

St Simon Stock Parish
“An Oasis in the Desert”
By Michael Kissane, O.Carm.

St Simon Stock parish (now St Simon Stock/St Joseph) is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2020. I would like to share with all those who will participate in the activities during this anniversary year some of the history of our wonderful parish.

In early 1918 Cardinal Farley promised the Carmelites a new parish in the Bronx which at the time was the fastest growing section of New York City. Since



the world was still at war (World War I) the offer of a new parish remained only an offer for two reasons. First, building materials were scarce. Second, German submarines continued to prowl the North Atlantic preventing additional Irish Carmelites from coming to America.

A month before the Armistice (November 11, 1918) Cardinal Farley died. The Carmelites feared the promise of a new parish might have died with the Cardinal. However, in

April 1919, Fr John Cogan, O.Carm., the Irish Provincial made a visit to the new Archbishop Patrick Cardinal Hayes who assured him the promise of a parish was still alive. This promise became a reality in March 1920.

The first mass in the new parish which took in the corners of four neighboring parishes; Our Lady of Mercy, St. Nicholas of Tolentine, St. Joseph's and Holy Spirit was celebrated in “a house on the hill” which was located on the Southwest corner of 182nd street and Valentine Ave where the school building presently sits. Rev. William G. O'Farrell, a Carmelite from Ireland who had only been ordained about three years was appointed the first pastor of the new parish. The first mass was celebrated in the house on Palm Sunday - March 28th 1920 with about 200 people attending.

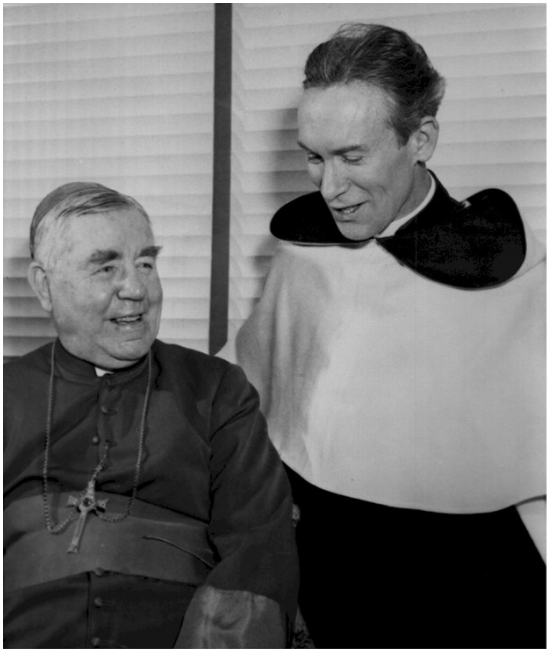
Ground for the basement church was broken on February 1, 1921. Hard rock in the excavation slowed work for a while. The construction of the church however was eventually finished and Archbishop Patrick Hayes presided at the ceremony attending the laying of the cornerstone on the first Sunday of October, 1921.

Father O'Farrell, dressed in the white and brown habit of the Carmelites, led his parishioners in solemn procession. The Most Reverend Hilary M. Doswald, O. Carm., former president of St. Cyril College, Chicago, and future Prior General of the Carmelite Order, preached the sermon.

The area around the new parish was mostly undeveloped except along the Grand Concourse. Gradually residential buildings were built on the streets east and west of the Concourse. The former Third Avenue elevated train and the Jerome Ave 4 train were in existence when the parish began and there were already plans for the D Train along the Grand Concourse which would begin in 1940.

Because of the availability of mass transit and an easy commute to Manhattan the area quickly grew. The buildings on the Grand Concourse around the parish became predominantly Jewish. The buildings off the Concourse quickly were filled with Irish immigrants who were familiar with the Carmelites from Ireland. Many of the priests in the early years who served at St Simon Stock were from Ireland and they brought with them many of the customs and traditions that attracted the Irish immigrants to the parish. Many Irish Societies were formed and flourished in the parish. The Fordham section of the Bronx soon became home to many Irish immigrants because of the availability of land and better housing than the lower east side of Manhattan where the Irish first settled in the wake of the famine in Ireland in the late 19th century.

Fr William Mel Daly, O.Carm., after finishing studies in Rome, was assigned to St Simon Stock in 1930. In 1934 he was appointed pastor and would remain pastor of the parish for 27 years. During that time the convent building was constructed to house the Sisters of Mercy who taught in the Elementary and High School. Carmelites ministered both in the parish and the High School that had been added to the parish school.



During those years there were about 10 Carmelites living in the priory. The Priory was built large enough to house the Carmelites who would both serve in the parish and teach in the High School along with the Sisters of Mercy. When the Priory was built, the back part of the second floor was designed as rooms for the live-in three or four

housekeepers.

St Simon Stock parish quickly grew and remained predominantly Irish until the 1960's. The second generation of Irish often moved out of the parish area to City Island, Coop City and to the North. Puerto Ricans began to come to the Bronx in the 1950's. By 1970, St Simon Stock parish and school went from being predominantly Irish to predominantly Hispanic – mainly Puerto Rican. The church implemented the changes called for in Vatican II. The altar was removed from the back wall and turned around to face the people. The altar rail was removed along with the pipe organ that was along the back wall of the church. Some of the statues were removed and given away to people who wanted them. Rose-

mary Reimer, her husband and son Arthur were given the statue of St Simon Stock which they brought up to their summer home near Lake George, NY and kept it there. Each year mass would be said by a Carmelite in the little chapel they built for the statue on the Feast of St Simon Stock. When Rosemary Reimer passed away in the 1990's her son honored her intention to give the statue back to St Simon Stock parish where it remains today.



