

## **HISTORY OF ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY PARISH**

SITUATED along a quiet neighborhood in one of the older streets and districts of Ottawa, Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church with its light brown brick building capped by a belltower is hard to miss even for one not familiar with the area. Today this church at Olmstead Street still serves – even after 90 years – a varied mix of parishioners around its vicinity of Vanier and beyond. Its history started in the early days of the township itself, when Vanier was still named Eastview.

Eastview was incorporated as a town in 1913. It later saw a large influx of French-Canadian Catholics who later established a French-speaking church, Notre Dame de Lourdes, at Montreal Rd. As the number of English-speaking parishioners grew larger, the need for another church became more apparent. Under the guidance of parishioners Mr. & Mrs. John Quinlan, a committee was formed to petition Archbishop Joseph-Guillaume Forbes to establish an English-speaking Catholic Church in the area.

**The Early Years.** Petition was soon granted around 1922. Archbishop Forbes appointed Fr. Walter Cavanagh to be its founding pastor. Msgr. Cavanagh called an election among the early parishioners for its first board of church wardens and the following were elected: Thomas Caulfield, Henry Cosgrove, Patrick Foley, Edward Garvey, Patrick Hanratty, Michael Logue, Francis McLaughlin and John Quinlan. The congregation originally met for holy mass at the double living room at the big home of Joe Dollard Archambault and his wife, Regina, on Second Avenue near Montreal Road. The Archambault couple also hosted the three priests who were serving the parish, Msgr. Cavanagh, Fr. John O'Neill and Fr. G. Fenton, in the same house.

Times were hard during the 1930s as it was the time of the Depression. But the community feeling persisted among the closely-knit parishioners. Somehow, a frame church was subsequently built in 1931 from everyone's contributions at First Avenue where the parish celebrated its first masses at 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. on August 15, 1931. As this date coincided with the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the parish was named after it. There were over 200 parishioners attending the Sunday masses in this location at this time. The parish was blessed on August 29, 1931. It recorded its first Baptism in the parish on August 30, 1931.

Permission was given In October 2, 1931 to purchase a vacant building on Second Avenue (Savard St), left behind by the Eastview Presbyterian Church, called the Assembly Hall. Volunteers spent several weeks of labour, digging with pick and shovel a foundation on which they could put a furnace. The construction of a parish hall was subsequently approved on February 1932.

On July 22, 1933, Fr. Francis Day succeeded Fr. Cavanagh as pastor. He was only there six months when he died suddenly of a heart attack. On January 18, 1934, Fr. John O'Neill was appointed pastor. He started the parish devotion to our Mother of Perpetual Help, a well attended Wednesday afternoon and evening prayer sessions including a Sunday afternoon session aired over the radio. This devotion was later continued by parishioners over the years. After seven months, Fr. O'Neill was transferred. On September 18, 1934, Fr. John Cody took over.

During these years, the parish continued to grow. By this time, the parish church was a busy hub for the community with fundraising bazaars and social evenings in August with the women cooking beans and everyone else enjoying Crown and Anchor and Bingo games. At one point, it was necessary to sell tickets for the midnight mass on Christmas Eve to ensure that parishioners would be able to attend. Since the children could not attend, the parish eventually decided to have a midnight mass on New Year's Eve and this time no tickets were required and children could attend. The organ was connected to a special speaker

outside and as one waited in line to get into the church, beautiful Christmas music would be heard outside. In those days, people did not complain of church music being played at midnight.

Fr. Cody remained as pastor until January 5, 1937, when he was named bishop of Victoria, British Columbia. Fr. Austin Stanton, a great uncle of current parishioner Mary Stanton, became the next pastor.

The first organist was Mrs. Zimmerman, who was also the Choir director, and she volunteered for 25 years. The choir in the upper loft, consisted of both men and women singers. The school children of Assumption School would sing at the 9 a.m. Children's Mass on Sundays.

**The War Years.** When World War II broke out in 1939, many young men from the parish signed up to fight alongside the Allies in Europe and Asia. Many died in battle, never to return home. To this day there is a plaque in the church with the names of those men from the parish who served in the war.

On May 1, 1940, Fr. Stanton blessed the ground for a new church and rectory at Olmstead Street. Three months later, the cornerstone containing coins and newspapers of the day was solemnly blessed by Archbishop Alexander Vachon. On December 22, 1940 the Archbishop returned to dedicate the new parish church. Fr. Stanton celebrated the first mass on Christmas eve December 24, 1940. The people were so happy to have their own church that it would be filled to capacity. If one didn't arrive ten minutes before mass started one had to stand at the back of the church. It was then the only English-speaking Catholic church in the area. People came from the outlying areas, which in those times were sparsely populated such as "the Quarries" (now the area after the intersection of Montreal Rd and St. Laurent Blvd). It extended to where the National Research Council is today (2022). Without the benefit of buses in those days, transportation was difficult so it was common for parishioners to walk to church. People also came from the Cyrville road area, which in those days was considered an outback.

