



Saint Nicholas Chapel  
Staten Island, New York

1923 - 2023

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A History of The Chapel  
of Saint Nicholas of Bari  
in the Parish of  
St. Teresa – Staten Island  
(1923-2023)  
*Celebrating 100 Years*



Babbo Natale, or Father Christmas, as St. Nicholas of Bari, Italy is known today, has many churches named in his honor. These range in size from the Basilica in Bari, where for almost 1000 years the “Preliero Della Santa Manna” is collected from the relic of St. Nicholas, and brought to a Chapel in the church of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy. Indeed, for 921 years the “Miracle of the Manna,” a sweet-smelling myrrh has flown from the relic of St. Nicholas.

## STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK

There is only one Chapel, named for St. Nicholas, champion of the Divinity of Jesus Christ, in the Archdiocese of New York and it's located in the Sunnyside section of Staten Island. It was built in 1923.

In the previous year, 1922, after moving to Staten Island from Manhattan, an Italian immigrant mother of eight, Nicolina Nichetta, saw that many of the Catholic children in Sunnyside were attending a local Protestant Church. There was no Catholic Church in the area.

She went to see Father Riccio, pastor of Mount Carmel Church on Castleton Avenue to tell him about the situation. Father Riccio told her that, if she would hold catechism classes in her home, he would send benches for the children to sit on until the Chapel was built. Nicolina agreed, and about 10 to 12 children began going to catechism class once a week at her home on Seneca Avenue.

When the Chapel was finished, it was named Saint Nicholas in Nicolina's honor. After

Nicolina's death in 1930, her daughters Sadye, Nettie, Jean, Connie, Florence, and Margaret continued to be very active at the Chapel, doing the cleaning, teaching Sunday School, raising funds and starting a choir.

## REV. LOUIS RICCIO

Louis Riccio is a name that is not familiar to many Staten Islanders. However, this remarkable priest is responsible for helping grow the Catholic Church on Staten Island. He was born in Italy on January 8 1882, and came to this country as a boy. He returned to Europe for part of his education but eventually entered St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, New York. He was ordained on December 21, 1907.

Father Riccio was serving at Immaculate Conception on Staten Island when he agreed to assume responsibility for the Italian-speaking Catholics on the North Shore of Staten Island. Working from a rented stable on Clove Road, he eventually started nine Italian-speaking missions between 1910 and 1923, all of which became

independent Staten Island parishes. The three missions this 31-year-old, recently ordained priest, founded on December 25, 1913 became Our Lady of Pity, St. Mary of the Assumption and Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

Father Riccio became the pastor of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and used the parish as his base of operations from which he visited his other missions. Fr. Riccio also founded the missions, turned parishes, of St. Rita, St. Michael, St. Rocco (now known as St. Roch) and St. Nicholas, which eventually became known as the parish of St. Teresa in 1926. He also founded the missions that became the parishes of Christ the King (now defunct) and St. Benedicta (now merged with Our Lady of Mt. Carmel).

In 1961 Pope John XXIII elevated the 79-year-old, Father Riccio to the rank of Monsignor. He passed away in Yonkers on April 7, 1966.

## EARLY PARISHIONERS

A coal stove located within the nave was

St. Nicholas's first source of heat. Each Sunday morning, long before the early Mass began, a 49-year-old Italian immigrant from Avellino, by now a New York City Department of Sanitation worker named Michele Tirelli would fire up the coals.

In 1924, his 10-year-old son, Annibale Alexander (Nebo) Tirelli would serve as an altar boy at Mass, also attended by Michele's wife, Elizabeth and 4 other children, Margaret, Elvira, Rosalie and Ralph. Michele and his family faithfully attended Mass at St. Nicholas until he died, sitting in his favorite chair listening to Italian opera on his radio at 9:45 on a Sunday night, February 10, 1963 at the age of 88 in his home on Ontario Avenue.

His sons and daughters also have since passed away. Michele and Elizabeth's granddaughters, Maryann and her sister Elizabeth were taught religious education by Sister Margaret Mary Quinn co-founder of St. Teresa's food pantry. Religious education was also taught by the Nichetta sisters (Nicolina's daughters) following the 8:30 Mass each Sunday

morning at the Chapel.

Maryann married Joseph Granello at St. Teresa Church on January 25, 1964. The Church was chosen for the wedding because the center aisle of the Chapel was too narrow for 2 people to walk side by side.

