

Saint Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church
600 Hamilton Street, Norristown, Pennsylvania, 19401
Telephone: 610-272-0402

Cardinal Dougherty established Saint Francis of Assisi (SFA) Church on June 9, 1923. His Eminence appointed Reverend Francis J. Ross, D.D. as the first rector. Father Ross resided at St. Patrick's rectory during the early phase of our parish. On Sunday, June 17, 1923, Father Ross celebrated the first masses of St. Francis of Assisi Parish at eight o'clock and ten o'clock a.m. on the lawn of the Charles D. McAvoy residence. Father Ross repeated his open air masses on the following Sunday. Daniel Skelly, recognizing the need for a more permanent place of worship, convinced the Hanranft family to allow a barn on their property to be used as a temporary church. On July 1, 1923, by the grace of God and the skills of the good men of the parish, the barn was transformed into our first church. This structure was used continuously until December 1923. The prayers of the congregation were especially strong during this period, preventing the occurrence of cold weather and heavy rain, either of which would have forced the closure of the church.



First St. Francis Chapel

On September 27, 1923, ground was broken on the corner of Marshall and Buttonwood Streets for a new church. On land that had once been used for farming, the men of the parish helped to erect a wooden building that would become the first permanent building of the parish. This purchase, for \$22,000 from the Fornance estate, would set the stage for the future expansion of our parish. With pews and kneelers made by the boys from the Protectory, one side altar donated by the B.V.M. Sodality, the Stations of the Cross paid for by various parish families and a small pipe organ from St. Patrick's, the first Mass was said in our new chapel on December 23, 1923. Later on, after the school building was erected, the chapel would serve as a meeting hall and the site for other parish activities, such as Communion breakfasts and youth dances.

In September 1924, the cornerstone of the school was laid. This building would serve a multitude of purposes throughout the history of our parish. The "Corson Streeters" raised fifty-one dollars and seventy-five cents during their annual street party on Kohn Street for the school building fund. (A 22% increase over the previous year.) The school, located on the middle floor, was opened in September 1927. The convent, which had been located at 572 Noble Street, was transferred to the top floor of the new building. Reverend Dennis A. Coghlan succeeded Father Ross in 1927 and led our parish until July 1944. This date marks the beginning of the next significant phase of our parish.



The School built in 1927

In July 1944, Father Charles J. McGovern was assigned to our parish as pastor. Father McGovern would be instrumental in building our present church, a new convent and a rectory. With a driven enthusiasm and a vision of the future. Father McGovern began the task of raising the funds necessary to fulfill his dreams. In 1949, the 25th year of our parish. Father McGovern put together a jubilee yearbook. Do you remember Haley's Paint Store. London Motors, or Helen's Restaurant? Shannon Coal Company offered a ton of coal and Steffano Furniture a Chippendale barrel chair as door prizes for the celebration. These local businesses, along with many others, helped make that jubilee a success. In 1951, Father McGovern opened the present convent. During the dedication ceremonies, Bishop Hugh L Lamb, who had officiated, remarked that a new church could be on its way, thus initiating the next phase of parish development.

Father McGovern laid the cornerstone for our present church in 1954. As part of the plan to build the church, the chapel was shifted to the bottom floor of the school building (now the parish hall/gymnasium). Door to door solicitations and parishioner pledges raised \$380,000 for the building. One of the major attractions during the construction was the placement of the Moses statue in the church. Traffic was stopped, and the school children were allowed to go outside to witness a giant crane lowering the statue into its place. Before the roof was completed the dome over the altar was also lowered into its place. Father McGovern researched and designed the stained glass windows of the church, using the famous churches of Rome as his models. On Sunday, November 13, 1955, the Most Reverend Edwin V. Byrne of Santa Fe, New Mexico dedicated our present church. Father McGovern directed his estate to pay off the debt left on the church after his death in 1964. Father McGovern lies next to the main entrance of the church he loved.



The Rectory built in 1949



The Convent as it appears today

Monsignor Howard Hood succeeded Father McGovern at SFA in 1962. Monsignor Flood was responsible for the construction of the school annex in 1968. Monsignor Flood also commissioned the mural of our patron saint in the church. Monsignor Flood became pastor emeritus in 1970.

