are to be called upon to work a modern miracle. The modern miracle is the transformation of the four-story brick structure on the north side of East 47th Street between First and Second Avenues into a beautiful, modern church. This building was once a stable ...”

The words quoted above are not from a recent appeal by our present pastor, Father Robert J. Robbins, but words like those which are continually presented to us, not only by him, but by all who have served in the ministry of hope and vision here at Holy Family since its founding by Patrick Cardinal Hayes in November of 1924. Father Danielle DeNonno was the person of vision who knew whence Holy Family had risen – a stable – to where it was to encompass over eighty-five years later a place of beauty and holiness for all to praise Him who was born in a stable and suffered on a cross.

“A tutte le anime generosi che apprezzano I valori spirituali revoliamo confidenti il nostro appello fervid e sincere per la lora cooperazione ad’un opera di bene altamente Italiana – la costruzioni della Chiesa della Santa Familia.”

While the language that Father DeNonno spoke to begin the appeal for funds for the first Holy Family Church is Italian, the thoughts expressed and the hopes engendered to subsequent generations of believers who call Holy Family “home” have not changed.

It was noted by Father DeNonno that the place where Holy Family Church is built there once stood stables. For us, as Christians, the birth of Jesus was the Father’s intention to complete what already existed – a Holy Family – Mary and Joseph. The original church dedicated in April of 1927 was a haven for immigrants and refugees of Italian descent. The beautiful ceramics in the present church on the west wall were inspired by the intent of the first pastor and incorporated by Monsignor Reilly. They still speak volumes about the vision and mission of Holy Family Church – a microcosm of the Church Universal. “O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness ...” “The Lord is our refuge and our strength ...” The words of the psalmist echo in the prayer and liturgy of Holy Family as a reminder to all who enter the doors of the church that “the Lord hides us under the shadows of his wings.”

We need only to look at the bold and beautiful depiction of the Risen Christ over the altar to be visually presented with the great mystery of our faith – that Jesus died and rose that all might be saved. Christ, indeed, shelters us under the shadow of those outstretched arms of his love and mercy.

Pope Paul VI, on his mission for peace to the United Nations and the prayers for peace that he offered here at Holy Family on October 4, 1965, not only established Holy Family as the first parish church ever visited by a reigning Holy Father in these United States, but also reminded us in his encyclical, *Familiaris Consortio*, that a family is the Church in miniature; that the growth of family life, prayer, holiness, and respect is the key to stability and happiness in society and in the Church. The great visionary of our time spoke and wrote words which are as meaningful today as they were then. The people of Holy Family Church, though fewer in number than in years past, still have the mandate and the mission given us by Christ and re-echoed in the words of Pope Paul VI. This church, officially established as a territorial parish by Francis Cardinal Spellman on the 17th of March 1951 (Feast of Saint Patrick) under the pastorate of Monsignor George J. Zentgraf, continues to mirror the needs and aspirations of all who contributed to its founding as a national parish for Italian speaking people and who to this day continue to be generous in their love for beauty, tradition and faith.

“Only in the Holy Family and within the union and the confines of the Holy Family have we always and will continue to find peace.” These words of Father DeNonno began the mission that the pastoral staff and parishioners of Holy Family Church continue to carry out to this day: that Holy Family will be a place of peace and a source of hope for the people of the United Nations and the Turtle Bay community.

Welcome to Holy Family! We’re glad you’re here!