For the first masses, members of the parish donated new statues and other fixtures for the church, including the communion rail. The statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was donated by Mrs. Margaret Bones. The statues of our Lady of Perpetual help, St. Jude and St. Anthony were donated by the Zimmerman family. The wooden crucifix at the side altar of St. Anthony was donated by Paul Deziel as an act of thanksgiving. The former pipe organ was donated by the Sisters of Notre Dame Convent. The communion rail was donated by Mr. & Mrs. Edward Garvey. The original pulpit was donated by Mr. Richard Manion, who happened to be the Police Chief of Eastview. The gold inscription of the "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus" which adorns the sanctuary was donated by the Fox family. To attend to the altar linens for the daily Masses, the ladies of St. Anne was organized.

At about the time when the parish was planning to open a school. Fr. Stanton was transferred out on January 31, 1941. Assumption parish was by then firmly established, a memorial to his energy and zeal. He was succeeded by Fr. G. O'Gorman who served as pastor for nearly two years.

**The Brennan Years.** In 1942, Fr. J. Edgar Brennan was appointed pastor. After he arrived as parish priest from Richmond, Ontario, he wanted to establish the Catholic Women's League (CWL), as they had it in Richmond and he saw the great work that they did for the parish. At his direction, instead of continuing with the Ladies of St. Anne group, the CWL was organized in May 1943 with its first president Mrs. J. Walter Byrne and Fr. Brennan as its first Spiritual Director. Over the years, CWL became a driving and active force in the parish as it organized and hosted many activities, including many fundraisings that benefited not only the parish but also other causes like the Shepherds of Good Hope, Heart Fund, cancer clinics, children's hospital, Canadian Blood Service, and many others.

CWL would hold teas on Sunday during the summer months and the people came and supported it. Wives of the town council would be asked to pour tea. Women came dressed up with the customary white gloves

on their hands. Food was prepared by the CWL and a fee was charged as one way to raise money for the parish. To commemorate St. Patrick Day, there were formal dinners every March 17th as in those times the schools were closed, it being a religious holiday, and mass would be celebrated in the morning. The ladies provided catered hot turkey dinners, with entertainment supplied by members of the parish in recognition of the many Irish parishioners, such families as the McCarthy family, the McCann family and others. Money raised was donated to the parish.

In the summer, Assumption parish would organize outdoor bazaars with games, such as crown and anchor, bingo, dancing and hot food like hot beans, wieners with buns and hot and cold beverages along with desserts provided by the CWL ladies. People came from all over to attend, as it would be held in the month of August and lights were hung up on posts accompanied by loud music. Raffle tickets would be sold as another way of raising money for the parish. When Assumption School, located on Montreal Road (near Olmstead Street), burned down during the month of March (around 1949), the church hall was converted into a school so that classes were not interrupted from March until the end of June. The Grey Sisters of the Immaculate Conception from Pembroke continued to act as teachers, continuing a service they have been doing at Vanier since 1935. A new school was soon built on Lajoie street, and classes started in September on the new school building.

Rev. Fr. Brennan felt sorry for the nuns as they had to come from their residence on Bronson Avenue by bus to the school during cold winter mornings. In those days the nuns did not wear coats over their habits, even in cold weather, only heavy shawls. Fr. Brennan, after discussing with his Council, decided that the parish would buy the property next to the church. In 1964, the property was torn down and a large convent was soon erected for 20 nuns of the Grey Sisters of the Immaculate Conception along with a private court yard at the back. These nuns not only taught at the school but contributed greatly to the running of the parish by acting as altar servers as well as providing other services. Since Assumption school was located fairly close to the church, the schoolchildren supervised by the nuns attended the Wednesday afternoon devotions to the Mother of Perpetual Help. The nuns also attended the 9 a.m. mass, which was the Children's mass, and the children would be expected to attend as the following day at school the homily would be discussed.

In time, the church had to expand and funds were raised to cover the cost of the proposed renovation. The wing, which was now the Upper Hall, was added along with the Lower Hall. The church was opened to the altar where parishioners could see the pulpit. A sound system was installed for everyone to hear the priest.

