

## **History of Saint Raymond of Penafort Parish**

*Paraphrased from the Parish Jubilee Book of 1992*

### **THE BEGINNING**

On Friday, November 21, 1941 Father Richard Kearney sat in the rectory at Our Mother of Sorrows parish in West Philadelphia when the phone rang. It was a message from Dennis Cardinal Dougherty who wished to meet with him on Monday, the 24<sup>th</sup>. On that day at 10:00 a.m., the Cardinal invited Father Kearney to assemble a flock from the existing parishes of St. Athanasius, St. Therese (*the parish was closed in 2013*), Seven Dolors (*the parish was closed in 2004*), Immaculate Conception and Holy Cross (*the parish was reconfigured in 2013*) to form a new parish in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

The newly designated pastor was also asked to choose the patron saint of the parish he was to found. Father Kearney chose a little-known Dominican saint of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Saint Raymond of Penafort. Saint Raymond was known for having revised the manner and form of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and for his deep devotion to the poor of the Spanish countryside in the village of Penafort.

Father Kearney began his new mission with his arrival at his new parish on November 25, 1941. It is interesting to note that no other new parish was formed in the Archdiocese until December 1945, months after the war ended. On December 7, 1941 that fateful day a small group met and prayed in the dining room of Nolan's farmhouse within the boundaries of the new St. Raymond's parish. They discussed the difficulty of finding a suitable place of worship. None of the existing halls

in the area were available. In an act of great kindness and generosity, the Nolan family, non-Catholics, offered the use of their home for meetings. They suggested their large stone barn as a place of worship. Mass was offered in thanksgiving at the farmhouse and the members were asked to spread the word that on Sunday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, the formal Opening Mass of the parish would be held at the barn on the Nolan property – a barn to welcome Jesus.

There was no heat in the barn. There were no pews or seats of any kind, but the 300 dedicated worshippers didn't seem to consider this a hardship as they gathered in the cold barn, with animals nearby, to celebrate Mass at 9:30 and again at 11:00. They prayed for world peace and the safety of our servicemen and women. Saint Raymond Church had begun and the Parish Family was together. The "Barn" now become a church and was soon a "bragging right" for members of the new congregation that drew much attention from neighbors as well as publicity from local newspapers.

The farm on which the barn sat was bought by the Nolan family around 1901. Lovingly called "Nolan's Barn" by parishioners, it sat 372 feet above sea level, one of the highest points in Philadelphia. It was built in 1839 by Isaac Williams with stone gathered from the field. It was constructed without nails, held together instead by wooden pegs. The Barn was a vivid expression of a community's determination to possess a place of worship, however humble. The barnyard in the rear was filled with farm animals, and hearing roosters crow and cows moo during Mass was an ordinary thing.

## **THE BARN BECOMES A CHURCH**

The spirit of unity at Saint Raymond's began through its many organizations and ministries. The "Hatchet and Saw Club" was formed almost immediately under the direction of Father Kearney. The club included all men in the parish not in the armed forces, as well as several Protestant neighbors who volunteered their services. The membership was a diverse mix of blue- and white-collar workers comparable with the make-up of our parish today. Through the efforts of one of the club's members who was a contractor, lumber and other supplies discarded by various Army projects in Philadelphia were salvaged and brought to the Barn at his expense. One bit of salvage was a heavy piece of mahogany, which became the altar rail.

Thanks to the Hatchet and Saw Club, by the winter of 1942-1943 the old stone barn was better equipped to protect parishioners from the rigors of cold weather and a great pride was evidenced in their accomplishments. The transformation was a magnificent one to behold. Though still a barn, the stone building gradually came to house a fully-equipped chapel, one where the parishioners could worship in comfort. The Barn had become a church, a House of the Lord. Strong and hearty people had a common purpose in 1943. Throughout the country, and specifically in Mount Airy, the gift of Hope reigned. This hope was a prelude to many years of an on-going building process. The type of work begun by the Hatchet and Saw Club was to be seen again and again through the efforts of the men and women of St. Raymond's. Is it any wonder that in 1990 the men would formally declare themselves the

“Men of St. Raymond” committed to a future of on-going maintenance and improvement of the parish buildings?