## CHAPEL IMPROVEMENTS

Thanks to Capital Campaign Funds and the generosity of the current parishioners of St. Teresa Church and St. Nicholas Chapel, the Chapel was completely restored under the then pastor, Bishop John J. O'Hara. It now has a modern gas-heating system which replaced the 60-year-old oil burner, which replaced the original coal stove. The pump organ was replaced by the Chapel organist, Mr. Philip LaMarca, in the 1950s. A restored digital Allen Organ was played by Mr. LaMarca. In 2010 this restored organ was replaced by an upgraded, theatre quality, organ (Allen Renaissance Digital Organ) which is currently in use.

In 2007 new pews and flooring were

installed and the interior tin ceiling and walls were repaired and repainted. The center aisle is now wide enough for 2 people to walk side by side. In addition, the Chapel roof was recently replaced by the current pastor, Monsignor William Belford.

As a result of the generosity of individual parishioners such as the Forte and Norton families, the statues of the Sacred Heart and Blessed Mother were refinished and the Infant of Prague, with 4 beautifully made dresses in its garderobe, stand in the Chapel. A commissioned carved wooden triptych of the Virgin and Child, by Steliga, also a gift from devoted parishioners, hangs on the heavenly blue wall of the Chapel. Parishioners enter the Chapel through 2 new glass and wooden doors donated in memory of Addolorato Forte by his wife, Giovannina. Over the altar hangs the Cross of San Damiano as does a statue of St. Nicholas blessed at a High Mass on Sunday, January 30, 1949, commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St. Nicholas Chapel.

In memory of her parents, Augustine

(Gussie) Perrone, Frank F. Barretta and Josephine Fodera restored the Stations of the Cross donated to the Chapel by Gussie and Frank on June 20, 1932, to commemorate their wedding day. As were his neighbors, Frank's parents were immigrants from Borgetto, Sicily. They brought with them their devotion to La Pieta, Our Lady of Sorrows.

## BUCOLIC SUNNYSIDE

The Chapel of St. Nicholas is tucked away in the residential Sunnyside community of Northern Blvd. and Labau Avenue in Clove Valley. The valley is surrounded by three hills, Emerson, Grymes, once known as Signal Hill, and Todt aka, Iron Hill. The valley was very much like the small Italian villages of the Mezzogiorno from which the 1920s residents were born and raised.

Staten Island was not their first home in America but the second step in the American dream of owning their own home. The first stop after Ellis Island for most of them was the

congested concrete streets of the Borough of Manhattan in New York City.

Despite Staten Island's consolidation 25 years earlier, in 1898, with the City of Greater New York, as one of its five boroughs, Sunnyside was bucolic. The footpath to Sunday morning Mass involved crossing a freshwater stream fed by an artesian well which still exists today. People from miles around continued to fill jugs with water from the well.

Prior to the population explosion on Staten Island in the 1960s, there were few homes in Sunnyside but in the 1920s there were even fewer homes in the area. So few, that Michele's wife, Elizabeth Tirelli, could open the window on a Sunday afternoon after attending Mass at St. Nicholas and announce to Michele, who was playing bocce more than 3 blocks away, that dinner was ready.

The Staten Island population in 1920 was less than one quarter or 116,531 as opposed to the nearly 500,000 who now call the Island home. Approximately 38% of these islanders today are of Italian descent, according to the US

Census Bureau. This gives Staten Island the largest percentage of Italian-Americans of any County in the United States.

## SAINT TERESA PARISH

Until the Archbishop of New York, Patrick Joseph Cardinal Hayes, incorporated the Parish of St. Teresa and named Father Philip S. Conran its pastor on the Feast Day of St. Joseph, March 19, 1926, St. Nicholas Chapel was owned by the Parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. After the formation of the Parish of St. Teresa, Father Riccio, on November 29, 1926, deeded the property and the Chapel to Father Conran. The main parish Church is located about a half mile from the Chapel.

After the Church was built, the Chapel stood as a Chapel of Ease. Monsignor Conran was known to be found by the faithful on the Chapel roof making repairs. When Monsignor needed help with Masses at the Chapel, he called on the Scalabrini Fathers located nearby on Todt Hill. Marriages and other Sacraments

were not performed at the Chapel. Prior to the incorporation of the Parish of St. Teresa, the sacraments were performed at neighboring parishes such as St. Sylvester and Our Lady of Mount Carmel, St. Benedicta.

To this day, 100 years later, St. Nicholas continues to be a beacon to the faithful.



St. Nicholas Chapel Easter Sunday  
1952



St. Nicholas Chapel Christmas 1956



St. Nicholas Chapel after restoration  
in 2007



***St. Nicholas Chapel***