A History of St. Therese of Lisieux Church

It is the working of grace which transforms man's human labors into something living and lasting. This gift of grace is visibly present in the history of St. Therese of Lisieux, the Church of the Little Flower, in Montauk, New York - a narrative of effort against discouraging odds and of blessing through Divine Love.

The story of Catholicism in Montauk starts with the pioneering French Canadians from Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, who began coming to the Promised Land, as this part of Long Island was then called. They formed the nucleus of the Catholic faith in the eastern part of the island. Legend has it that an Acadian exile named Francis Martin, who spent some time in East Hampton and tended sheep in Montauk, was actually the first Catholic to have set foot on the peninsula in the 1760's. An interesting connection is that his last name is the same as the family name of St. Therese of Lisieux, patroness of our parish.

As far as we can tell, the first Mass was offered in Montauk at the time of the Spanish-American War, when troops and nursing sisters were stationed at Camp Wycoff, located at the Great Plain near the present tall office building. These military encampments included chaplains who brought the sacraments to Montauk.

Early seasonal visitors to Montauk were Eli Pitts and Tom Joyce who came to the Promised Land, and later to Montauk with their brothers. They were known to have attended Mass on the carrier "Philadelphia" which anchored briefly in Fort Pond Bay. Permanent settlement in Montauk began just before the first World War, when Eli and his brother Ben brought their families here. Gradually others came from Nova Scotia, forming a considerable faith community who struggled to keep their traditional Faith active and living.

Montauk was largely a summer community, and Mass was celebrated by visiting priests in locations as varied as the lobby of the Montauk Manor, and the theatre, which is now the local Post Office. Montauk had the status of a mission church under the auspices of the East Hampton parish of Saint Philomena, now known as Most Holy Trinity. By 1928,the Catholic community in Montauk had grown large enough that two Sunday Masses were offered in the summer, at 6:30 and 8:00 AM, saving the grateful parishioners a trip into East Hampton.

Notable among the priests serving the community were Father Albert Dolan, a Carmelite from Chicago, and the well known New Yorker, Monsignor Chidwick. Monsignor Chidwick was a link with the Spanish American War period, since he had been the chaplain on the "Maine" at the time of its disaster. He was also a friend of Colonel Theodore Roosevelt during his posting in Montauk with his recovering troops. Monsignor Chidwick's friendship with Mr. and Mrs. Walter P. McCaffray was a significant factor in their patronage and support of an independent church building for Montauk.

The years from 1927 to 1930 were a critical time for the growing Catholic community in Montauk, which numbered about sixty in 1928. Encouraged by the support and influence of Monsignor Chidwick, Father Dolan and the McCaffrays, the dream of a Montauk church began to take shape. A committee was formed which included Eli Pitts, the McCaffrays, Leonard McDonald and Edgar Grimes. The search for a piece of land began. Names were gathered for a building fund drive. By 1929, the grand total of $10,000 had been collected, and this fund grew over the following months through the generosity of outsiders and visitors, as well as the support of the struggling and hard-working parishioners. A proposal was made to place a plaque with the names of donors near the statue of St. Therese, but as the list of donors grew, this became impractical. In its place a roster of names was compiled, which included many Montauk Beach Company Associates, among whom were John Brennan, P.J. Reilly and Gilbert Niesse.

A land grant was secured from this same Beach Company through its manager, Parke G. Haynes. Carl Fisher, the famous founder of the Beach Company, made a personal gift of $1,000 to the church fund. In the first week of September 1929, a fund raiser, a Boxing Meet, was held in the tennis stadium at the foot of the Manor Hill. Generous supporters of this event were Mrs. Lyttleton Fox, Mrs. Kenneth O'Brien, A.J. Drexel-Biddle and George LeBoutillier. This fund raising made it possible for building plans to be drawn up. Construction bids were sent out.

Although there is little documentation regarding the clearing and excavation of land, it is believed that the initial work of ground preparation was done in epic fashion, in a single day by a group of volunteers. George Walker

was among these volunteers who were grateful for the steam shovel donated by the Montauk Beach Company. The architects of record were McKenna and Irving of 15 Park Row, NY. The construction firm was D. Martinucci.

