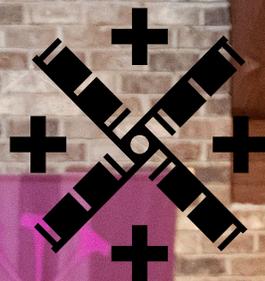


# Archways



## ALTAR SERVERS

*Leading Us Toward Christ Through Humble Devotion*

### *Parent/Child*

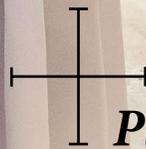
We Care for One Another in Christ

### *Venerable Félix Varela*

His Saintly Light Still Shines in New York

### *Everybody Listen!*

A Report From the Synod 2021 - 2023 Listening Sessions



**Plus:**

What Is Pentecost?

Why Do We Use Incense at Mass?

Upgrades at the Sheen Center

The Return of CYO Basketball

Focusing on Stewardship in the Cardinal's Annual Appeal



# GIFTED BY OUR LORD

**Y**ou are all familiar, I'm sure, with the term *re-gifting*. It's what you call it when someone gives you a present that you don't want or need, so you wrap it back up and give it to someone else. Many people look down on this practice.

But when it comes to God's gifts, the equation changes completely. Because we're not meant to keep God's gifts for ourselves. The Lord is delighted when we re-gift them.

Consider the gifts He gives us in spring. Stepping outside, we feel the warmth of sunshine. We see flowering gardens and trees. We hear birds singing and children laughing. These are all gifts from God, and there's no way for us to keep them for ourselves.

The same is true of our God-given talents and our material wealth. We are meant to share these things with others.

In spring, when we see new growth bursting forth everywhere, we are reminded of the greatest gifts of all: life itself and the love of our Creator. On Easter, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We are reminded that He walked among us and gave His own

earthly life so that we might live forever in Heaven.

The Spring 2022 issue of *Archways* is filled with examples of God's gifts. Our lead feature, "*Parent/Child*," celebrates the lives of our children and their parents. Parenting is a joyful yet challenging mission, critically important in our time, as children grow up in the midst of sinful and destructive influences. The programs offered by ministries of the Archdiocese of New York and our 288 parishes help our families accentuate their joys and ease their struggles.

Another feature story, "*In His Service*," brings you portraits and voices of devoted young men and women who serve in parishes of the archdiocese each Sunday as altar servers.

The lives of saints and holy men and women are gifts to all of us, especially to those touched directly by their works. In New York, we can be grateful that *Venerable Félix Varela* landed in New York City in 1823 and blessed our region with his intellect, his energy, and his shining example of selfless Christian charity for nearly three decades. Read about his life [here](#).

Elsewhere in the issue, you'll find a report from the *listening sessions of the Synod on Synodality*; clear explanations of *the meaning of Pentecost and the use of incense during Mass*; a look at the *history and benefits of the Cardinal's Annual Stewardship Appeal*; and *updates from the Sheen Center for Thought & Culture and the Catholic Youth Organization*.

As we thank the Lord for his innumerable gifts, we also remain aware of the human pain in our region and around the world. While the pandemic has largely eased in New York, we cannot forget the many here and abroad who died or lost loved ones, and those still suffering the economic impact. Nor can we turn our backs on the brutal humanitarian tragedy unfolding in Ukraine and other war-torn parts of the world. At times like these, we must take stock of our own gifts from God – our time, talent, and treasure – and share as much as we can to help people who are suffering.

Because, in the end, that is what God's gifts are for: re-gifting.

A blessed Easter to you all.

With prayerful best wishes, I am,

+ *Tim. Card. Dolan*

Timothy Michael Cardinal Dolan  
Archbishop of New York

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## Archways ❖

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## ASK A PRIEST

**What is Pentecost?**

**On June 5, Catholics will celebrate Pentecost. In preparation, Archways asked Fr. Ryan Muldoon to tell us about the significance of the day.**

Fifty days after Jesus' Resurrection on Easter Sunday, and 10 days after Ascension Thursday marks His ascent into Heaven, the Church celebrates Pentecost. Sometimes referred to as the birthday of the Church, Pentecost marks the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and the Church, as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles:

*When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, [the apostles] were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.*

– Acts 2:1-4

It was the Feast of Weeks for the Jewish people, and we hear in Acts that there were “devout Jews from every nation” in Jerusalem. This was one of three annual Jewish pilgrimage festivals, when Jews traveled to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in the temple. The Feast of Weeks, called Shavuot in Hebrew, came to be known by its Greek name, *Pentecost*, meaning “50th.” In the Book of Deuteronomy (16:9-10), God commands the Jewish people to keep sacred the seven weeks after Passover. After those 49 days, the 50th day – Pentecost – was to be a day



*Pentecostés (1615-1620),  
by Juan Bautista Maíno.*

of celebration. Similarly, Pentecost is celebrated by Christians 50 days after the solemnity of Jesus' Resurrection.

The Jewish Feast of Weeks occurred in the spring in Jerusalem, and during the festival, the first fruits of the year's grain harvest would be offered to God in the temple. Jewish tradition connects Pentecost with the day that God gave the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai; God's presence was said to have descended upon Mount Sinai in the form of fire (Exodus 19). Jewish tradition also holds that, when God gave the Law to Moses, all the Jews assembled heard the Law in their own native language.

Likewise, when the Holy Spirit descended, Acts tells us that all those gathered heard the apostles speaking to them in their own native language. As the Preface at Mass on Pentecost Sunday recalls, the Holy Spirit, “as the Church came to birth, opened to all peoples the knowledge of God and brought together

the many languages of the earth in profession of the one faith.”

When God came upon Mount Sinai under the appearance of fire, he made the Jews one community, one nation, with the giving of the Law. Similarly, at the Christian Pentecost, the presence of God – the Holy Spirit – also comes down in tongues of flame that come to rest on the heads of the apostles. When God's presence comes to earth, a new community is born: the Christian Church. Just as God promised at Mount Sinai to remain with the Jewish people, so the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost ensures the Spirit's continual presence in the life of the Church and her members.

*Rev. Ryan A. Muldoon, STL  
Parochial Vicar*

*St. Patrick's Church, Yorktown Heights  
Adjunct Professor  
St. Joseph's Seminary, Yonkers*



Cardinal Dolan “imposes” incense into the thurible at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

**When and why do we burn incense at Mass?**

The veneration of God and sacred things in the context of the liturgy is an ancient practice. “Take sweet spices ... and make an incense blended as by the perfumer,” God instructed Moses in Exodus (30:34-38). “Put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you; it shall be for you most holy.”

In the Catholic Church today, the use of incense adds to the solemnity of the Mass. The sweet-smelling plumes ascending from the *thurible* (the vessel in which incense is burned) point to the transcendent nature of the liturgy.

Church practice permits the use of incense at several points during Sunday Masses, as well as on solemnities and sanctoral feast days. Before the start of the Mass, if incense is to be used, the priest who is celebrating the Mass – referred to as the celebrant – “imposes” incense into the thurible and blesses it. A server known as the *thurifer* may then carry the thurible at the head of the entrance procession. Upon arriving at the altar, the priest

may proceed to “incense” the altar, swinging the thurible first toward the altar cross, then around the altar itself.

Subsequently, during the Liturgy of the Word, there may be a Gospel procession. When the Alleluia is sung, the thurifer presents the thurible to the celebrant, who may impose and bless more incense. Then the thurifer, flanked by acolytes holding candles, leads the deacon to the *ambo*, or pulpit. Before proclaiming the Gospel's text, the deacon swings the thurible toward the *Evangelarium* (the Book of the Gospels).

There are two more times in the Mass when incense is commonly used. The first comes at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, following the presentation of the gifts, when the celebrant may incense the offerings, the cross, and the altar, after which the deacon incenses the celebrant and the congregation. Finally, during the *Sanctus* (or Holy, Holy, Holy), there may be a procession of the acolytes and thurifer to the step of the sanctuary, where they will kneel for the

Eucharistic Prayer. At the *Elevations*, when the celebrant raises the consecrated host and chalice, the thurifer may swing the thurible toward the Eucharist as the bells are rung.

At funeral Masses, incense is employed one additional time. During the final commendation, as the cantor chants the *In paradisum*, the celebrant takes the thurible and incenses the casket in which the remains of the deceased lie.