The Hatchet and Saw Club was paralleled by the “Needle and Thread Club”. This group of women prepared the vestments and linens for the altar. Their care and dedication allowed the simplicity of the Barn to be enriched by beautiful decorations and appointments. Today, the other women of our parish family continue this fine tradition.

On January 11, 1942, a most important organizational meeting was held in the Nolan home. The purpose of this meeting was to form the “Church Debt Society” to provide funds for new grounds and buildings for the parish. Many generously volunteered their services. Spiritually, the most important groups founded in the early 1940’s were the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Holy Name Society. They were the rock upon which many other organizations were formed and most social gatherings were rooted in these organizations. The Sodality of the BVM was an organization for the women of the parish, guiding their spiritual life in imitation of the Blessed Mother. The Holy Name Society served the men of the parish, guiding them towards holiness in the things of everyday life.

These first organizations accurately depict the spirit, the unselfishness and the dedication that emerged in those early years. Today, the men and women of St. Raymond’s continue to donate their skill, time and energy in all aspects of parish maintenance and ministry. They are worthy successors of the early pioneers of the parish.

## **ESTABLISHING ROOTS**

The Feast of St. Raymond of Penafort, which then was celebrated January 23<sup>rd</sup> (and was moved to January 7<sup>th</sup> in the late 1960s following Vatican Council II) was an exciting day in 1943. It was the first time the Feast of the Parish Patron was celebrated. In a manner befitting the patron of Canon Lawyers, the Feast was celebrated with a “Red Mass”, as was the annual custom of the Thomas Moore Society and the Catholic Lawyers Association of Philadelphia. The Mass, a special liturgy for judges and lawyers was celebrated at the new parish. This was a great honor, and in just six weeks St. Raymond’s was known to all in the city and the Archdiocese. On April 12, 1942, the first rectory was established some blocks away from the Barn at 8018 and 8020 Michener Street. These two houses were directly across from Temple Stadium. The house at 8018 served as the residence for priests and the one at 8020 was the chapel for weekday Masses and the Parish Office.

It was also on January 23, 1943 that the first census and visitation of the parish began. Based on the spiritual records of the parish, there were 242 families. Twenty years later this number had grown to 1,800 families. Less than one year after the parish was established, a large plot of land adjoining the hill where the Barn stood was acquired by the Archdiocese. This one day would be the site of a new Church, School, Convent and Rectory.

## **THE NEW CHURCH**

After a six and one-half year wait, the parish of Saint Raymond was ready to move from the Barn and construct a new house of worship.

Permission was granted to Fr. Kearney by Dennis Cardinal Dougherty on April 8, 1947 to start work on the new church. The building was to be designed with an eye toward future expansion. Plans called for the site to contain a basement large enough temporarily house the new St. Raymond Parish School. On Sunday, July 11, 1948 the grounds for the new church were blessed by Fr. Kearney. Following a procession from Nolan's Barn to the new site, 1,000 parishioners, friends and well-wishers from other parishes marched and offered prayers of thanksgiving, followed by a Sermon and Solemn Benediction. Forty-five priests took part in the ceremony, the theme of which was "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad."

July of 1948 to February 1949 was an exciting period for the St. Raymond Parish Family as the progress of construction was scrutinized by the now 700 families who had outgrown the Barn. In February of 1949 the Church was dedicated. Great joy was experienced by all as they entered the new "Home of the Lord." The new Church was a beautiful structure of dark wood that allowed parishioners to remember those first days in Nolan's barn. The cost of the Church was \$350,000, much of which the Parish had raised before construction began.