Father Paul Maloney became our pastor in August 1969. Father Maloney would remain our pastor until November 1986. Father Maloney would be challenged by the need to maintain the beautiful buildings and grounds of the parish at a time of economic turmoil and shrinking collections. Father Maloney was instrumental in the placement of windows in the choir area, had the fans installed in the church, and established the Monday night bingo.

Father James F. Cassidy took up Father Maloney's burden in November 1986 but was stricken by

illness shortly after he began his tenure at St. Francis.

Father George P. Ettorre was assigned to SPA in November 1988. Father Ettorre set to his task of renewing the grandeur of St. Francis with enthusiasm. He sought to make spiritual and physical improvements to our parish. Father started the October celebration of the feast novena of St. Francis, the renewal of our Forty Hours Devotion, the Lenten Scripture Series, and a renewed commitment to the RCIA program. Father began the physical renewal with repairs to the rectory and convent. Then, at Father's request, donations were secured to

replace the original wooden doors of the church with doors depicting the significance of the saints in our lives. The bell tower, silent for many years, now sounds its renewed chimes for all to enjoy. A new heating system was installed, and the pews restored, as the refurbishing of the church continued. Father Ettorre established the pledge campaign, whose contributions are honored on plaques near the main entrance of the church. He began the cleaning and repainting of the church interior. Exterior improvements include restoration of the dome over the Baptistry, and the bell tower. The Ladies of St. Francis commissioned the creation and installation of the new permanent stone monument identifying our church.

The needs of our school have been addressed as well. Father Ettorre refurbished the school hall/gymnasium, including improvements to the kitchen and the installation of the air conditioning system, making it the focal point of the parish. The Ladies of St. Francis helped in this task by replacing the floor. Many activities take place here, including parish dances, Christmas bazaars, school graduation parties, CYO sporting events and school plays. Father Ettorre brought back bingo, not only as a source of funds, but to add to the diversity of parish life. The main roof of the school was replaced; rooms in the school painted, the heating system repaired, and the school made a better place to learn. Father Ettorre began the pre-school and CARES programs. He made weekly visits to the eighth grade class to teach the students Spanish. During Father's tenure, the St. Francis Carnival was established and has become a noted springtime event in Norristown.

More about Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic School...

Reverend Francis Ross blessed our school on August 29, 1926. In addition to the school, the church and convent were housed in the school building at Oak and Buttonwood Streets. The SFA school opened on September 7, 1926 with 176 students in the first through seventh grades. Mother Henrietta was the first Superior of the school, starting an association with the Sisters of Saint Joseph, which continues today.

Our school has helped many children to succeed in life through encouraging participation in academics, church functions, sports and community activities. In 1943 the school children were active in War Bond sales and received the Minute Man flag for their efforts. During this time period, St. Francis fielded its first football team and earned the name "Haley's Comets" after their spiritual leader, Father Haley, who later went into the Army as a Chaplain. Enrollment in 1943 had

increased to 345 students. Over the years, our school has put on a variety of shows and plays. In 1951, Show Boat was the theme of the show. Once upon a Summer was presented in 1960. Do you remember selling Gold, Silver and Blue patrons to support the shows? Oliver was a more recent addition to this fine tradition. The rousing Spring Shows of 1997 and 1998 continued our children's tradition of entertaining the parish with show tunes and exuberance. The children are also responsible for the Nativity tableau on Christmas Eve. As our school grew and society changed, the number of Sisters teaching at the school declined. Lay teachers have continued the Sisters of Saint Joseph tradition and have enriched our children's lives through their devotion and caring. The school has been active in supporting many charitable activities. Do you remember pagan baby ransoms and the Golden Mass for the poor? The Rice Bowl campaign continues the legacy of helping the poor.

The school annex, built by Monsignor Flood, helped to make St. Francis one of the largest schools in the area and to allow more students to receive a Catholic education. The annex has become the home of the lower grades, including kindergarten and pre-kindergarten. The annex has also been the staging ground for many of the parish activities including the feast, the carnival, Cub Scout and Brownie meetings and the after school CARES program.