When we attend Mass, we escape the mundane, if but for a brief time, and enter into the divine, worshipping Almighty God with the choirs of angels and saints. With the clouds of incense, we send up prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and supplication for ourselves and the souls of the faithful departed. As the Psalmist cries out (Psalms 141:2), “Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!”

*Fr. Michael Connolly, Parochial Vicar  
St. Martin de Porres, Poughkeepsie*



A March 12 listening session at Corpus Christi Church in northern Manhattan.



St. Joseph's Church, Middletown.



Sharing with a smile at the Orange County listening session in Middletown.



Time for Communion at morning Mass before the listening session at St. Joseph's.

## SYNOD 2021 - 2023

# A TIME FOR LISTENING

In October 2021, Pope Francis opened the door to a new process for the Catholic faithful when he announced the opening of Synod 2021 - 2023. He invited all to engage in *synodality* – a process of “journeying together” in ongoing dialogue and discernment – to help Church leaders in their planning. As part of the synod plan, there was to be a listening phase (formally called the Diocesan Phase) – now ongoing – during which Catholics and non-Catholics around the world would share their thoughts and ideas about the Church.

Since March 12, more than a thousand lay people from around the Archdiocese of New York – joined by priests, bishops, deacons, and religious sisters and brothers – have gathered at “listening sessions” to let Pope Francis know their ideas and feelings. Regional

sessions have taken place in parish halls, gymnasiums, and church basements at 12 locations across 10 counties. For the participants, gathered around tables in small groups, it has been an experience of being listened to by their Church. At each table, a scribe has created a record of the comments made. These records will be compiled and make their way by a series of steps to Rome for the Synod of Bishops in October 2023.

At the North Manhattan session, held at Corpus Christi parish on a rainy, snowy Saturday morning, Sr. Joan Curtin, CND, Vicar for Religious in the Archdiocese of New York, served as a small group facilitator. The listening session began with a Mass followed by a prayer to the Holy Spirit to guide the participants.

At her table, Sr. Curtin led a culturally diverse group whose ages

ranged from the 30s to the 80s. “They came to this session because they love the Church and want it to grow and flourish,” she said. “They came despite the inclement weather. They were happy to pray together at Mass, to enjoy a light breakfast, and then to enter into the process. I was truly delighted by the openness of each to listen and share.”

At St. Joseph Parish in Middletown, there was a similar air of openness and careful attention to one another’s ideas. Facilitators at both venues remarked on what Sr. Immaculata Ndewitso Andrea called participants’ “keenness of listening to one another as they shared.” As a byproduct of a process designed to let the thoughts and experiences of the faithful be heard by the Church, people were paying close attention to their neighbors.

At one table, facilitator Patricia Davies noted, “People were very respectful of the process and one another. We represented three different parishes. Each person shared and no one took over the discussion. . . . I’m still inspired and savoring the graces of sharing with humility and respect. There is cause for hope when we can listen and love one another and not agree.” In a time of cultural polarization, this experience of respectful, loving disagreement is a rare and joyful one.

The discussion themes reported by facilitators were as diverse as the attendees, ranging from a desire for more singing in Mass or more opportunities for Eucharistic adoration to concerns about homelessness and immigration or equal opportunities for all the faithful to play a meaningful role in their parishes.

The themes that emerge from the listening sessions are critically important, as they will be considered by the assembly of Bishops; but in this synod,

the process itself is equally meaningful. “What we hope for – what the Holy Father hopes for, is that it improves the process of listening in the church,” says Fr. Brian McWeeney, director of Ecclesial Ministries and Ethnic Apostolates for the archdiocese, who was tasked by synod leaders to help ensure that marginalized groups would be included in New York’s listening phase. As the listening sessions unfolded, he took steps (along with Tom Dobbins and Fr. Eric Cruz of Catholic Charities and Fr. John Anderson of ArchCare) to bring immigrants, homeless people, the elderly, and other “unheard” groups into the conversations.

“The hope is that people will come out saying, ‘I was listened to,’” Fr. McWeeney says. “And having had that experience, they might become stronger in their faith. They might be more open to listening to the Church and also to its people.”

If the process works, listening sessions might become standard practice

in the Church. According to facilitators, many participants of the recent sessions would favor the notion. “Everyone at our table wanted more opportunities to share like this,” Davies says. This would mark a great success for Pope Francis’s idea of a “synodal Church.”

“Once people started participating, they quickly saw the purpose of the process: for our Church to become a better listener to the Holy Spirit and each other,” says Elizabeth Guevara de Gonzalez, Director of Adult Faith Formation, who has coordinated the synod process for the Archdiocese of New York. “It has been a great reminder of the power of the Holy Spirit when we are gathered. He makes a difference by helping us to listen to one another in love.” ✠

For those unable to attend an in-person listening session, there will be a virtual session on May 4. For more information and to register, go to [archny.org/onlineession](http://archny.org/onlineession) (English) or [archny.org/sesioneescuchavirtual](http://archny.org/sesioneescuchavirtual) (Spanish).

## GIVING TOGETHER

## ENDURING APPEAL

These days, the word *stewardship* is not used very often. Merriam-Webster defines it as “the office, duties, and obligations of a steward,” and, somewhat more helpfully, as “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care.”

So, if a steward takes care of something that is not the steward’s property, why is the word *stewardship* sitting in the middle of the *Cardinal’s Annual Stewardship Appeal*? Isn’t the Church asking us to sacrifice something that is our property – namely, our money?

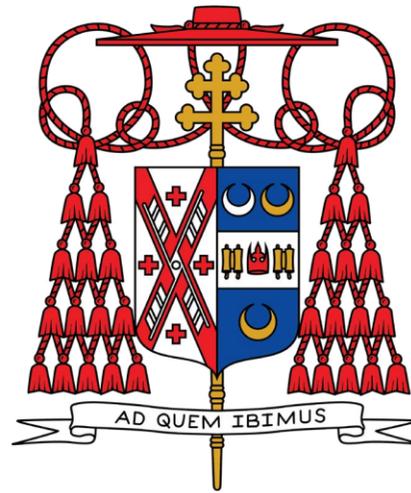
“For me, stewardship is a covenant with God, the giver,” explains Fr. Peter Mushi, pastor of St. Cecilia and Holy Agony Church in upper Manhattan. “In the covenant relationship, I will manage His gifts as a good steward. It is about the gifts. All is from God and all goes back to God.”

In other words, everything we have is a gift from God. Our job is to manage His gifts with care. We must each *steward* what has been entrusted to us, and repay God by giving to others.

“Broadly speaking, the biblical foundation of stewardship is prayer, service, and alms-giving. The financial piece – alms-giving – is just one element, but it’s an important one,” says Juliette Picciano, director of the Cardinal’s Appeal. “We think of the appeal as part of a person’s broader commitment to the Church. A person’s first financial commitment should always be to their parish – but we do belong to the universal Church. The appeal supports the broader mission of the Church in New York.”

The needs served by the Cardinal’s Appeal are vast and wide-ranging,

The overall fundraising goal for 2022 is \$21 million, and contributions are directed to five main areas. The first of these is the **support of financially vulnerable parishes**, which will account for 48% of spending. “Many of our parishes cannot meet their operating budget on their own through the offertory,” Picciano explains, “especially in places that are economically



Cardinal Timothy Dolan’s ecclesial coat of arms bears the motto, “Lord, to whom shall we go?” – the theme for the Cardinal’s Annual Stewardship Appeal for 2022.

disadvantaged. We have to provide the support that those places need.”

The second main area of spending is **charitable outreach and pastoral support** (28%), which covers archdiocesan ministries like Catholic Charities and ArchCare, as well as offices like Family Life, Respect Life, Youth Faith Formation, Black Ministry, Hispanic Ministry, and others that support the parishes and the faithful in our region. This translates into meals, shelter, and other help for the poor and marginalized, as well as programs like marriage preparation, parenting help, counseling, and other services. “Because the archdiocese is so large, it’s hard sometimes to articulate how the appeal affects individuals,” Picciano says. “But when you drill down to see

how people’s lives are being touched, it’s very real.”

The third focus area (14%) covers **evangelization, communication, and Catholic education**, supporting Catholic schools and the many ways the archdiocese gets the word out about Jesus and the Church. Finally, **formation of new parish priests**, principally through the facilities at St. Joseph’s Seminary in Yonkers, and **care for retired parish priests** round out the allocations at 5% each.