The Lower Hall extension was used on Sunday evenings for the youth of the parish to hold seminars and dances. It was a great way for the youth of the parish to mix and to learn Christian values. The pastor's house was also expanded as there were also assistant priests in the residence. During this time, there were three other priests assisting the pastor to tend to the needs of the parish.

When the organ in the upper choir area was in need of repairs, and it was getting harder to find organist who could play that type of organ, it was decided to purchase an electric organ instead which was placed on the ground floor at the right. The confessional box was removed to make room for the organ enabling the choir to sing from the vacated space.

Eventually the diocese expanded and the Lady of Mount Carmel Church was built followed by St. Ignatius parish, which reduced the boundaries of Assumption parish. With the need for the church to extend into the Upper Hall no longer necessary, it was decided that the open area to the altar would be closed off and the Upper Hall would be rented out. This was rented out to a Muslim congregation and, for many years, the Muslims celebrated their services there using a separate private entrance.

With the town continuing to grow, it necessitated expansion in the parish as the need for more Sunday Masses increased. There were five masses on Sunday, starting at 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon mass. Well attended masses during the week was held at 7:30 a.m. and at 8:00 a.m. Devotions to our Mother of Perpetual Help, started by Rev. John O'Neill in the little church in the early 30s, continued and were held every Wednesday evening.

Through the years, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary parish had its own bowling League which existed for several years. There was also a baseball team for the youth in the parish. Under the leadership of Rev. Fr. Robert Bedard, an assistant priest who incidentally in later years formed the Companions of the Cross, a youth group also met at Assumption School on certain week nights for basketball.

In recognition of his loyal service to the Church, Fr. Brennan received the title of Canon of the Archdiocese of Ottawa. Canon Brennan retired in 1972 after 30 years of faithful service in the parish. He was honored by Mayor Roger Crete with a framed Certificate of Merit for his outstanding service to the community.

**The Middle Years.** Fr. John Heffernan took over and was pastor until the next year when he was assigned pastor of St. Martin de Porres at Bells Corners. Fr. Heffernan introduced changes gradually to the Liturgy, following the Second Vatican Council, so that parishioners could more easily adapt to the increased participation by the laity during the mass. He was succeeded by Fr David Corkery in 1973, under whose administration the Parish Council was formed and interior repairs to the church were completed. After three years, he in turn was followed by Fr. Robert Martineau who came from the neighbouring parish of St. Ignatius. It was during Fr. Martineau's time that the parish celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary where Archbishop Joseph-Aurele Plourde of Ottawa was the principal celebrant and homilist during the Thanksgiving Mass offered, with former pastors and assistants concelebrating the mass with him.

After 11 years, Fr. Peter Cody became pastor in 1987. It was Fr. Cody who suggested that the windows of the church be changed to stained glass windows. After he announced this need at a Sunday Mass, the windows were donated and the church windows were transformed into beautiful stained-glass windows. During his tenure, the rectory was renovated with a new parish office, updated plumbing and electrical works. Fr. Cody also presided over the celebration of the church building's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1990, where the cornerstone from 1940 was opened and parishioners' names were added with the coins of that year. Around this time, ladies from the Catholic Women's League (CWL) Council were actively assisting in training altar servers and helping prepare students from the parish for the sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation.

Rev. Fr. Bosco Wong followed Fr. Cody in July 1991 and he brought with him a strong spirit of community, introducing many changes that enriched the lives and fellowship of his parishioners. In December 1991, the Chinese Catholic community became part of the parish. The Parish Mission Statement was articulated in March 1994 as building "a viable Christian Family that all will consider home". The photo directory project was launched in 1994, the renewal of marriage vows was started in 1996, and the practice of anointing the sick and honouring veterans commenced.

The parish was also able to honor nineteen WW II veterans for the first time in November 8, 1998 and this became an annual tradition. By November 2006, sadly only seven remaining veterans were on hand to be honoured. Under Fr. Wong, Assumption parish hosted the Ottawa Archdiocesan Convention with the assistance of its very active CWL chapter members. It was in 1992 that the parish kitchen was renovated, completely paid for by the CWL. It is this same group, through its annual St. Patrick's Dinner and bazaar that raise substantial donations to the parish, that also helped pay for the washroom and the new lighting system in the church. Fr. Wong was eventually transferred out in the year 2000.

**The 2000s.** Fr. Arthur Auckwood took over as acting pastor for three months until the arrival of Fr. Jose Serafin Anaya. When the Muslim community decided to have their own building for worship, they gave up the lease on the Upper Hall and the Chinese community then rented that area for 11 years. It was fortunate that Fr. Anaya, although he was Mexican by birth, was a missionary in China before for many years so that he readily agreed to have their congregation accommodated. They would have their own masses celebrated at 12:00 noon on Sundays with their choir. The annual mass on Holy Saturday would be the only joint celebration with their choir joining Assumption's choir.