Over the years, our school has enjoyed many famous visitors. Cardinal Bevilacqua was embraced by our children during a very special visit. Jerry Spinelli, hometown author of children books and William Fuller, from the Philadelphia Eagles spoke to the children during school assemblies. Other events that have added to the richness of school life at St. Francis have included outdoor Stations of the Cross, the Science Fair, Catholic Schools Week and Crazy Hat Day.

The Norristown Police Department sponsored a program where the children learned about safety on the streets and in the home. The sponsorship of the D.A.R.E. Program by the Home & School Association has educated our children on drug awareness. The parish CYO has administered numerous sports programs for the children of St. Francis for many years.

Our children continue to participate in many school activities. The annual Turkey Bowl is played between the seventh and eighth grades. The chess and checkers tournaments draw many players for the lunchtime competition. In the Spring, Field Day and the Walk-A-Thon are popular events. Halloween parades, Easter egg hunts and many other special happenings add color and memories to our children's lives.



Our Diamond Jubilee in 1997...

With the placement of the anniversary maroon and silver banners on the telephone poles in front of the church and the large wooden signs on the church lawn, we proclaimed our Diamond Jubilee to all. On June 8, 1997, the swirl of bagpipes announced the beginning of a yearlong celebration. A con-celebrated mass was offered by the Reverend John Marine. Vicar of Montgomery County assisted by our pastor, Reverend George Ettorre, Reverend James Donlan. pastor of St. Matthew of Conshohocken (a former assistant at St. Francis). Reverend Gaspar Genuardi. pastor of SS. Cosmas and Damien (a former parishioner), and our parochial Vicar. Father Kevin Trautner. Our guitar group, our children's choir, our adult choir and cantors. and guest instrumentalists performed music for the liturgy. Flag bearers representing the cultural diversity of our parish led the procession. The intercessions were offered in the various languages of the parish. A banquet of fine food, drink and fellowship at the Westover Country Club followed the mass. Rev. Genuardi was the principal speaker. The Mayor of Norristown presented our pastor with an award citing the contribution of our parish to the community. Many of our former parish priests, sisters along with hundreds of our parishioners, both past and present attended this great event. In July, an old-fashioned parish picnic was held at Perkiomen Park in Audubon. Root beer and hot dogs were shared by many parishioners and games were played on this hot summer Sunday. October marked the Feast of Saint Francis. We celebrated our patron saint with a weeklong novena and the blessing of the animals. This special week culminated in a festival of ethnic foods, music, rides and carnival games. The month closed with our Forty Hours Devotion.

A special All Souls Mass opened November, followed by the Ladies of St. Francis Christmas bazaar. St. Joseph University basketball coach. Phil Martelli, gave a motivational speech at our Family Communion Breakfast on November 16. A special Thanksgiving Mass was celebrated on Wednesday night. November 26. Father Ettorre presented all in attendance with blessed loaves of bread for their holiday meal.

In December. a Diamond Jubilee Holy Hour was celebrated. A Christmas party was held for all of our parish "servants." The Advent season and Christmas celebrations took on a special significance in this important year.

January 1998 was not a slow month! A Winter Dance, a "Night at the Races" and a "Celebrating our Children" program which featured movies, pizza and a clown were the highlights of the month. A special Holy Hour for mothers was offered as well.

On Saint Valentine's Day we celebrated "God's Gift of Love." Our married couples renewed their marriage vows at the Saturday evening Mass and attended a dinner dance in the school hall after the celebration of Mass. Live music and fine food highlighted the evening.

March events were inaugurated with the administering of the Sacraments of Initiation for our RCIA

class at the Easter Vigil. A photodrama, featuring old pictures and other memorabilia gathered for our jubilee, was presented in the school hall on Palm Sunday. Our annual spring Carnival was held during the week of April 21. God favored us with good weather and the carnival was a success.

May was an important month. Our second graders received their First Communion and the entire school along with all the CCD classes honored Mary at the May Procession.

Our Diamond Jubilee celebration closed on June 7, 1998. A con-celebrated Mass was offered with Bishop Louis DeSimone, Auxiliary Bishop of Philadelphia, as the principal celebrant. Bishop DeSimone was assisted by our pastor, Father George Ettorre. Monsignor Charles Devlin, Vicar for Renewal and Evangelization. Monsignor Richard Skelly from Our Lady of Perpetual Help (Morton, PA), our parochial Vicar, Father Kevin Trautner and Reverend Mr. John Orlando. International flag bearers led the procession and the Knights of Columbus served as honor guards. The liturgy was supported by our guitar group, children's choir, adult choir and cantors, and guest instrumentalists. This special year of spiritual and physical renewal was concluded by a dinner dance with Monsignor Skelly as the principal speaker.