The archdiocesan appeal has evolved significantly since its inception in the mid-20th century, both in its mission and its methods. Fr. Peter Madori, now administrator at St. Joseph in Wurtsville, recalls that donations were still being collected door to door in the late 1960s, when the annual fundraiser was called the Catholic Charities Appeal and supported a narrower set of programs. By the time the newly named Cardinal’s Annual Stewardship Appeal was officially launched in 1979, a new technology, the phone-a-thon, emerged and led to increased giving. It didn’t last. By the early 2000s, caller ID and voice mail had made phone-a-thons obsolete. Mailings and in-pew envelopes became the norm, until Internet giving started catching on in the past couple of years.

While the technology has changed, the fundamental approach has remained steady for nearly two millennia. “This way of giving, outside of your immediate local community, has been a part of the practice of our faith since its beginning,” Picciano observes. “St. Paul went around talking to various communities, taking up collections to help other places. They gave because St. Paul was asking them to, and because they trusted him that there was a need.”

“It is a mission to go beyond the self and share with others our gifts of time, talent, and treasure,” Fr. Mushi says. “This mission of sharing becomes a way of life.” ✱

For more information or to contribute, visit [cardinalsappeal.org](http://cardinalsappeal.org).

Photo by Matthew Carasella (Sheen Center)



The play’s the thing. ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: CYO trophy time at Our Lady Star of the Sea, Staten Island; basketball action at St. Anthony, Yonkers; on stage at the Frank Shiner Theater (left to right): Sheen Center Executive Director Bill Biddle, Msgr. Joseph LaMorte, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, and Frank and Suzanne Shiner.

## NEWSFEED

## STAGING A COMEBACK

The future is looking bright at the **Sheen Center for Thought & Culture**. Last fall, after 18 months of virtual programming, the archdiocesan arts hub on Bleecker Street reopened with a nearly full schedule of in-person performances, lectures, and gallery shows. Now it has announced the renaming of two key spaces, and plans a robust season of music, theater, and art for 2022–23.

On February 28, Cardinal Timothy Dolan delivered an inaugural blessing for the newly named Frank Shiner Theater (formerly the Black Box Theater), an 80-seat venue for theater and music performance with versatile seating and a new state-of-the-art lighting system. And on April 5, the Gallery at the Sheen Center was rechristened the Janet Hennesy Dilenschneider Art Gallery. The generosity of the donors not only funded makeovers for the gallery and the theater, but will also underwrite a secure future for the center as a showcase for vibrant cultural offerings aligned with Catholic values. Visit [sheencenter.org](http://sheencenter.org).

## CYO REBOUNDS

In March 2020, during the first round of the annual archdiocesan basketball championship, **Catholic Youth Organization** director Seth Peloso ruefully announced a postponement. “I shared with the community that we would pause the season for two weeks,” he recalls. “Then the world stopped.”

For almost two years, there was no CYO basketball in the Archdiocese of New York. On February 5, 2022, it officially resumed.

Overall participation is down compared to pre-pandemic levels. “Still, we have over 900 teams participating from seven counties,” Peloso says. It’s a shortened season, but families are glad to be back in the gym amid the din of bouncing basketballs, referees’ whistles, and parents’ cheers.

In April, CYO track and field, spring basketball, and baseball will begin practices. Pre-pandemic levels of participation are anticipated. Visit [CYONY.org](http://CYONY.org).

## SPRING BLOSSOMING

The activities at the Sheen Center and CYO are two signs among many that our Catholic communities are reemerging after social distancing. Ministries throughout the archdiocese are relaunching programs that went dormant (or virtual) during the pandemic. Of note:

- On April 23, **New York Catholic Youth Day**, the event of the year for teenage Catholics, will be held in person for the first time since 2019. Visit [archny.org/ministries-and-offices/youth-faith-formation/oymny/events/nycyd](http://archny.org/ministries-and-offices/youth-faith-formation/oymny/events/nycyd).
- The **Summer Sacred Music Program** at St. Joseph’s Seminary will also be held in person this year, offering classes suited to a wide range of students. Visit [dunwoodie.edu/dunwoodie-music-classes](http://dunwoodie.edu/dunwoodie-music-classes).
- The **Young Adult Outreach** office continues to expand its dynamic menu of in-person events throughout the archdiocese. Visit [catholicnyc.com](http://catholicnyc.com). ✱

# PARENT / CHILD

CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER IN CHRIST



Madeline Sequinot, a lector at St. Anthony, Yonkers, with her son Lucas, an altar server. LEFT, FROM TOP: A baptism at Holy Name of Jesus, Valhalla; a growing Catholic family enjoys the gifts of springtime.

*“Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from him.” – Psalm 127:3*

**O**f all the gifts God gives us, none is more precious than the most basic: life. Each of us receives it at our conception and birth. We receive it again with each new birth that follows ours, with each new life added to the human community.

For those blessed to be parents, there is no deeper gift than their own children, and there is no calling more profound than to love and nurture them, to keep them safe and guide their development, to seek to understand their individuality and help them find a righteous path in life.

As any parent can tell you, raising kids is no walk in the park. Life gets messy. Things can go wrong: family finances, medical conditions, learning disabilities, bad habits, bad behavior, flaring tempers, inappropriate language . . . At times, mothers and fathers need a little help – or a lot – as they steer their young ones away from pitfalls and dangers toward a life of faith and joy.

The Archdiocese of New York is dedicated to assisting Catholic parents, both through support of parish-based ministries and in programs offered directly by archdiocesan ministry offices. The **Family**

**Life Office** provides parents with practical and spiritual information, training, and tools for taking care of themselves and their children. The **Office of Youth Faith Formation** educates children in the faith and affords opportunities to teens for Christian social activities and volunteering. The **Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of New York** provide a high-quality education in which all instruction is aligned with Catholic values. And **Catholic Charities** helps teens through mental health and substance abuse services, as well as athletic programs sponsored by the **Catholic Youth Organization**.

All of these archdiocesan efforts are in support of and collaboration with our parishes. There, young people receive the sacraments and are invited to participate in prayer, fellowship, and community volunteer projects, and parents can turn to one another for mutual support. In this way, we all witness the love and mercy of Jesus Christ for our children, our parents, and our neighbors.

Read on for more information and links to archdiocesan programs in support of parents and children of all ages.

## GETTING STARTED

It all starts with love. A husband and wife are joined in marriage, and out of their love for one another a child is born. A family is formed. Love multiplies.

From the day a Catholic couple decides to get married, the Church is ready to support them. This support will last for the rest of the couple's lives, and it begins with **marriage preparation**. In the Archdiocese of New York, the Family Life Office has a blended program that includes in-person and virtual Pre-Cana days. The office also partners with pastors and parishes to administer relationship inventories that help couples learn to thrive together emotionally, spiritually, and even financially. "While the bride and groom are preoccupied with preparing for a wedding, we help them prepare for a lifetime together," says Family Life director Dr. Kathleen Wither. (For more detail about programs in the archdiocese, see "Joined in Spirit," *Archways Fall 2021*.)

Long after the honeymoon, God stays with the bride and groom – and so does the Church. The **Family Life Office** helps couples plan their pregnancies through fertility awareness-based methods (FABM) of **natural family planning**. New technology makes this process more precise than ever using wearable sensors, artificial intelligence algorithms, and constant upgrades to allow for the latest findings of reproductive science. With proper training, using the FEMM app and others like it, husbands and wives can better predict the days when the likelihood of getting pregnant is highest. While nothing can diminish the divine mystery of conception, natural family planning gives prospective parents the opportunity to prepare for receiving their baby into the world intentionally.

Help is also available for couples who are having problems with infertility or have had multiple miscarriages. **Catholic Health's Gianna Center of New York City**, a medical practice that has served as a resource for the Archdiocese of New York since 2009, specializes in helping couples conceive and carry babies to term using methods in keeping with Catholic doctrine. Since opening, the center has helped couples bring more than 1,500 babies into the world. "Families keep in touch with us for years with updates on their children," says Dr. Anne Nolte, the center's founder and director. "We are blessed to be able to do this work." To contact the Gianna Center, visit [chsl.org/gianna-center](http://chsl.org/gianna-center) or call 212-481-1219.