The McCaffray family continued to demonstrate their support for and influence on the building project. In November of 1929, Father McCaffray, S.J. of Canada, a brother of Mr. McCaffray who was one of the sponsoring inspirations of the building project, came for a visit and to celebrate Mass for the fifty people in attendance. After the completion of the church, Mrs.McCaffray's brother, Philip Curran, donated a statue of St. Therese to the Church, which replaced an older one.

This time of building was not without its struggles and tensions. Differences of opinions flourished as the parishioners struggled with problems of money, land, materials and maintenance. At times, the issue of becoming an independent parish seemed threatened by these conflicts, but gradually solutions were found and the project continued. The spring of 1930 saw the church walls rise. The English-Tudor style seemed especially appropriate.

The Montauk parish was first known as The Church of the Little Flower, but was later known as St. Therese of Lisieux .The choice of this name for the fledgling parish is attributed to the influence of Father Dolan and Mrs. McCaffray, both of whom had a strong devotion to St. Therese. Father Dolan often shared this devotion in his homilies, expounding on St.Therese's life and its meaning. The completion of the Church coincided with the canonization of St. Therese, and it is said that the choice of St. Therese as the patroness of the Montauk church was fitting because Montauk was the point in America closest to the Saint's native Normandy.

In the summer of 1930, Mass was held in the basement of the new Church, and on that first Sunday Father Kehoe, from East Hampton, summed up the past and future struggles of the new mission Parish, paying tribute to the collective effort and generosity of the parishioners. Father Dolan was singled out for his selfless devotion in the years of his ministry in Montauk.

August 31, 1930 was a big day in Montauk, when the first Mass was celebrated in the Sanctuary of the new Church by Monsignor Chidwick. A musical program was provided by Oscar Adler and the musicians of the Manor orchestra. Mr. Adler, the leader of the orchestra, donated an organ to the Church which was imported from Vienna. The day was the climax of years of anticipation, as well as the beginning of new growth and development.

Church furnishings were still needed, so fund raising efforts continued during this time. The women's group sponsored a "frolic" at the Surf Club, which raised the substantial sum of one thousand dollars. A card party and dance were held at the Manor under the auspices of the Catholic Women's Society. The generosity of the McCaffray family provided many of the church's interior furnishings. The baptismal font was donated by Leo Kane. In parish records during this time, it is a pleasure to note names of families still prominent in the social and religious activities of the parish.

The decade following the completion of the Church saw the varied ministries of Father Bell, Father Crowley and Father Brady. On June 30, 1935, Bishop Molloy officiated at the dedication of the Church of St. Therese of Lisieux. The Reverend John D. Bell celebrated the Mass. Father Kehoe, gratefully remembered for his nurturing of the new parish, was unable to attend and died later that same summer. Others in attendance were Reverend Francis Waters of Sag Harbor, the Reverend Theodore and Reverend Cuthbert C.P. of Jamaica. The church still maintained its status as a mission of the Church of the Most Holy Trinity in East Hampton.

The first child baptized in the new church was Marie McDonald, from a family notable for its relationship to the parish. She was also married from St. Therese. The first marriage ceremony in the new church took place during Father Bell's incumbency in the early 30's. The newly married couple was Violet and Raymond Paon, from one of the several French Canadian families who were the foundation of Catholicism in Montauk. Other "pillars of the church" mentioned in early announcements were the Cooks, the Pospisils, and the Gilmartins. The strong French Canadian heritage of the Montauk community was evidenced by a visit from Reverend Alfred W. Boucher, the pastor of St. Hyacinth in D'Escousse, Nova Scotia.

During the winter months, because of the fewer numbers in attendance and the heating costs, services were held in the church basement. The long-standing hour for Mass was 9:30 AM, and religious instruction for children

was held immediately after Mass. Extensive repairs were necessary in the Spring of 1936 due to damage from heavy rains. By 1936 two summer Masses were held at seven and at nine-thirty. The great hurricane of 1938, devastating to parts of Montauk, mercifully spared the Church substantial damage.

In 1939, an important anniversary was held in Montauk- a gathering of Spanish-American War veterans recalling their encampment at Montauk. Records chronicle the visits by several noteworthy people – Senator David I. Walsh from Massachusetts and Professor of Law Edmund Borgia Butler from Fordham University. This end of Long Island has always exerted a strong attraction to many people, especially those professing devotion to St. Therese of the Little Flower. Her intercession was seen in the development of Montauk's Catholic and community life.

