

The History of Sacred Heart Parish, Camden, NJ

By: Father Michael Doyle, Pastor Emeritus

“An Infinite Ocean of Mercy”

In 1864, as the U.S. Civil War was nearing its end, Father Patrick Byrne, a young priest born in Waterford, Ireland, was pastor of Immaculate Conception Church, the first Catholic parish in Camden. He secured the valuable location at Broadway and Market and built the cathedral we use today. In 1872, when the city expanded its southern boundary from Kaighn Ave. to the Newton Creek, a huge enlargement, he established a mission of his parish and hired a builder from Gloucester to construct a little wooden church at 8th and Van Hook Streets. He called it the Church of the Sacred Heart. It was the first church named for the Sacred Heart in the state of New Jersey.

The Bishop of Newark sent Dean William McNulty of Paterson to bless it. The people gathered, the Mass was offered, the sanctuary lamp was lit, and the Church of The Sacred Heart came to life in Camden.

It was also in 1864, that Margaret Mary Alacoque was declared Blessed by the Church, on her way to sainthood. A long time after she died in 1690 that the Church officially recognized her, even though she was the person chosen to bring the veneration of Jesus’ Sacred Heart to Church and the world.

Margaret Mary was a French nun born in 1647. She suffered from ill health in childhood before entering the Monastery of the Visitation in Paray-le-Monial, France at age 24. It was there that she experienced visions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The sisters in the convent were hard on her because they didn’t believe that she had visitations from Jesus. She suffered greatly. She finally won over her superiors with her humility and her obedience. But she was unable to convince a group of theologians of the validity of her apparitions – they called the visions delusions and suggested that she adopt a more healthy diet. But her genuineness won over the Jesuit Claude de la Colombiere, who was at the time the convent’s confessor. The Visitation sisters began private observance of the Feast of the Sacred Heart in 1686 and two years later built a chapel to the Sacred Heart. Margaret Mary died in 1690 at age 43. The veneration of the Sacred Heart spread throughout France, and was finally approved for the whole church by Pope Clement XIII in 1765, 75 years after she died. But Margaret Mary wasn’t totally believed until the Church declared her believable, with her elevation to being Blessed in 1864. Then the devotion to the Sacred Heart grew more widespread, and became, in 1872, the name for Fr. Patrick Byrne’s mission church in South Camden.



On February 28, 1887, the last Mass was offered at the little wooden church on the hill. That was the year that the new Sacred Heart Church opened at the corner of Broadway and Ferry, built in nine months by

stonemasons Philip McDonald and his six half-brothers. The sculpture on the side altar in this church building, added later by German artist Joseph Sibbel, depicts Jesus appearing to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque.

In 1899, in what he described as the “great act of his pontificate,” Pope Leo XIII solemnly consecrated all humankind to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Margaret Mary Alacoque was finally canonized by Pope Benedict XV in 1920, the same year that Sacred Heart school in Camden opened with more than 500 students. Today, we are still open and proclaiming that “God is always marked present” in our school for the benefit of our children.

Jesus’ great revelation in St. John’s gospel is that God is Love. The idea of devotion to the Sacred Heart was first presented to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque and she promoted it despite great hardship to herself. The revelation to her that she shared with the world is that His human heart was to be the symbol of His divine love for all of us.

Jesus made 12 profound promises through Margaret Mary Alacoque, one of the most beautiful being: **“Sinners will find in my heart an infinite ocean of mercy.”**

An “infinite ocean of mercy” is what we now pray for as we enter a new chapter, in the year 2017, in the history of Sacred Heart Parish.

Now, after 145 years of service to people, years marked by both fulfillment and failures, we go forward with renewed confidence in the loving heart of Christ. Two local churches, St. Bartholomew’s, founded in 1940 for African American people in Camden, and St. Joan of Arc, founded in 1920 for the people of the Fairview section of Camden, are now merged into one to be called Sacred Heart Parish. We all will go forward together, praying for that ocean of mercy and love to beam brightly upon all of us.

Sincerely,



Michael Doyle

August 2017