Each child's story is unique, as is the journey of each family. All are equally loved by God. **Couples who choose to adopt** can find referrals and counseling through the Respect Life Office of the Archdiocese of New York. The same office, administered by the Sisters of Life, provides loving support to **single mothers**, whether they choose to parent their babies or entrust them to adoptive families. From the moment of conception through childbirth and beyond, ministries throughout the archdiocese can help women get free preg-



Surrounded by love, at Holy Name of Jesus, Valhalla.

nancy tests, counseling, material and emotional support, medical care, educational programs, housing referrals, and more. Women from any location can be served as part of the Walking With Moms in Need initiative. The archdiocese also offers support for couples who receive an adverse prenatal diagnosis for their unborn child, providing referrals to life-affirming medical care and, if necessary, hospice care for newborn children with life-limiting conditions.

## LEARNING TO WALK

For new parents, there seems a never-ending series of things to learn: how to hold, feed, soothe, and swaddle the new family member, how to change a diaper and lay a baby safely and gently down to sleep. Amid this, Catholic parents must not neglect the most important event of their child's life: **baptism**.

Baptism opens the door for eternal life in Heaven with our Creator. It also welcomes a new Catholic into the Church. The sacrament begins a baby's life as a member of the parish community, and starts the child down the road toward other sacraments that will mark significant milestones in life: reconciliation, first Communion, confirmation. It also brings into the baby's life two important people: the godparents, who vow to help the parents guide their child in the faith.

On the earthly side, the Family Life Office offers ongoing support in the many practical and emotional duties of new parents. One such program, from Fr. Flanagan's Boystown, is called **Common Sense Parenting**. This series of six weekly workshops was designed to take place locally, in the parishes. It teaches parents how to stay calm in moments of anxiety, how to use consequences instead of punishment to shape behavior, and other important skills. There are two versions of the program based on the ages of the children: one for parents of toddlers and preschoolers (ages 0-6), the other for parents of school-age children (ages 6-16).

Since the onset of Covid-19, Common Sense Parenting has pivoted to a virtual format through Zoom. Both classes are being offered for spring 2022. For more information, visit [archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life/parenting/parents](http://archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life/parenting/parents), and look under "Parenting Programs."

Another mainstay of the archdiocesan services for parents of young children, **ParentCare**, has been on hold since the pandemic shut-downs began. In this program, which takes place in local parishes, parents and caregivers gather one morning a week for group discussion, including expert guests, while their children engage in supervised play in a room next door. For more information, or to start a ParentCare group in your parish, visit [archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life/parenting/parents](http://archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life/parenting/parents).

## LEARNING TO PRAY

Once they have been baptized and socialized, it's time for children to begin learning more about their faith. The greatest instructional asset for their religious education is the Mass itself. Parents are encouraged to bring their young ones to church with them; answering their questions after Mass is a great opportunity to tell young ones about God's love for them. For children who have a hard time sitting still and keeping quiet, many parishes have a family room with a large window and a speaker to amplify the sounds of the ceremony. Some also offer a children's liturgy, where youngsters between the ages of 4 and 8 are led from the church to a separate room after the opening prayer. They hear the Word of God in a form they can more readily understand, then rejoin their families in the church in time for the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Lord's Prayer.

More formal **religious education** begins in kindergarten or first grade. Children who are not enrolled in a Catholic school attend religious education classes sponsored by the parish and taught by parishioners in order to begin their formation in the faith and prepare to receive the sacraments of reconciliation and Communion.

In the sacrament of **reconciliation**, boys and girls learn to examine their consciences and understand the nature of sin and the way it affects our relationships with ourself, our family, our community, and our Lord. It's worthwhile for parents to spend some time talking with their child about this. Sr. Cora Lombardo, ASCJ, director of religious

education at Immaculate Conception/Assumption Parish in Tuckahoe, suggests a few minutes of discussion at bedtime. Asking what we are thankful for and what we want to tell God we're sorry for can "help prepare our children to receive the transformative blessings of the Eucharist," she says. See "Setting the Stage for First Communion: A Bedtime Q&A," *Archways Spring 2019*.

Learning to say a good confession is a prerequisite for an event most Catholic children will remember for their entire lives: **first Communion**. On this day, dressed as if for a wedding, they march down the aisle with classmates, surrounded by families and friends, and receive the body of Christ for the first time. It's a day of celebration, the first (aside from birthday parties) at which they will be guests of honor – and the beginning of a lifelong relationship with Jesus.



Taking time for family prayer at St. Vincent Ferrer, Manhattan.

## GROWING WISE

As children get bigger, they become more independent. They need less help in the basics – getting dressed, eating, cleaning up their messes – but this does not diminish the parental role. If anything, as the child’s social relationships widen, the oversight of parents and caretakers becomes more critical. This is especially true in matters of faith.

“The Church reminds us that parents are the first teachers of the faith,” says Joe Long, Director of **Children’s Faith Formation** for the Archdiocese of New York. “More and more, we see the importance of integrating the practice of faith at home with the parish and beyond.” This integrated approach centers on *formation of the family*.

“Faith formation programs take the work of the Church at home – the ‘domestic church’ – and provide teachings and tools to live as disciples of Jesus in the world,” Long says. “We work with pastors and religious education directors to provide programs and strategies that help parents actively participate in teaching the faith to their children.”

The Covid-19 pandemic, for all its tragic consequences, actually gave a boost to *formation of families* in the archdiocese. Because social distancing required at-home instruction, even when remote learning tools like Zoom were being used, parents had to take a more active role in overseeing the process. Religious education directors soon saw that this enhanced the experience for everyone and showed parents how rewarding their role can be. “Parents are actually sitting with their children and making it a priority. It’s very different from just dropping them off,” says Antoinette Gilligan, director of religious education at St. Joseph’s in Bronxville. “We have had lots of positive feedback from our parents saying they love the flexibility and really enjoy learning along with their children.”

For parents whose students are enrolled in the **Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of New York**, the support is even stronger. Their children learn Christian history, scripture, and traditions in the daily school setting – while teachers and administrators also ensure that all subjects are taught in alignment with the Church’s values. Over the past several academic years, the K-8 Catholic schools in New York have consistently outperformed their public counterparts in test scores and academic outcomes. The students get a first-rate education by secular standards, but are also exposed to the full spectrum of Catholic teachings.

This doesn’t mean that classes in history or science are “censored” to teach only Catholic ideas. The Catholic schools teach students of all backgrounds, and don’t force the Church’s beliefs on anyone; but children of Catholic families can graduate with not only great skills but also a stronger relationship with Jesus Christ.

Catholic high schools in the archdiocese extend this opportunity right up until the time a young woman or man is ready to go to college or enter the workforce. For more infor-



After Mass at St. Lawrence O’Toole parish, Brewster.

mation on the 170 K-8 schools and 43 Catholic high schools in the archdiocese, visit [catholicschoolsny.org](http://catholicschoolsny.org).

## GROWING STRONG

Late childhood and adolescence is a crucial time in a young person’s life, and not just for education. These are years when parents want to see their children become strong and resilient both physically and emotionally.

The **Catholic Youth Organization**, an agency of Catholic Charities of New York, sponsors youth programs in basketball, baseball, track and field, volleyball, cheerleading, and golf. The most widely known program, CYO basketball, has administered programs in more than 100 parishes around the archdiocese, serving thousands of boys and girls in 4th through 8th grades. The evening practices and weekend games bring families and children into close involvement with their parishes. “What we’re teaching these kids is not how to be great players and win, win, win,” says Seth Peloso, acting director of CYO for the archdiocese. “We try to instill in them a love of physical activity, the values of sportsmanship and fair play, and a sense of the rewards of consistent effort and practice.” The CYO prayer is also recited before every contest.

In addition to athletics, CYO sponsors a competitive chess program and an art and essay contest for students at parishes in the archdiocese. After a hiatus in competitive and team sport programs during the pandemic, CYO’s programs are gradually building back to a full schedule. For more information, visit [cyony.org](http://cyony.org).



Learning to type, learning to pray. ABOVE, FROM TOP: A children’s program at Don Bosco Community Center, Port Chester; all dressed up for first Communion.

In addition to the CYO, many parishes also offer children and adolescents **opportunities for participation** in the life of the Church community. Music directors frequently lead youth choirs and invite young instrumentalists to provide music during Mass and at other events. Starting around 4th grade, boys and girls can also sign up for training to be **altar servers**. For portraits of altar servers in a few of our parishes, see “*In His Service*,” page 18.