## **GROWTH AND EXPANSION**

St. Raymond remained a very busy place throughout 1949. The new Church/School had been constructed with four classrooms directly beneath the body of the church (this area was later renamed "The Academy"). In the early days of St. Raymond, children from the Parish attended St. Athanasius School and the Sisters of St. Joseph would travel to St. Raymond on Sundays to catechize children who attended

Public Schools. The Sisters of Mercy of Merion accepted the invitation to staff the new St. Raymond School and the long, deep and rewarding relationship with the “Mercies” began. The first Sisters arrived under the direction of first Principal/ and Superior, Sister Mary Redempta, RSM. The Sisters of Mercy moved into the Michener Street house which had served as the first Rectory. Months earlier the priests had moved to a new Rectory on Williams Avenue directly across from the Church. These homes (located at 7971, 7973 and 7975 Williams Avenue) would serve as the Rectory until 1965 when the current building was constructed. By now the Barn was history, a most happy memory for all.

The early fifties were days of steady growth. The school located in the basement of the church was bursting at the seams. By April of 1952, it was evident that a proper School must be built. With the approval of the Archdiocese, construction began on March 9, 1953. At the same time, it became clear that a new Convent was needed to accommodate the twelve sisters who would be called upon to staff the new School. The Parish chose the far corner of the Parish property at Forrest Avenue and Phil-Ellena Street.

The new school opened officially on September 9, 1953 with an enrollment of 708 students and was blessed on September 27, 1953 by Archbishop John O’Hara. Fireproof and modern in every way, it incorporated the latest in school construction and equipment. The School was built with a full Parish Hall and Kitchen in the Basement, six large classrooms and offices on the First Floor and six large classrooms and a Faculty Lounge on the Second Floor (two of these classrooms

were later converted to a Library and Computer Room; a Science Lab is located on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor of the Church which is accessible through the School). The new School cost \$380,000 and much of the work necessary to get the building ready to be opened was completed by members of the parish who generously offered their time and talent. Sister M. Redempta left St. Raymond in 1955 and was succeeded by Sister Mary Regina, RSM who served as Principal until 1961.

## **THE 1960s**

By 1963 the Church had been in use for fourteen years. The School building was celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Convent was filled with Sisters of Mercy, their new building costing \$276,000. The three priests who served St. Raymond continued to live in the three homes on Williams Avenue. Late in 1963 construction began on a new Rectory. At its completion, the parish structures formed a total unit, an accomplishment that took 22 years to achieve. The new rectory was scheduled for occupancy in April of 1965. Father Kearney, in failing health, predicted he would never live to see its completion, and his premonition proved correct. On December 20, 1964, at the age of 68, Father Kearney died suddenly in the rectory. Two days later, with students from St. Raymond School forming an honor guard along the driveway, his body was transported to the Church. Mass was celebrated by Archbishop John Krol on December 23, 1964 with over 75 priests present and the Church filled with caring and grateful worshipers. Fr. Kearney's body was buried on the parish grounds in front of the Church along Vernon Road. The tomb remains today as a monument to his 23 years of forming and leading his flock. It is upon his commitment and



example that future Pastors have continued to build the faith of their people and the success of the parish.

On February 26, 1965 Father Charles Diegel was appointed Pastor of St. Raymond. He continued the spirit of the founding Pastor and built upon existing programs and initiatives. A spirit of ecumenism came alive at St. Raymond, long before it existed in other Catholic Churches. Perhaps because of the fact that the Nolan's were Protestant, perhaps because of the demographics of Mount Airy, perhaps because of the spirit of the parishioners: there was an openness and dialogue among all of the Christian Churches in the neighborhood.

St. Raymond School was blessed with three new Principals in tis decade: Sister Mary Virgo, RSM (1961-1963), Sister Mary Gabriel, RSM (1963-1969) and Sister Mary Rita McSorley, RSM (1969-1970). Each Sister of Mercy brought her own gifts and talents that contributed to the success of our Parish School.

The sixties brought change to the Church, the world, our country, the city, and St. Raymond's. Throughout the city and surrounding counties, families began to seek new roots. In a relatively short period of time, over 50% of the neighborhood was populated by Black families desiring to stay within the city limits and at the same time benefit from the suburban atmosphere of the neighborhood. The area was not completely prepared for such a sudden influx of changing neighborhood culture, and a period of unrest occurred. Some local news accounts painted a dreary picture of the area at that time, but the one rock of stability was Saint Raymond Church. While all around her was changing, the Church with its many services reached out to all. Not

every venture was a success, but there was and is pride in how St. Raymond's stood tall in the midst of these changes.

