

The Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

December 8, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Genesis 3:8–15, 20**; *Psalms 98:1–6*; *Ephesians 1:3–6, 11–12*; *Luke 1:26–38*

Newbury Frost Read's *The Story of St. Mary's* includes a very brief account of the congregation's beginnings by the Reverend Thomas McKee Brown, whose vision for the renewal of congregational worship continues to touch the lives of those, who for a hundred and fifty years today, have entered this congregation's church home and discovered a special a place where God's grace, forgiveness, love, and fellowship with others can be found.

Father Brown called his account of this congregation's origins, "A Short History of the Foundation of the Parish of Saint Mary-The-Virgin, New York City. 1867-1868." It begins: "The result of several conversations between Mr. Henry Kingsland Leonard and the Rev. Thomas McKee Brown, concerning the establishment of a Free Church in this City of New York, to be worked upon a thoroughly Catholic basis, was the receiving advice from the Bishop, who pointed out the locality where such a church would be most likely needed.

“Upon a clear, cold and windy afternoon of November, 1867, the two gentlemen above named started upon a tour of inspection, to find out a suitable position. They noted a number of vacant lots, among which were the present ones.”—that is, on West Forty-fifth Street, the location of the first church—
 “The owner, Mr. John Jacob Astor, Jr., upon learning the object, at once presented the three lots, stipulating, that the Church should be free, and positively orthodox in management and working.

“Upon this very liberal gift being made known, a number of Gentlemen associated themselves together, meeting frequently at the house of Mr. William Scott . . . accepted the gift, and met formally to *Break the Ground* upon the afternoon of April 6th, 1868.”

Father Brown wrote these words about the mission of this parish: “The Rev. Flavel Scott Mines, is to be the Associated Priest in Charge, with the Revd. Mr. Brown, who enter upon the work, not only with the intention of preaching the comfortable Gospel of Christ, and of ministering the Holy Sacraments to His people, but also, of restoring to its proper place and importance the *Worship* of God—the rendering *Adoration* to Him as a *Congregational* and *ceremonial* act, (made beautiful, majestic and impressive by all the

outward adornments, which are called the Beauty of Holiness, springing from the heart[, that is, love] within, devotion)]; but, which in later times have been forgotten.”¹

In an account in the December 1891 issue of *The Arrow*, Saint Mary’s first newsletter, discovers this about Father Brown, “Declining the offer of a New England Bishop to establish a parish in his diocese and remaining at the request of Bishop Potter in the, then, Diocese of New York, [Father Brown] resolved, with God’s help, to start a Church in New York City with the Daily Eucharist. St. Mary’s was the result of that resolution.”²

There are many newspaper accounts of the first service of Saint Mary’s second church home on this date in 1895—you can find them in Mr. Read’s book. In the February 1892 issue of *The Arrow*, is, I think, the best account we have of what happened one hundred and fifty years ago today at 228 West Forty-fifth Street: “The Church was first opened for worship on Thursday, December eighth, the Feast of the

¹ Newbury Frost Read, *The Story of St. Mary's: The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York City, 1868–1931* (New York, 1931), 16–18.

² <https://www.stmvirgin.org/the-arrow-archives>: *The Arrow*, December 1891, Vol. 1, No. 3, 6.

Conception, in the year of our Lord, 1870. The first service was a celebration of the Holy Communion, a Missa Cantata” —Sung Mass—“at seven in the morning. The Rev. Thos. McKee Brown, was the Celebrant. There were sixty communicants. Later there was choral morning prayer. The High Celebration took place at about 11 o’clock . . .The Celebrant was Bishop Horatio Southgate, [who had been the Episcopal Church’s Missionary Bishop of the Dominions and Dependencies of the Sultan of Turkey] . . . assisted by the Rev. Thos. McKee Brown, as deacon, and the Rev. Walter B. Noyes, as subdeacon.”³ Saint Mary’s became the first congregation to introduce a daily celebration of the Eucharist in the Episcopal parishes of New York.

One of the blessings of this present, challenging time for me has been the opportunity to walk, as it were, in a new way with Saint Paul because of the daily Mass and the daily Office. Not a few scholars would argue that some of the New Testament’s best theology, found in the Letter to the Colossians and the Letter to the Ephesians, are extensions of Paul’s thought by

³ <https://www.stmvirgin.org/the-arrow-archives>, *The Arrow*, February 1892, Vol. 1, No. 5., 5.

other writers.⁴ These letters are indeed very good news. Reading what are generally Paul's "undisputed" letters,⁵ gives one a different appreciation of Paul's heart and his love for his sisters and brothers in Christ. The last of the seven is his Letter to the Romans, thought to be written between the years 55 and 58.⁶ He isn't in Rome, but they already know of him.

For a brief period, the Church of St. Paul and the Redeemer in Chicago had a newsletter named with words from Romans using the translation of The New English Bible.⁷ John McCausland wrote the newsletter. Later, we were classmates at Nashotah House Seminary and ordained together in Chicago. He's now retired. He preached for my institution as rector here on Annunciation March, 1999. These are words John used from Romans, "Let us then pursue the things for make for peace and build up the common life."⁸

In John's gospel, we hear and learn at the supper before the Passover about Jesus' last gift to his

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 586.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 406.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 560.

⁷ *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha Oxford Study Edition*, eds. Samuel Sandmel, M. Jack Suggs, Arnold J. Tkacik (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁸ Romans 14:19.

disciples. Jesus said, “Peace is my last gift to you, my own peace I now leave with you; peace which the world cannot give, I give to you.”⁹

Anxiety is abroad in our land. Much of it is born from legitimate concerns. May I remind myself and you that faith is God’s gift to us to strengthen us in what comes our way in this journey of life that we have been given.

I really miss us singing in church. Songs of faith that can almost always take us closer to the path God wants us to walk in this life. The pandemic has kept us from singing, and will keep us from singing for the foreseeable future. I hope that before the end of the summer we will again be able to sing together to praise God and for the grace that comes to us through singing. I close with eighteenth-century words from Charles Wesley and a reminder of an eighteenth-century tune by Augustine Arne that we would be singing today if we could. This is the last verse of the hymn “Lo, he comes, with clouds descending:”

*Yea, amen! Let all adore thee, high on thine eternal throne;
Savior take the power and glory; claim the kingdom for thine
own:*

⁹ John 14:27.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Thou shalt reign, and thou alone.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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