In addition, various **charitable ministries**, including food pantries, clothing closets, and soup kitchens, encourage young people to volunteer in service to the needy. Though many of these programs were forced to limit participation during the pandemic, most have now reopened for young volunteers. For information on volunteer opportunities for youth, visit [catholiccharitiesny.org/volunteer](http://catholiccharitiesny.org/volunteer) and check your local parish bulletin for ministries in your locality.

## PEACE OF MIND

However sound a child’s physical health may be, parents must also be vigilant about mental health. Young people today often feel bombarded by stressful or judgmental messages, and may be affected by turmoil at home or in their social lives. The result can be anxiety, depression, or plummeting self-esteem – which in turn can lead to substance abuse or suicidal thoughts. Teens and concerned parents may have no idea where to turn for help.

The **Parish Counseling Network**, sponsored by Catholic Charities of New York, is a roster of highly qualified mental health professionals who can provide therapeutic services at a low cost to those who are registered at a parish in the Archdiocese of New York. To access this service, individuals and families can inquire with their pastor. Catholic Charities also provides other mental health services through regional clinical facilities and networks in the various regions of the archdiocese. For more information about therapy, counseling, and coaching resources, contact the Family Life Office at 646-794-3185 or [FLRLEvents@ny-familylife.org](mailto:FLRLEvents@ny-familylife.org).

To address the serious issues of teen suicide and substance abuse, the Family Life Office partnered with the Respect Life Office and the Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of New York to sponsor an **Archdiocesan Suicide Prevention Initiative** for teens. The program includes videos; parent webinars; lesson plans provided to teachers in religious education programs as well as Catholic middle and high schools; and “Friend2Friend,” a digital interactive simulation program for teens that breaks down stigmas, teaches warning signs, and allows them to rehearse scenarios. For more information, see “*Speaking of Suicide*,” below.

## TEEN FOCUS

### Speaking of Suicide

No one wants to talk about it. Now the second leading cause of death among people between the ages of 14 and 22, *suicide* is usually preventable, but not if we can’t even say the word.

To help parents recognize the warning signs and communicate with their children – to prevent tragedies and save lives – the Family Life Office of the Archdiocese of New York has sponsored “Hope and Action,” a live webinar covering topics such as how to create a safe space to talk with your teen, warning signs, what to do if those signs are critical, how to plan for safety, and God’s unconditional love for all. The webinars were presented in Spanish and English. The two events in Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 drew more than 1,200 registrants; a recording of the English version is available at [vimeo.com/641534284](https://vimeo.com/641534284); the Spanish recording is at [vimeo.com/692229078](https://vimeo.com/692229078).

For information about upcoming programs and other helpful links for parents of teens, visit [archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life/parenting/parents](http://archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life/parenting/parents) and click on “Youth Suicide and Depression.”

## TAKING FLIGHT

Sometime around the transition from middle school to high school, young Catholics typically experience a sacrament that marks a symbolic transition from childhood to maturity: **confirmation**. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1303), the sacrament of confirmation “unites us more firmly to Christ . . . increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us . . . [and] renders our bond with the Church more perfect.” Some theologians say it’s analogous to the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles at Pentecost; it strengthens us to go forth as Christians and spread the word of Jesus’ love. Once confirmed, a person is fully initiated into the Church.

Preparatory classes for confirmation, provided by parish religious education programs and Catholic schools’ religion classes, focus on developing the knowledge, judgment, and moral compass to help young women and men face the choices and challenges that will face them as Catholic



Confirmation at St. Joseph’s, Bronxville.

adults. The students are also invited to anticipate the joys of venturing on whatever path God will call them to.

After 8th grade, when young Catholics age out of most parish religious education programs, it’s important for parents to guide them toward continued growth in their faith. “We don’t want teens to think they are finished thinking about their faith once they hit high school,” says Ela Milewska, director of the archdiocese’s Office of Youth Faith Formation. “In fact, this is when they are hitting a crucial period for discerning God’s call.”

Though weekly religious education classes may be over, there are youth ministries throughout the archdiocese, supported by the **Youth Faith Formation** office, to keep young Catholics thinking about – and acting on – their faith. These ministries provide social events, volunteer opportunities, and arts and outdoor activities year-round. Once a year, the archdiocese brings together hundreds of young people from all over the archdiocese for **New York Catholic Youth Day**. This is the event of the year for Catholic teens in New York, with music, liturgical dance, inspirational talks, and a joyous Mass, usually celebrated by Cardinal Dolan. Most years, the event has included a mega-service project, in which all the attendees work in shifts to assemble thousands of meal packets to be shipped off for distribution to people facing starvation in a hunger-ravaged part of the world. For information about *New York Catholic Youth Day* and youth ministry in the Archdiocese of New York, visit [archny.org/ministries-and-offices/youth-faith-formation](http://archny.org/ministries-and-offices/youth-faith-formation).

It all starts with love. The love of a husband and wife for each other, and for their child. The love of a child for her or his parents. The love of a grandparent and a grandchild. It starts with love, but it doesn’t stop. Love multiplies. ✘

## GENERATIONS

### Caring for Aging Parents



After Mass at St. Barnabas, Bronx.

In the first two decades of life, the flow of caring mostly runs from parent to child. A few decades later, for many, that flow reverses, and grown children may need support in caring for their parents. **ArchCare**, the health- and elder-care ministry of the Archdiocese of New York, is here to help.

**Senior Residences** ArchCare operates five **nursing homes** in Staten Island, Manhattan, the Bronx, and Dutchess County. Cited by Dr. Deborah Birx for their great success at saving lives during the Covid-19 pandemic, the residences have won multiple awards for patient care and employee satisfaction.

**Living at Home** ArchCare Senior Life’s **Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE)** gives seniors the option to stay in their homes while receiving state-of-the-art medical care and social opportunities at a nearby community center.

**End of Life Care** When the time comes, ArchCare can provide **palliative care** for people approaching the end of life at home, in nursing homes, or at ArchCare at Calvary Hospital.

## SUPPORT GROUPS

### Facing Loss

To experience the joy of family love, we must also accept loss. If we love someone, we will grieve when they die, even if we know that we will be reunited with them in Heaven. Grief is the price of joy.

An especially painful loss can feel unbearable. It’s a terrible weight, and individuals should have help in carrying it. Jesus and the saints stand ready to assist through prayer – but sometimes a little earthly support can make a big difference.

The Family Life Office of the Archdiocese of New York supports **bereavement groups** in parishes throughout our region. A trained facilitator, often a member of the parish, meets with a group of individuals who have suffered the death of a family member or another loved one. Sharing their stories and their feelings, group members give and receive support and solace. For help finding a bereavement group in your area, or to start one in your own parish, visit [archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life/bereavement](http://archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life/bereavement) or email [vincent.dasilva@archny.org](mailto:vincent.dasilva@archny.org).

For parents who have experienced the death of a child, the loss may leave a void that can never be filled. **Emmaus retreats**, administered by Sue DiSisto of the Family Life Office, help parents who have lost a child of any age, by any cause, no matter how long ago, to share their burdens and seek relief with others who have felt their agony. Through the pandemic, Emmaus retreats have been offered as five-hour Zoom sessions. In planning for the fall, DiSisto hopes to bring back the parish-based gatherings, but the digital versions are here to stay.

“Parents report a healing that happens after these events,” she says. “Other grieving parents can understand your pain.” For information about upcoming retreats, visit [archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life/bereavement/emmaus-ministry-retreats-for-grieving-parents](http://archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life/bereavement/emmaus-ministry-retreats-for-grieving-parents) or email [susan.disisto@archny.org](mailto:susan.disisto@archny.org).

The Family Life Office is currently planning its events for Fall 2022 and Spring 2023. Visit [archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life](http://archny.org/ministries-and-offices/family-life) during late spring or summer for information about the new schedule.

## CIRCLE GAME

After high school, most children are no longer asking their parents to approve their movie choices or remind them to go to Mass on Sunday. But in families where Jesus has been a consistent parenting partner, the grown children stand a better chance of carrying their parents’ values into adulthood.

For parents of students who go on to college, there is great hope but also some fear about those first years when a child may be living away from home. The academic and intellectual journey takes place against a backdrop of dangerous distractions and temptations that a collegian must navigate. The **University Apostolate** of the Archdiocese of New York helps students at colleges and universities throughout the archdiocese to “keep the faith.” Its campus ministries offer social, religious, and travel activities in a context that accepts and encourages continued exploration of a student’s Catholic identity, even when the surrounding culture may dismiss it as uncool or politically incorrect.