The decade of the forties, the era of the Second World War, brought another chaplaincy to Montauk, that of the Reverend George Murphy, S.J. The basement of the church was used as a USO center, and the parish was contributing in many ways to the war effort and, with the chaplains, sustaining morale and religious awareness. The continuous use of permanent military bases in Montauk and the swelling of year-round residents were important factors in recognizing the need for elevating the Montauk mission to full parish status, with its own resident pastorate.

The conferring of full parish status to St. Therese, a moment of fulfillment and renewed dedication for the parishioners, took place in the Spring of 1950. The first resident pastor , the Reverend Adam L. Weber was appointed on June 30 of that year, and he took up residence in a small house which was later renovated and enlarged to serve as a suitable rectory. Further repairs took place in the 50's – the basement windows had suffered damage from rain and moisture. In 1952 the entire stucco exterior of the building was re-surfaced and painted. The need for a new organ arose and the choir, under the able direction of Mrs. John Craft and Miss Phyllis Wells, sponsored a drive to secure the needed funds. The new Hammond electric organ was first used at the Christmas Mass in 1950.

An outstanding parish event, the first solemn Mass of newly ordained Father Robert Ecker , took place on June 10, 1951. This was an historic moment for all of Montauk, because the Ecker family was well known and well loved by the whole community. Furthermore, Father Ecker was the first young man living in the East Hampton township and indeed the first east of Riverhead to be ordained to the priesthood. It was a testament to his family, to the community and to Catholic development in eastern Long Island. An historic and diverse number of people joined in that day of celebration.

The first Parish mission was held in March of 1952 by the Passionist Fathers and the Dominican Sisters from Water Mill assumed responsibility for the religious education program.

In the fall of 1953, the parish rejoiced when the old steel casement windows were replaced by beautiful stained glass windows. The glass was imported from the Innsbruck Art Glass Company of Austria and the windows were installed by the Sturm Ecclesiastical Art Studio of Yonkers, NY. At this time the Church interior and Sanctuary underwent extensive redecoration by the Old Brothers Church Maintenance Company of Brooklyn. The sanctuary lighting was also modernized at this time.

Parishioners had longed for a church bell to call people to worship. Fund raising efforts fell short, but their prayers were answered in quite a different way. It came to the attention of parishioners that the LIRR was removing steam engines (and their bells) from use, and they petitioned the management to donate a bell to the parish. Mr. Goodfellow, a LIRR general manager responded, "Such faith and hope shall not be denied. You shall have a bell with a 25-year history to match that of your church." Parishioners Mr. and Mrs.Edward Koza and their children drove to Jamaica to pick up the refurbished bell, which was hung in front of the church for all to see and hear. Father Weber said, " I knew someday Montauk would have a church bell. It shall guide the fishermen to their haven."

In 1955, Father Jeremiah McLaughlin became the second pastor.

By 1957, the Diocese of Brooklyn, which comprised all of Brooklyn, Queens, Nassau and Suffolk Counties had become large enough for it to be divided. The Counties of Nassau and Suffolk formed the new Diocese of Rockville Centre. Father John J. Carew came to St. Therese in 1957, and it was he who was convinced of the need for a parish

Catholic school for the children of St. Therese. The school was built and the Sisters of St. Dominic of Amityville came to Montauk to live and to staff the school. These sisters, Sr. Rita, Sr. Elizabeth and Sr. Jean are still remembered with great fondness by the parishioners who knew them.

In 1961, Father Carew was followed by Father William White. Always with a smile and a great musician, Father White cared lovingly for his flock in Montauk and was greatly loved in return. From 1967 until 1976, three pastors came to Montauk, each staying for a short three years: Father Roland Brodeur (1967-1970), Father Raymond Tortora (1970-1973) who, during his brief stay, remodeled the interior of St. Therese church, and Father Martin Reidy (1973-1976). While three pastors served St. Therese in those nine years, Father John Traynor would, himself, come in 1976 to serve St. Therese for a full nine years until 1985.