In 2002 Reverend Kevin C. Trautner succeeded Father Ettorre, who had taken ill in 2000. Father Trautner acted as parish administrator until Father Ettorre's death in 2002. Father Trautner had been an assistant at St. Francis since 1993 and was already well established with the parishioners. He had celebrated his silver jubilee in the priesthood in 1999. Father Trautner was loved dearly by the parishioners and school children of SFA. He passed away unexpectedly on March 13, 2007. At his funeral, Bishop Cistone said he had never seen so many parishioners come out for a priest's funeral in his life. The Norristown Fire Department gave Father an impressive escort to the cemetery. In addition to his devout service to SFA Parish, Father Trautner was active in the community and participated in many organizations. He was instrumental in forming the parish-based Knights of Columbus Council at St. Francis, and was its first Chaplain. The Council was named Reverend George P. Ettorre Council #13662, in honor of his predecessor, whom he loved and respected. Father Trautner was also Friar of the Father Tomko Assembly #934 Knights of Columbus Fourth Degree, active in the St. Patrick's Day Observance Association of Philadelphia, the Ancient Order of Hibernians of Norristown, Notre Dame Division, the Yacht Club of Stone Harbor, New Jersey, the Valley Forge Council Sons of Italy, Chaplain of the Norristown Police Department and the Norristown Fire Department. Father Trautner founded the "Saint Francis Forever Committee" with a group of parishioners to ensure the continued viability of the parish.

In 2007, Reverend Vincent F. Welsh, J.C.L., M.A., M.Div. succeeded Father Trautner as Pastor of St. Francis. Father Welsh's installation Mass was on May 20, 2007, the 18th anniversary of his Ordination. The Most Reverend Daniel E. Thomas, D.D., V.G., Auxiliary Bishop, Archdiocese of Philadelphia, was the principal celebrant and homilist. Father Welsh came to us as the Pastor of the Church of St. Philip Neri in Queen's Village, Philadelphia, Pa. Father Welsh established himself quickly at SFA, and we saw many improvements in the spiritual and physical aspects of our parish early in his administration. We were truly blessed to have Fr. Welsh as our pastor for five years.

In 2012 Fr. Christopher Cooke was appointed administrator of St. Francis of Assisi Parish. Fr. Cooke held this position for one year and was then assigned to St. Charles Seminary to head the Spirituality Year program for men entering the seminary.

After Fr. Cooke's departure Fr. James E. Goerner was appointed pastor in June 2013. Fr. Goerner was previously pastor of St. Bartholomew Parish, Philadelphia and most recently St. Laurence Parish in Upper Darby. One of the first things that Fr. Goerner addressed was the need for a new roof on the rectory which was installed by the end of August 2013. Early in 2014 the leadership of the Sisters of St. Joseph approached Fr. Goerner and told him that the three remaining Sisters in the convent would be moving to Villa St. Joseph in Flourtown. It was a sad day to see the Sisters of St. Joseph leave our parish. The order had been a presence here since 1927. The first floor of the empty convent was cleaned out, painted and re-carpeted. In September of 2014 the former convent was officially renamed "The Meetinghouse". In "The Meetinghouse" the former dining room is now used for meetings of 15 to 20 people and the former community room can accommodate meetings of up to 35 people. The basement of the building was also cleaned out and new lighting was added. Today part of the basement is now the craft room for the Ladies of St. Francis while the remainder is used for seasonal storage.

St. Francis of Assisi School enrollment continues to grow. We are projecting an enrollment in September 2016 of 220 students. That is an increase of 15 students from last school year and an increase of 57 students since 2010 when the enrollment was 163! The breakdown for school enrollment is approximately 75% Catholic and 25% non-Catholic. The number of students in our Religious Education Program (CCD) is also on the rise and we will have close to 200 students enrolled this academic year. In both the school and Religious Ed programs enrollment numbers are for students in grades K-8. The number of children in the Early Learning Center (ELC) is also on the rise from last year increasing from the low to mid-seventies last year to the mid-eighties this year.