It’s natural for young adults to turn from the faith for a time when they become independent. “The students’ faith, while seemingly lost, is not lost at all,” says Sr. Barbara Mueller, OP, director of campus ministry at CUNY. “Third and fourth year, one sees the student begin to interact with the Church again. It can be thought of as a sign of reinvigoration.”

This is the parent’s prayer: The young adult, fresh from self-discovery and strong in faith, begins the cycle over again.



Installation of new altar servers at the Church of St. Augustine, New City.



New servers at the Church of St. Augustine. BELOW, FROM LEFT: Suiting up for service at St. Anthony Church, Yonkers, and St. Patrick's Cathedral, Manhattan.

# In His Service

ALTAR SERVERS HELP LEAD US TO A DEEPER DEVOTION TO CHRIST

**A**s the altar servers arrive, the church is nearly empty. They come in from the street to the hush of high ceilings and stained glass, walk past the altar, and exchange quiet greetings with other early arrivals: choir members, Eucharistic ministers, ushers. In the sacristy – a room off the altar where priests and lay ministers prepare for the Mass – the altar servers find their way to a closet hung with vestments, don their albs or cassocks, and ready themselves for service.

By the time the church has filled – the faithful settling into the pews, shedding jackets, silencing phones – the servers have gathered in the sacristy with the lay ministers and the priest, awaiting the cue to enter. At the back of the sanctuary, the organist begins playing

and the choir starts to sing. The sacristy door swings open, and the altar servers step out of the sacristy and into the aisle.

These young men and women occupy a place of distinction. With cross held high, they walk at the head of a procession that stretches back for centuries.

Every Sunday, all over the Archdiocese of New York, altar servers help priests bring Christ's grace to the people of their parishes. It's a humble yet profound role. Through it, they touch the faith lives of their families and their community, and set themselves on a path toward a life of deeper spiritual connection with God.

In the following pages, *Archways* will introduce you to a few of the thousands of altar servers who offer up their time and devotion to enrich the Mass experience for all of us.



Photos by Chris Sheridan (St. Patrick's Cathedral), Paul Undersinger (St. Augustine), and Ricardo Paiba (St. Anthony).

“  
I've been training to be an altar server for one month. I like seeing my friends at church. It's a little hard when you're in front of everyone at church. My family is very proud that I am an altar server. It makes me feel happy when my family comes to see me at church, and it makes me happy when I ring the bell.

”  
– Laila Skrypack, 4th grade  
St. Augustine, New City



“

I remember how proud my grandmothers were when I became an altar server. Altar service gives me a stronger connection to God, which will stay with me forever.

”

– Daniel Riolo, 8th grade  
St. Anthony, Yonkers

“

We trained to be altar servers about four weeks ago. Remembering all the steps is a little hard, but if I forget, I review the sheets Deacon Jim gave us. Our family is excited that we are altar servers.

”

– Oke Okelezo, 4th grade  
St. Augustine, New City



Preparing for the procession at St. Patrick's Cathedral. BELOW: At the credence table, St. Anthony. PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Getting ready for the procession at St. Patrick's Cathedral and St. Anthony; new altar servers in procession at St. Augustine; preparing the credence table at St. Anthony.



## ALTAR SERVER DUTIES

### A Short Sequential Guide

The duties of servers may vary based on the parish, the priest's preference, and the number of servers at a given Mass. The sequence below may not be a perfect match for what the servers do at your parish.

**Before Mass** The servers set the side table with the items for the Mass, include the chalice, ciborium (container of hosts), cruets filled with water and wine, washing bowl, and hand towels. If there is to be a procession at the offertory, the ciborium and the wine cruet may be placed at the back of the church.

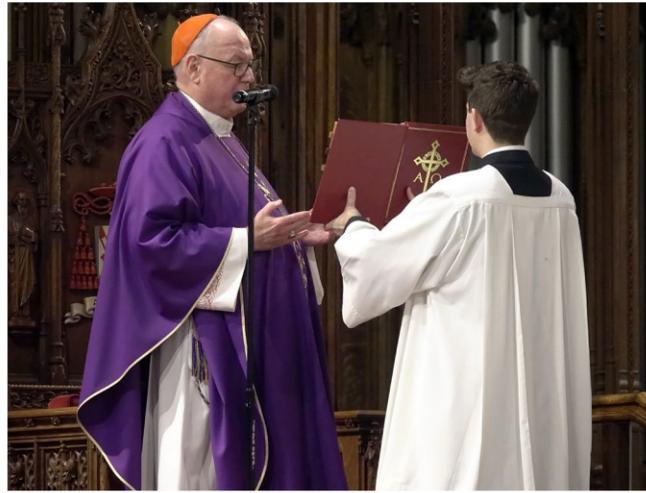
**Procession** One altar server carries the cross to lead the procession from the back of the church to the sanctuary (the area where the altar is located), bows to the tabernacle, and places the cross in its stand. Depending on the number of servers, others may bear the incense, candles, and missal. The deacon, lector, and priest follow.

**Opening Prayer** Following "Glory to God in the Highest" (or, during Lent, "Lord have mercy"), when the priest says, "Let us pray," a server may hold the missal open for the priest's reading.

**Offertory** Immediately after the Prayer of the Faithful, the cross bearer places the missal on the altar, then carries the cross to the back of the church to lead the procession in which two of the faithful carry the bread and wine to the sanctuary. At the foot of the altar, the candle bearers stand behind the priest and the deacon to receive the gifts. They carry the ciborium to the altar and the wine cruet to the side table, then bring the wine and water cruets to the altar, where the priest prepares the wine for Communion. The candle bearers return the cruets to the side table, then go back to the altar with water, a bowl, and a hand towel so the priest can clean his hands.

**Consecration** The servers kneel while the priest consecrates the bread and wine to signal their transubstantiation into the body and blood of Jesus. One of the servers may ring the altar bell once when the priest extends his

*Continued on page 23*



“  
I enjoy having an active role in the mass, especially participating in the preparation of the Eucharist.

”  
– Lucas Lanzo, 6th grade  
St. Augustine, New City



## ALTAR SERVER DUTIES (CONT.)

“  
The first time I served, it was the 10 p.m. Christmas Eve Mass. I struggled to stay awake sitting next to the priest. My family thought it was funny, but worried I would fall off the chair.

Being an altar server taught me that helping out in the Mass might mean I could help out other people too.

”  
– Eric D. Morales, 9th grade  
St. Anthony, Yonkers

hands above the bread and wine and asks the Holy Spirit to come over them, three times when the priest elevates the host (the Body), and three more times when he elevates the chalice (the Blood).

**After Communion** The cross bearer clears the Missal from the altar, and, when the priest and deacon are finished, the candle bearers clear away the chalice and other items.

**Recession** To conclude the Mass, the servers come to the foot of the altar with the priest and deacon, bow toward the tabernacle, and then lead the recession back up the aisle.



Kneeling during the Consecration at St. Patrick's Cathedral. PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Holding the missal and helping with Communion at the cathedral; ringing the altar bells and straightening the credence table at St. Anthony.



Leading the recession at St. Anthony. *BELOW, FROM LEFT:* Carrying the candles at St. Charles Borromeo, Harlem; holding high the cross at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

“  
I was an altar server for 7 years, from 5th grade to 12th grade. Being an altar server has shown me how much goes on behind the scenes during the Mass, especially during Holy Week and the Masses leading up to Easter Sunday.

”  
– Marcos A. Morales II, college freshman  
St. Anthony, Yonkers



“  
I became an altar server at the age of 7 in my local parish. I began serving at St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1993, when I was in high school. I have had the honor of serving three archbishops of New York: Cardinal O'Connor, Cardinal Egan, and Cardinal Dolan.

My favorite task is carrying the cross in procession. I raise it as high as I can so that people automatically look up at it. I can always see people bowing or looking intently at the cross as it passes the pews.

As a server, I not only witness the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, but I am a part of how the Mass unfolds on the altar. I feel the mystery of the Mass in a powerful way. I serve at the foot of Calvary and am always humbled by this privilege. Serving the Mass is about keeping Christ at the center, and that experience affects me every day by keeping Christ at the center of all that I do.