During these years the mission of the parish remained the same – to serve the immigrant population. An 11am Spanish mass was introduced in the parish and the Carmelites ministering in the parish learned Spanish. Fr Jerome Bauer, O.Carm. was one of the first Carmelites to regularly celebrate mass in Spanish in the parish. The Puerto Ricans brought with them their own traditions and celebrations such as the devotion to Our

Lady of Providencia. Each year on the feast day of Providencia a special mass and celebration in the gym would take place. Soon, the Spanish masses became the main masses in the parish.

The Carmelites serving at St Simon Stock during these years of transition welcomed the new arrivals and helped the Irish and others who stayed in the neighborhood during this time of transition to understand the culture of the new arrivals. Much emphasis was placed on youth ministry since many of the new arrivals were young families.

With the arrival of the Hispanic population ministering to the rival gangs in the area became a challenge. Fr Vincent Ciorciari, a Carmelite, developed a “street ministry” where he would go to the corners in the parish where the gangs hung out and minister to them. Other Carmelites joined him in this ministry. He also worked with the local 46 precinct



to better understand the gangs and often worked as an intermediary to keep the rival gangs from fighting. From his ministry with the police department the Carmelites were invited to be the “Yankee chaplains”. Each Sunday when there was a home game, a Carmelite from St Simon Stock would go to Yankee Stadium and celebrate mass in the alternate locker room for any stadium workers, the police who organized the mass and some players and coaches. When Billy Martin was manager, he attended the mass regularly. Bob Sheppard, the stadium announcer from 1951-2007 did the readings faithfully at the mass each Sunday. This chaplaincy would continue until the new stadium was built in 2009.

In the 1980’s the Hispanic population became more diversified with the arrival of many immigrants from mainly the Dominican Republic and Central America. By the late 80’s the Dominican population was the largest Hispanic population in the parish. Many of the new arrivals were poor and undocumented.

The Carmelites again welcomed the new arrivals and with the lay staff of the parish ministered to their needs which were more complex. Each of the new

groups that arrived brought their own religious traditions and devotions. The parish would celebrate each year the Marian feastdays of Providencia, Altagracia, Divino Nino, etc.

The Carmelites and Araceli Iturri, a lay minister in the parish for more than 20 years with the assistance of the Archdiocesan office of Immigration helped many members of the parish regularize their immigration status. They also assisted those in financial need and helped many to find meaning-



ful employment.

The 1980’s saw an increase of crime in the neighborhood. By the end of the 80’s the 46 precinct became the precinct with this highest murder rate in the City of New York. This increase in murders was largely caused by the drug epidemic and the arrival of crack cocaine as the drug of choice. The AIDS epidemic also spread in the late 80’s and many young were dying in the area. Because of these realities the Carmelites in the parish were often doing funerals for people who were younger than they were.

Because of the diversity in the Hispanic population of the parish, the Sunday liturgies incorporated a variety of different music styles. At the parish socials one would often find various musical genres such as bachata, merengue and salsa.

In 1986 Cardinal John O’Connor read a Building Commission report on the condition of the buildings at St Simon Stock and noted that much work was put into maintaining the school building and church. However the rectory needed new



windows, a new roof and other major repairs. In an article in Catholic New York he called St Simon Stock parish “An Oasis in the Desert” and visited the parish and school in 1987 spending the whole day going to each classroom and celebrating mass in the evening. He frequently wrote about how the parish provided stability and a place of refuge for many immigrants. Soon after this visit the parish was

informed that the Archdiocese would loan them the money needed for new windows and a new roof for the Priory.

The 1990’s saw the arrival of many Mexicans for the first time in the parish. They brought their own particular culture and religious traditions. The annual Guadalupe celebration quickly became the largest Marian celebration in the parish.

Fr Nelson Belizario, a Carmelite from the Most Pure Heart of Mary province was appointed Pastor of St Simon Stock in 2003. He would remain as pastor until 2019. During his time many of the parochial schools in the Archdiocese, including St Simon Stock became regional schools. Some of the surrounding parishes closed including St Joseph parish which was merged with St Simon Stock. Additional lay and religious staff were hired to continue the good work done at St Simon Stock. Much emphasis was placed on evangelization in the neighborhood.

This brief history of the parish shows that St Simon Stock parish has always been a parish made up of immigrants. The Carmelites over the years adapted their ministry to the new cultures that came. Catholic social teaching is clear that all people have the right to migrate and sustain their lives and the lives of their families. Before God, all people are equal. When a person cannot achieve a meaningful life in his or her own land, that person has a right to move. In this spirit the parish and Carmelites at St. Simon Stock have always been a welcoming community. As the parish celebrates its 100th anniversary we pray that it may always be an “Oasis in the desert” for all those who seek a better life and deeper relationship with Christ.