It was during Fr. Serafin's time that in 2001 the city of Vanier was amalgamated with the city of Ottawa but this did not alter the geographical boundaries of Assumption. A Knights of Columbus chapter was also established, on the initiative of Wilfred Clermont, with its first president Mr. George Organ. Fr. Serafin encouraged the Breaking Bread project of the CWL as part of the parish's forthcoming 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration. It is this project that provided us with many rich details on early parish history, as many of the early parishioners were still around at this time to give their recollections. Fr. Anaya remained pastor of Assumption parish until July 2005.

Fr. Tim Amyot, O.S.M. was then appointed pastor. His message on the importance of respectful listening and attending to the young people of the parish made quite an impression and led to more activities and participation from the young in the life of the parish. A year later, on September 2006, the Archdiocese replaced him with Fr. Pedro Arana, a Filipino, as pastor. Fr. Arana came to Assumption parish along with his Filipino congregation as the church in which they were celebrating their mass, St. Brigid's, was being closed.

Shortly after Fr. Arana's arrival at Assumption, the Grey Sisters of the Immaculate Conception decided to sell their nearby convent as the need for it no longer existed. The convent then became the home of the Catholic Family Services, which counsel troubled people providing them with various services. It must be noted that years before Fr. Arana came, the children's liturgy group was formed by the Grey Sisters and for many years it was a feature during the 10:30 a.m. Sunday mass. After the nuns left, the parishioners continued this practice for many years.

During Rev. Fr. Pedro Arana's tenure, the children of Assumption School attended mass every Friday morning and the school children provided the choir. This practice continued however they eventually attended only once a month for Mass. At this time, Assumption parish was also offering a Marriage Preparation Course that was being attended by people from other parishes, as it was the only parish in the area providing that service during that time.

Up to the present, the Filipino community has embraced Assumption parish as its preferred church and it has supported and incorporated their religious customs by celebrating its noontime Sunday mass in Tagalog that began with Fr. Arana. He also revived the popular Filipino traditions of the "Pabasa" (chanting the reading of Christ's Passion) in abbreviated form during Holy Week, the "Santacruzán" in honor of the Holy Cross during May and the 9-day "Simbang Gabi" novena preceding Christmas Day. Also during his time, one of the parish rooms became a venue for Alcoholic Anonymous meetings although this was later discontinued.

It was at Fr. Arana's initiative that the San Lorenzo Ruiz Ecclesial community was organized at the parish to attend to the extended religious formation of parishioners. This was in addition to the other parish Christian groups already present at the parish at that time, such as El Shaddai, Couples for Christ, Knights of Columbus, Legion of Mary and Catholic Women's League.

Fr. Arana also initiated the upgrade to the church and rectory heating systems with the installation of two steam boilers, including another boiler at the rectory as part of the renovations required prior to the arrival of the Franciscans. Fr. Arana retired as pastor after 11 years in August 2017. By this time, the Archdiocese had already arranged with the Franciscan Order to serve at the parish and to set up its friary.

Fr. Dominic Lim OFM Conv., a Franciscan, was installed as pastor on August 22, 2017. He continued with the physical improvements in the church with the replacements of the kitchen floor and the main washrooms in the lower hall. Despite the pandemic lockdowns that began in March 2020, a vigorous fundraising for the parish renovation was successfully conducted during his term in preparation for its celebration of its 90<sup>th</sup> Foundation Day Anniversary. Renovations were completed on the Upper and Lower Halls, including the suspended ceilings on the main basement hall, in time for the important event. Archbishop Marcel Dampousse of the Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall concelebrated the Anniversary mass held on August 15, 2021 together with the current and former pastor at the altar. Among the seated parishioners who attended this important milestone was Rodolfo Robles, the Philippine Ambassador to Canada.

With the availability of Zoom technology, Fr. Dominic was able to continue delivering talks online to various groups upon request. Although many parish activities were curtailed during lockdown restrictions arising from the pandemic, celebrating Holy Mass with the 10-person maximum present continued and Fr. Dominic's daily mass at 7:00 p.m. was broadcasted live each day via its Facebook account. This online mass was discontinued only after the Archdiocese dispensation, exempting local Catholics from attending mass in-person, was lifted in mid April 2022.