Altar servers set an example for the congregation. Unlike the lector or priest, we do not have speaking parts at the Mass. We serve in silence, with reverence and devotion, and by this example we hope to make people aware that the Mass is truly Calvary come to life. Christ will come down on that altar at the moment of consecration and be present with us not as bread and wine but as His true body and blood. The servers need to be aware of this truth and set the example of veneration and awe at the mystery of Christ alive in our midst.

”  
– Mario Bruschi, Senior Vice President and Finance  
Director, IPG Health  
St. Patrick's Cathedral



Leading the recession at St. Charles Borromeo. *ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT:* After Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral.



# Venerable Félix Varela

THE CUBAN PRIEST, PHILOSOPHER, AND STATESMAN – A CANDIDATE FOR SAINTHOOD – LEFT A PIOUS LEGACY IN NEW YORK

ILLUSTRATIONS BY VINNY BOVE

**F**or a distinguished native of the Caribbean, it was a rude welcome to America. Fr. Félix Varela, a renowned Cuban philosopher, educator, writer, and statesman, arrived in New York Harbor on December 15, 1823, disembarking from the cargo ship *Draper C. Thorndike* and stepping into a full-blown blizzard. Unfamiliar with the perils of walking in a northern winter, on his first steps in the country where he would live the next three decades, he slipped and fell on an icy walkway.

It was an unaccustomed low point in the life of the 35-year-old priest. A few weeks earlier, he had been representing Cuba, then a Spanish colony, as a delegate to the nascent legislative assembly at Cádiz, Spain. In a swift turn of events, the deposed Spanish king had been restored to power and ordered the execution of all who had advocated democracy. Facing certain death if he remained in Europe or returned to his beloved Cuba, Varela escaped at night to Gibraltar, where he boarded the *Thorndike*, bound for New York.

Suddenly an exile, the thin priest in his thin cloak stood up from the icy harborside pavement and found his footing in the streets of a new city. Over the next quarter of a century, he would become a humble but prominent force in the Catholic community there, serving the faithful of New York with a selfless devotion that matched the patriotic fervor he felt for his homeland.

Félix Varela would never again set foot in Cuba, but he also never stopped working on behalf of its people, pointing the way for them toward a freedom that would not come in his lifetime. Two centuries later, he is still revered by Cubans and Cuban-Americans of all political persuasions. The cause for his canonization, initiated in the 1980s, is princi-

pally overseen by the Archdiocese of Havana. But it is his life after 1823 – his years as a New York priest – that mark Varela unmistakably as a man of God.

**F**élix Varela y Morales was born into a military family in Havana, Cuba, in 1788. Orphaned at the age of 3, he was raised by his paternal grandparents in St. Augustine, Florida, where his grandfather was commander of the Spanish garrison. An intelligent, curious child, slight in stature, young Félix took eagerly to his studies in Latin, religion, and history.

When Varela was 14, his grandfather told him it was time to turn from academic pursuits and enroll in military training. The boy politely refused. “I want to be a soldier of Jesus Christ,” he said. When the commander became angry, Félix responded, “I don’t wish to kill men. I want to save their souls.” Though he was not destined to be a warrior, young Varela did not lack for courage.

Instead of a military academy, his grandfather sent Varela to the Seminary of San Carlos in Havana. There the young man was quickly recognized as a rising star. He became a priest, a professor, and by his mid-twenties, one of the colony’s foremost philosophers and thinkers.

As a professor and speaker, Varela showed no fear in exploring and expanding the potentially dangerous ideas of the era he lived in: the abolition of slavery, the overthrow of absolute monarchies and colonial empires. He became known as a speaker who explained ideas so clearly and persuasively that even those who disagreed with him sat up and listened. As a writer, teacher, and delegate to the Spanish Cortes, the priest stood up for what he believed in.

After his landing in America, it took Varela more than a year to get his credentials verified to serve as a priest in the Diocese of New York. By February 1825, he had begun serving as a parochial vicar at St. Peter's Church on Barclay Street in Manhattan. He had learned to speak English, and had begun to settle into his duties: saying Mass, hearing confessions, performing baptisms, visiting the sick. In the evenings, the priest also found time to write and edit *El Habanero*, a magazine for Cuban readers. And the rulers of Spain and Cuba still wanted him dead.

In March 1825, an assassin landed in New York City, dispatched by associates of Francisco Vives, the colonial governor of Cuba. His instructions: to kill Fr. Félix Varela.

The priest received a letter of warning. His friends in the Cuban expatriate community were able to learn the assassin's identity, but not his whereabouts. They entreated Varela to go into hiding, but he refused. Instead, he went about his business apparently un-



Church of the Transfiguration, Manhattan – a parish founded by Fr. Félix Varela.

perturbed. He was not going to let threats turn him from his new mission of helping to build the Catholic Church in America, ministering to the needs of its people.

One day, walking the streets of his parish, the priest encountered the man who had been sent to murder him. In a spirit of compassionate forgiveness, he approached the would-be assassin and counseled him against committing a grave sin. The man listened. Then he returned to Cuba, his mission unfulfilled, while Varela carried on his own with hardly a pause.

Before the American Revolution, under British rule, Catholicism was banned in New York. Five decades later, as Varela began his priesthood there, a strong anti-Catholic sentiment still prevailed among many in the Protestant majority. Catholics had to be careful. They could be assaulted in the streets. On one occasion, hundreds of Catholics had to form a human shield around St. Patrick's Cathedral on Mulberry Street (now known as the Basilica of Old St. Patrick's Cathedral) to stop a Protestant mob from ransacking and burning it.

*Continued on page 30*

**“Father Varela... helps us to live our faith as a force for change in society. Seeing his example, we can offer our own contribution with the same enthusiasm that he had for helping the societies of his time to live according to justice and truth.”**

– **Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, postulator in Varela's cause for canonization**

TRACING VARELA'S LIFE (1788 – 1853)



**1788 – Havana, Cuba**  
Félix Varela is born into a military family. Orphaned at the age of 3, he goes to live with his grandfather, who commands the Spanish colonial troops in St. Augustine, Florida.

**1802 – Havana, Cuba**  
Young Varela attends the Seminary of San Carlos and is ordained as a priest. Continuing his studies, he becomes a renowned professor, writes widely used textbooks on philosophy, mathematics, and science, and pioneers the study of constitutional democracy in Latin America. He will later be called “the Benjamin Franklin of Cuba.”

**1823 – New York City**  
Varela escapes to America and helps build up the Catholic Church in New York as parish priest and vicar general. He gains renown as an eloquent orator against anti-Catholic bigotry and a model of selfless Christian charity, courageously visiting the sick during a cholera epidemic and giving freely to the poor.

**1792 – St. Augustine, Florida**  
Raised in the Spanish colonial garrison, Varela studies Latin and scripture with Irish priests. Horrified by slavery and violence, he is drawn to the priestly life. When his grandfather offers to send him to officer's training, the 14-year-old Varela refuses.

**1821 – Cádiz, Spain**  
As a delegate from Cuba to the Spanish Cortes, Varela advocates in favor of democracy and independence for Spain's colonies. He is marked for execution when King Ferdinand VII returns to power.

**1850 – St. Augustine, Florida**  
In poor health, Varela returns to the city of his childhood. At his passing in 1853, locals crowd his sickroom, hoping to be blessed by the holy man.

VARELA'S PATH  
TO SAINTHOOD

Champions of Venerable Félix Varela (from left): Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, postulator of his cause for canonization; Bishop Octavio Cisneros, vice postulator; and Cardinal Timothy Dolan.

The process of canonization usually requires decades of advocacy, investigation, and deliberation. First, a diocese must submit a “cause” to Rome and wait for the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to approve it.

In 1983, 130 years after his death, the Vatican declared Félix Varela a Servant of God and granted approval for the Archdiocese of Havana to initiate his cause. The Cuban Bishops’ Conference started its investigations in 1995, and submitted a *positio* (an extensively documented report) to Rome in 1997.

In 1998, a second *positio* was requested, this one from the Archdiocese of New York. Havana’s report showed Varela to be a great intellectual and patriot; but the Vatican was looking for accounts of heroic virtue. New York’s *positio* was published in 2011, and Varela was declared Venerable in 2012.