Coming to St. Therese to relieve Father Traynor was Father Raymond Nugent, who served faithfully for twelve years (1985-1997) In 1995 the parishioners came across the street and established a temporary sanctuary in the school building, until the parish's future plans could be decided. During these difficult years, Father Nugent continued to serve until 1997.

It was also during the years of the mid 90's that, through the efforts of Bishop John McGann, the Vincentian priests began to serve the needs of the Latino community on the East End's North and South Forks. First Father Manuel Quesdada and then Father Gregory Semeniuck, C.M. were responsible for our people here in Montauk.

Following Father Nugent came Father William Singleton, not as pastor, but as temporary Administrator until a new pastor could be found. This new pastor , Msgr. John C. Nosser, came to serve the people of St. Therese. He too ministered with great care for the people of Montauk. However, his stay was all too brief.

Again, while seeking a new pastor for St. Therese, Bishop McGann asked Father Singleton to be the temporary Administrator. This he did dutifully for several months, until Msgr. Michael Manzelli and Father James Miller came to relieve him. A lay committee, comprised of Mr. Jack Graham, Mr. John Willenborg, and Mr. Paul Monte was asked to assist during this time of administratorship. During this period (1997-1999), it must be noted that a longtime resident of Montauk, Father Ronald Ciaravolo, came to the aid of each and every Administrator. It was he who made sure that Mass would be celebrated during the week whenever any of the Administrators could not be here. Father Ron continues to be an important and beloved part of St. Therese's roster of spiritual fathers.

In June of 1999, Father Peter Libasci came to the pastorate of St. Therese. The subject of the church building project was again approached. The parish Building Committee, then comprised of Mr. Thomas Comack, Mr. Kenneth Jacob, Mr. David McMahon, Mr. Jay Rigano, Mr. James Grimes, Mrs. Rita Gosman, Mrs. Maureen Murphy, and Mrs. Phyllis Lomitola, renewed its efforts.

Ultimately, permission to build the new church was granted by Bishop James T. McHugh, who succeeded the late Bishop McGann. Suffering from an already serious form of cancer, Bishop McHugh died the following December. His successor, Most Reverend William F. Murphy, the fourth Bishop of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, saw the project through to its completion and eagerly looked forward to the day of dedication.

The firm of J. Petrocelli Construction Co., Inc. of Ronkonkoma, NY accepted the contract for building the new church. Originally conceived and begun by the local team of Zwirko, Ortmann and Issing, the project was carried out and completed by the architectural firm of DCAK (Denker, Cackovic,Aitchison, Khomut) Inc., of Nyack, NY.

Funds were raised through the dedicated and tireless efforts of a committee of parish volunteers headed by Mr. Tom Bogdan. Perhaps one of the most successful fundraising campaigns ever enjoyed by a parish of our size, the campaign, begun on Memorial Day of 2000 and completed on Columbus Day of that same year, raised nearly 5 million dollars. The success of this effort is a testament to our fundraising leadership, and all who believed in this project and the goodness of our patroness, St. Therese. The enormous task of bookkeeping and maintaining active correspondence was handled by parish bookkeeper Madeline Boddy and Mrs. Virginia-Galletta-Stevens, a parish volunteer.

Mr. Donald Bostrom was a driving force in coordinating the restoration of the original stained glass windows and the selection of additional new stained glass that the new, much larger church required. Mr. Paul Coulaz of Durhan Studios in West Hempstead, NY, had kept the original windows in storage, at no cost to the parish, since 1995. Now restored and installed by this master craftsman, they have come back home.

Msgr. Libasci's loving stewardship during the building project kept the parish focussed on its goal, and inspired unprecedented loyalty and unity in our parish. The parishioners of St. Therese and, indeed, the whole community of Montauk, are forever grateful to him.

Now, in this Dedication Journal, you may see the generous donors and benefactors, the equally generous and eager volunteers, and many, many others who have longed to see this day. They are now joined to the ever lengthening historical record of this parish that was begun so long ago by a small community who, when they settled here, strove to keep their Faith alive.

MEMORABLE FIRSTS
ST. THERESE
(LITTLE FLOWER)

1930's First Child Baptized
Marie McDonald

1930's First Couple Married
Violet & Raymond Paon

1951 First Mass of
Rev. Robert Ecker

Monsignor Ecker was the first priestly vocation from
St. Therese