The Assumption church building is currently the only Franciscan friary in Ottawa. It housed their superior Fr. Jobe Abbass OFM Conv., Fr. Saviour Karamvelil OFM Conv. and Fr. Jeremiah Budau OFM Conv., in addition to the parish pastor. However, Fr. Jeremiah Budau was subsequently called to serve over in Europe and Fr. Varghese Puthenpurackal replaced him. Fr. Saviour Karamvelil OFM Conv. served as pastor of St. Ignatius parish while Fr. Varghese Puthenpurackal served as chaplain for the hospital. In 2021, both Fr. Karamvelil and Fr. Puthenpurackal went back to India. Two new friars came to Assumption: Fr. Maurice Richard OFM Conv. who was appointed Pastor of St. Ignatius the Martyr parish, and Fr. Jeramiah Arguelles OFM Conv. who came in early 2022 and became pastor of St. Peter's parish situated on the other part of town.

After nearly five years of service, including more than two years of countrywide lockdown for the corona virus pandemic, Fr. Dominic was assigned back to the Philippines. On March 19th 2022, Fr. Jobe Abbass took over as interim pastor of the parish. On June 30, 2022, Fr. Francis Victor Mateo OFM Conv. arrived from the Philippines to assume his role as pastor of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary parish.

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PARISH PRIESTS OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY PARISH:

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| 1931 – 1933    | MSGR. WALTER CAVANAGH                     |
| 1933 – 1934    | REV. FR. FRANCIS DAY                      |
| 1934 – 1934    | REV. FR. JOHN O'NEILL                     |
| 1934 – 1938    | REV. FR. JOHN CODY                        |
| 1938 – 1941    | REV. FR. AUSTIN STANTON                   |
| 1941– 1942     | REV. FR. GERALD GORMAN                    |
| 1942 – 1972    | CANON EDGAR BRENNAN                       |
| 1972 – 1973    | REV. FR. JOHN HEFFERNAN                   |
| 1973 – 1976    | REV. FR. DAVID CORKERY                    |
| 1976 – 1987    | REV. FR. ROBERT MARTINEAU                 |
| 1987 – 1990    | REV. FR. REV. PETER CODY                  |
| 1991 – 2000    | REV. FR. BOSCO WONG                       |
| 2000 – 2000    | REV. FR. ARTHUR AUCKWOOD (interim)        |
| 2000 – 2005    | REV. FR. JOSE SERAFIN-ANAYA               |
| 2005 – 2006    | REV. FR. TIMOTHY AMYOT OSM                |
| 2006 – 2017    | REV. FR. PEDRO ARANA                      |
| 2107 – 2022    | REV. FR. DOMINIC LIM, OFM CONV.           |
| 2022 – 2022    | REV. FR. JOBE ABBASS, OFM CONV. (interim) |
| 2022 – present | REV. FR. FRANCIS VICTOR MATEO, OFM CONV.  |

ASSISTANTS PRIESTS WHO SERVED AT THE PARISH:

Rev. Fr. Arthur Cadieux, Rev. Fr. G. Fenton, Rev. Fr Thomas Kiggins, Rev. Fr. John Tompkins, Rev. Fr. James Finn, Rev. Fr. Stephen Thomas, Rev. Fr. Vincent Hogan, Rev. Fr. Francis Brennan, Rev. Fr. Kenneth Dodge, Rev. Fr John Macdonald, Rev. Fr. Gerald Fogarty, Rev. Fr. Lawrence Battle, Rev. Fr. John Devine, Rev. Fr. Maurice Eagan, Rev. Fr. Leo Hickey, Rev. Fr. Robert Bedard, Rev. Fr. Paul Baxter, Rev. Fr. Dale Crampton, Rev. Fr. John Heffernan, Rev. Fr. Daryle Kennedy, Rev. Fr. Donald Touri (Previously ordained at this parish), Rev. Fr. Adore Castillo.

LIST OF DEACONS IN THE PARISH:

Deacon Edward Webster, Deacon Philippe Gosselin, Deacon Rudy de Castro and Deacon Paul Beaudoin.

SOURCES:

- Unpublished chronicle of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary parish, as written by Joan Lepage (accessed June, 2022)
- Catholic Women's League, Breaking Bread: Recipes, Memories and Other Treasures, issued in 2006 during the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish (includes several reminiscences from old parishioners)
- Ottawa Journal, *Aug 19, 1940 (p. 11); Feb 17, 1941 (p. 6); May 7, 1977 (p. 16) cited per <http://www.gloucesterhistory.com>* (retrieved June 8, 2022)
- Church History, vaniemow, blogspot.com (retrieved June 8, 2022)
- Personal recollections of some existing and active parishioners (July 2022)