To achieve sainthood, the Cuban priest now needs to have two confirmed miracles. Usually these involve a documented medical cure as a result of prayer. Several possible miracles are being investigated. If one is confirmed, Varela will be beatified and receive the title of Blessed. Should a second miracle be confirmed, the way will be clear for him to be canonized.

When and if that day comes, there will be joy in the Catholic communities of Havana, St. Augustine, and New York.

There were two Catholic churches in New York City in 1825: St. Patrick’s Cathedral and St. Peter’s Church on Barclay Street. The diocese opened a third, St. Mary’s, in a former Presbyterian church building on Sheriff Street, in 1826; and the following year, Varela, using his own funds and money raised from the community, purchased a fourth: an old Episcopal church in Ann Street called Christ Church. Varela became pastor of a new Catholic parish there. Its population was generally very poor, and most of the money to operate it came from Varela’s supporters in Cuba and New York.

The skills and the passion for justice that Félix Varela had developed in the first 35 years of his life turned out to be just what the Catholic Church in New York needed. His command of the principals of governing served the Church well when parish board members made unruly demands; his problem-solving skills helped keep parishes financially solvent; and his command of language enabled him to build strong community bonds. His talents at oratory captivated congregations during his homilies and, at public forums, unmasked the distortions of demagogues fomenting anti-Catholic sentiment.

Soon he was writing articles in English and co-publishing the *New York Weekly Register and Catholic Diary*, which was widely read among the immigrant Irish. He wrote an English-language catechism for religious education and opened free Catholic schools for girls and boys next door to Christ Church, where he oversaw instruction and taught many classes himself. The schoolchildren there could hardly have imagined they were being taught by one of the most celebrated professors in the Americas.

In 1829, Bishop Jean Dubois named two vicars general for the Diocese of New York: Fr. John Power, the pastor of St. Peter’s, and Fr. Félix Varela. Varela would serve in the role until 1850. Under their management, the Catholic Church in New York grew rapidly. Six new parishes were created in the diocese (which at the time encompassed the entirety of what is now New York state, plus part of northern New Jersey). With the help of the Sisters of Charity, schools and orphanages were created – often with a considerable portion of the funds obtained through the efforts of the Cuban priest. Upon receiving one particularly generous donation, Varela funded an asylum for widows and their children, which would be run by the Sisters of Charity; the site of the asylum would eventually become St. Vincent’s Hospital.

With its founding philosophy of religious tolerance, the United States attracted many Catholic immigrants, especially from Ireland, where the faith was being suppressed. This added fuel to the virulent anti-Catholic movement in New York and elsewhere, and Félix Varela proved to be one of the church’s most effective forces to counterbalance it. In 1830 and 1831, in addition to appearing on debate stages, he published a periodical called *The Protestant’s Annotator and Abridger*, in which he patiently dissected each scurrilous charge of a popular anti-Catholic periodical called *The*



*Protestant*. While other Catholic leaders responded angrily to the insults of the Church’s detractors, Varela was a peacemaker. “In an era of blinding religious animosities,” wrote biographers Joseph and Helen M. McCadden, “Varela was the pioneer ecumenist, able to conduct dialogue without violence, astonishing his opponents by his learning, his patient exposition.”

While Varela’s writings and speaking engagements afforded him a public platform from which to proclaim his faith, the work that he did in New York quietly and without calling attention to himself was an even more remarkable sign of his devotion to the mission of Jesus on Earth. The Cuban priest embodied the notion of selflessness. His service to the poor and marginalized was immediate, direct, and deeply personal. Among Irish immigrants, many of whom came off the boats in desperate need, Varela was known as a tireless champion and supporter.

During the cholera epidemic of 1832, according to one contemporary, Varela “virtually lived in the hospitals.” He went to greet immigrant ships, going to the aid of the penni-

“Father Varela dedicated his life to the sick, the poor, and the helpless. He was called ‘the apostle of the Irish’ for his work welcoming immigrants and tending to their needs.”

– Bishop Octavio Cisneros, vice postulator in Varela’s cause for canonization

less and often sick passengers as they disembarked. Because of his loving approach to people of all denominations, even those who looked down on Catholics, he was able to gain access to institutions that other priests were barred from, including New York City Hospital, which was managed by Protestants (but full of Catholic patients).

Eventually, stories of his benevolence made him famous despite his avoidance of the spotlight. On one occasion, Varela was approached by a poor woman while eating his lunch. He excused himself for a moment, washed the spoon he was using, and handed it over to her. “Money have I none,” he is reported to have said. “But take this silver spoon, the last from my homeland – it will fetch enough to feed your family.” The woman was subsequently arrested on suspicion of having stolen the spoon, and when Varela went to the police to vouch for her, the incident was reported in the press.

Other accounts of his selflessness also spread through the city. There was the wintry day on Chambers Street when a poor, shivering woman with a baby in her arms was approached by an unidentified man who quietly removed his own cloak and draped it over her, then slipped away coatless. Onlookers followed the mysterious benefactor and recognized Varela letting himself into his residence on Reade Street.

In *Félix Varela: Torch Bearer from Cuba*, the McCaddens describe his housekeeper’s “constant battle to keep him supplied with essentials. Whatever was nearest to hand – his watch, his silver, the dishes from his table, the household linens and blankets, his own garments – he gave to those in need.” When people came seeking help, “he often supplied the receivers of alms through a side window or rear door.”

**B**y the late 1840s, Varela’s health was failing. He had never fully adapted to the climate of New York, and his respiratory ailments became increasingly serious. Between 1847 and 1849, he experienced debilitating bouts of asthma and “consumption,” going south to recover and then returning north with renewed vigor, resuming his daily rounds of “sick calls, confessions . . . confraternities &c.,” in the words of one of the priests in his parish. In 1850, however, he left New York for the last time, relocating to St. Augustine, Florida, where he had lived as a boy.

By now the Cuban was widely renowned among American Catholics. He made a deep impression in Savannah, Georgia, as Fr. Jeremiah O’Connell recalled in an 1878 article: “In Savannah . . . his memory is held in deep veneration by the faithful and all who made his acquaintance. How he lived was a wonder to his friends, for he gave everything he had to the poor.”

After three years serving the people of St. Augustine, Fr. Félix Varela died in February 1853, surrounded by parishioners who sought his blessing or simply wanted to be in his

presence. Among the congregation, he was already considered a saint for his kindness and good works.

“Varela loved all men, and Varela has been loved by all,” observed Cuban scholar José Maria Casal a month after Varela’s death, in a speech to dedicate a St. Augustine chapel built in the priest’s memory. “Cubans owe Varela not only love, but profound veneration.”

Many non-Cubans felt – and feel – the same way. At the Church of the Transfiguration on Mott Street in Manhattan, a parish Varela founded in 1838 after Christ Church suffered irreparable structural damage, he is still proudly claimed as the original force behind a parish known to this day for diversity and service to the poor.

**“Venerable Félix Varela was a hero of Cuban independence and a great New Yorker. . . . He served the Church as priest, pastor, and vicar general, attended the sick, welcomed immigrants, and gave of his own belongings to help the needy: a pure servant of Christ.”**

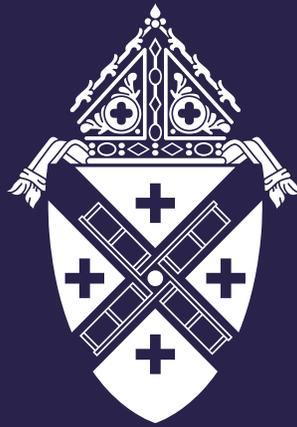
– Cardinal Timothy Dolan

The Archdiocese of New York proudly endorsed the cause for Varela’s canonization when it was launched in 1983, and New York Catholics rejoiced in 2012, when the Vatican’s Congregation for the Causes of Saints declared him venerable. “Venerable Félix Varela was a hero of Cuban independence and also a great New Yorker – the kind of man who just couldn’t help being generous and kind,” says Cardinal Timothy Dolan. “He served the Church as priest, pastor, and vicar general, attended the sick, welcomed immigrants, and gave of his own belongings to help the needy: a pure servant of Christ.”

The streets of lower Manhattan that he walked almost two centuries ago would be unrecognizable to Varela today – though if he searched among the tall buildings and busy streets he would find two parishes that claim him as founder. His light still shines there, and throughout the world. ✱



A statue of Venerable Félix Varela at Transfiguration Church.



ARCHDIOCESE  
OF NEW YORK