

Brooklyn Diocese Promotes Sainthood for Msgr. Bernard J. Quinn

By Ed Wilkinson

The process to declare a former Brooklyn pastor a saint has begun. Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio officially approved the project Jan. 13 and so the name of Msgr. Bernard Quinn, founding pastor of St. Peter Claver parish, Bedford-Stuyvesant, the first parish established for black Catholics in the Brooklyn Diocese, will be sent to Rome to be considered for canonization. A Mass to celebrate the beginning of the cause was celebrated that day at St. Peter Claver Church. Auxiliary Bishop Guy Sansaricq was the main celebrant for the congregation of 500 people, which included members of the Quinn family. Joining him at the altar were retired Auxiliary Bishop Joseph M. Sullivan, and Father Paul Jervis, the current pastor and main promoter of Msgr. Quinn's cause. "It is time to begin the final review," said Father Jervis, who wrote "Quintessential Priest," the story of the life of Msgr. Quinn. "He is in a class all by himself. Join me in promoting his cause with interest and zeal. Today's Mass is a powerful springboard to launch the cause." Father Jervis explained that the request for sainthood along with the details of Msgr. Quinn's life will be sent to the Vatican's Congregation of the Saints, which will study the merits of the case. Interest Must Endure but, Father Jervis warned, there has to be an enduring interest. "Rome wants to see that you are interested," he said as he urged people to participate in promoting the good works of Father Quinn with prayer and participation. In the front row at St. Peter Claver Church were members of Msgr. Quinn's family, including his grand niece Katherine and her family, who flew in from St. Louis. Her grandfather, Charles Quinn, was Father Quinns brother. On display in the church were memorabilia of items that belonged to Msgr. Quinn and have been preserved by members of the family, as well as newspaper articles about his life. A clipping from The New York Times described the scene of the funeral held at St. Peter for Msgr. Quinn in 1940 at which 8,000 people lined the streets around the church. Also shown were stoles that Father Quinn had used as a chaplain in Europe during World War I, as well as his surplice from the 1920s, and a leather paten holder used during his military service.

Some of his writings were also there in the form of pamphlets he had written with titles like "My Spiritual Anchor," "My Friend," and "The Call of the Master." The official approval for the cause came in a letter from Bishop DiMarzio which was read by Episcopal Vicar Msgr. Fernando Ferrarese. In it, the bishop said "accounts of his holiness have circulated all the years since his death," and he called Msgr. Quinn "a model of sanctity for us all." Wartime Service As a young priest, Father Quinn was drawn to serve black Catholics. When he approached Bishop Charles McDonnell about starting a parish for blacks in Bedford-Stuyvesant, he was told that recruiting chaplains to serve U.S. soldiers in World War I was a priority for the diocese. He volunteered and served in France, where he nurtured a devotion to St. Therese, the Little Flower. He visited the house where she was raised and became the first priest to celebrate Mass there which at the time was a little known shrine. He later was to begin a novena in honor of the Little Flower at St. Peter Claver. It brought together hundreds of white and black Catholics, in what Father Jervis called "the only place in the United States where whites joined their black brethren week after week in prayer, even though it was a time when blacks and whites were separate." Father Quinn returned from the war in ill health after being gassed with poison and suffered poor health for the rest of his life.

First Parish for Blacks

Upon arrival back in the diocese, he received permission from Bishop McDonnell to start a new parish for black people in Brooklyn. He worked with the Colored Catholic Club and established the parish of St. Peter Claver in what had been a Protestant church that later was turned into a warehouse depot. In his homily, Father Jervis referred to a pastoral letter written by Father Quinn to the people of St. Peter Claver. In it, he said, "I love you, I am proud of every one of you, and I would willingly shed to the last drop my lifes blood for the least among you." "I was shocked when I first read those words," exclaimed Father Jervis. In later years, Father Quinn referred to himself as "an adopted son of the Negro race." "In his quest to be an adopted son of the Negro race, he did not forsake his own Irish background," pointed out Father Jervis. "But he was able to get under the skin of the black race. He could feel the pain of injustice and indignity that was

systemic in society. Bernard Quinn identified his life with blacks without being the skin color of black." Father Quinn went on to establish a second parish for blacks in Jamaica named for St. Benedict the Moor and he established Little Flower Orphanage for black children in Wading River, L.I., despite having the building burned down twice by the Ku Klux Klan. As a practical matter, Father Jervis asked those devoted to Father Quinn's cause to support the campaign, both spiritually and financially. He requested that a prayer which he has composed for the process, be recited daily. He encouraged membership in the Bernard Quinn Guild. For more information, call Father Jervis at 718-622-4647. He said that a pilgrimage to France will be held to visit sites that touched the life of Father Quinn. Also a Mass will be celebrated each year around the date of Father Quinn's birthday, Jan. 15. A Mass will be celebrated April 3 at Holy Rood Cemetery, Westbury, L.I., where Msgr. Quinn is buried. "Most of all, I ask you to live out the spirit of Father Quinn's love and to wipe out every trace of racism in your heart," said Father Jervis. "Always be willing to open your hearts to the people of the world. An interested concelebrant was Msgr. William Rodgers, 85, chaplain at Queen of Peace Residence, Queens Village. He was a member of St. Peter Claver parish when he became the first black ever accepted into Brooklyn's diocesan seminary and to be ordained for the Brooklyn Diocese. Following the Mass, a reception and entertainment was held in the parish auditorium, across the street from the church.