The Pastors of St. Francis of Assisi, Norristown, Pennsylvania



Rev. Msgr. Francis J. Ross
1923



Rev. Denis A. Coghlin
1927



Rev. Charles J. McGovern
1945



Rev. Msgr. Howard R. Flood
1962



Rev. Paul Maloney
1969



Rev. James F. Cassidy



Rev. George P. Ettorre
1988



Rev. Kevin G. Trautner
2002



Rev. Vincent F. Welsh
2006



Rev. James E. Goerner
2013

Did you know . . .

- the boundaries of SFA extended to Collegeville at one time?
- the Moses statue is one of the only two in the world?
- St. Eleanor's parish sent their students to our school until they were able to build their own?
- high school grades were once posted in the earlier editions of the church bulletin?
- in 1978, triplets attended SFA school?
- the 1st Catholic Boy Scout Troop in Montgomery County was established at SFA?

Epilogue . . .

We leave this history to our future generations, so that they will know something of our past, and the sacrifices that have been made to create and nurture our parish of Saint Francis of Assisi.



His Holiness

paternally imparts a special

Apostolic Blessing

to

**Rev. George F. Etterre and
the Parish Community**

of St. Francis of Assisi Parish, Norristown,
on the occasion of the 75th Anniversary
of the founding of the Parish - 1923/1998
as a pledge of continued divine
protection .

Ex Aedibus Vaticanis die 15.1.1998

+ Oscar Rizzato
Archiepiscopus
Elemosynarius Apostolicus



Office of the Cardinal
222 N. 17th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19103-1299

May 11, 1998



Reverend George P. Ettorre
Saint Francis of Assisi Parish
600 Hamilton Street
Norristown, PA 19401

Dear Father Ettorre:

On the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of Saint Francis of Assisi Parish, Norristown, I wish to extend to you and your parishioners my sincere congratulations and best wishes.

The observance of this milestone in the life of your parish Community provides you with a fitting occasion to give thanks and praise to God for the many blessings He has bestowed upon Saint Francis of Assisi Church. Throughout the years, the people of Saint Francis of Assisi Parish have experienced the love and saving grace of the Lord. I join you in giving praise and thanks to God for all His goodness to the Parish.

I am grateful for the way the people of your Parish have continually responded to God over these past seventy-five years. They have been faithful and generous members of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and have witnessed to Christ and the Church by the example of their lives. Permit me to borrow the words of Saint Paul who wrote to the Philippians, "I give thanks to my God every time I think of you" (Phil. 1:3).

Please be assured that you and all the faithful of Saint Francis of Assisi Parish will have a special remembrance in my prayers at this special time in the life of your parish and always. May the Lord bless you with renewed faith, hope and love and may He fill you with every good gift.

With prayerful best wishes, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Archbishop of Philadelphia

Dear Parishioners,

The year 1998 marks another milestone in the history of St. Francis of Assisi Parish - the 75th Anniversary of the founding of St. Francis. Anniversaries afford us an opportunity to reflect on the past and look hopefully to the future. Through St. Francis, as a parish, Jesus has come into our midst in a special way. Here, thousands of people have grown in the knowledge and love of God and in realizing their ultimate goal in life - their eternal salvation.

The first parishioners came from many walks of life and from varied locations. They also formed a strong faith community which continues today. They toiled to make a dream a reality. They struggled through periods of tribulation, they worshipped together, gave their time, their money and their love to strengthen the Church.

The Lord has blessed so many people - those who have gone before us, as well as those who are here today.

Our sentiments on this 75th Anniversary are feelings of thanksgiving and praise for the people who have made up this parish.

We also are conscious of our religious responsibility to pass on to future generations the great gifts of our Christian heritage that others have given us.

Our forebearers in St. Francis have passed the baton of Faith to us. It is now up to us to be living examples of that Faith in action. May the Lord guide us in our efforts to continue to be the means through which all the people of our community will come to a deeper knowledge and love of God and our salvation in Jesus Christ.

Sincerely in Our Lord,



*Rev. George P. Ettore, M.A., M.Ed., M.Div.
Pastor*

To be continued . . .