Due to poor health, Father Diegel retired on June 2, 1967 and died on October 2, 1967 at the age of 67. The Cardinal appointed Father Bart Fair as the Third Pastor. Father Fair was a Canon Lawyer like Father Kearney and had spent 25 years as a Professor at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary. A robust, ruddy-faced, smiling storyteller, Fr. Fair encouraged and embraced all in the parish. In many aspects, the parish was never more alive than during his short time as Pastor. He renewed the community spirit, encouraged the spiritual growth of parishioners and began Ethnic Celebrations and Family Masses. Recognizing that the young were the future of the Church, Fr. Fair initiated many programs to include them in the life of the Church, especially CYO sports. Fr. Fair suffered a massive heart attack on January 8, 1971 and died.

## **1970s**

Among the many changes in the Church during the 1970s was an end to what had been known as "Convert Classes". In place of this long tradition, where individuals wanting to become Catholic would meet one on one with the priest, St. Raymond began the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Beginning with Father George Moore, and continuing under the watchful eye of Father Joseph Corley and Father William McGeown, the RCIA would assist hundreds of people in the journey with the Lord and His Church.

On February 19, 1971 Father George Friel, Principal of John W. Hallahan High School in Philadelphia, was appointed the Fourth Pastor of St. Raymond Church. Having spent most of his priesthood in high school, he began his work at St. Raymond with some anxiety. He sought to fully implement the Decrees of the Second Vatican Council which had taken place in the 1960s, especially the new ways of celebrating the Sacraments and the design of the Church. Less than a year into his time at St. Raymond, Father Friel suffered a heart attack and died in his room in January of 1972. The Assistant Pastor at the time, Father Peter Fitzpatrick, was named as the Fifth Pastor on February 6, 1972. While the people were still grieving the loss of two Pastors in a year, they rejoice in having "Father Fitz" as their new Pastor.

The staff of St. Raymond School underwent great change throughout the decade as the positions long staffed by more than fifty different Sisters of Mercy gradually gave way to lay teachers, mostly faithful women who responded to God's call to take up this vital work in the life of our Church. The lay teachers were blessed with two gifted Principals during these years: Sister Corinne Ritchie, RSM (1970-1977) and Sister Mary Jo McGinley, RSM (1977-1983).

In 1974 the Leisure Club began. Their by-laws state that a member had to be over 50 chronologically but 21 in spirit! The members lived up to this expectation as they gathered week after week for socialization and service. The Leisure Club provided a wonderful opportunity for our Seniors and continues to this today as a cherished part of the St. Raymond Family. The group disbanded in 2010.

In 1976 Father Fitz left St. Raymond when he was made Pastor of St. Patrick Church in Center City Philadelphia. John Cardinal Krol sent Father George Boyle to serve as the 6<sup>th</sup> Pastor of St. Raymond Church.

## **1980s**

As the City of Philadelphia continued to experience a decline in population throughout the 1980s, St. Raymond did not remain unaffected. The number of families worshipping each weekly declined as people continued movement to the suburbs. While faces may have changed, the enthusiasm of the early years remained as people sought to build the Kingdom of God in Mount Airy and West Oak Lane.

Sister Gail Osborne, RSM returned to St. Raymond School as Principal in 1983. Sister Gail had previously served as a first-grade teacher. Her energy, enthusiasm and love for our school children were a tremendous blessing to our parish community. While the number of students who professed faith as a Catholic decline in the 1980s, many children and their families were welcomed into the Church during these years. New traditions were added to the school year and our school continued to strive to provide a quality Catholic Education. The ever-expanding world of technology reached St. Raymond when a Computer Lab was added to the school and computers installed in Classrooms as well as the School and Parish Offices. What many considered a “fad” would slowly change the way business was handled, education unfolded and even how the parish reached out to new members.

In June of 1987 Father Boyle was made Pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Havertown. The 7<sup>th</sup> Pastor of St. Raymond would be Father John

O'Brien who many in the community knew from his earlier ministries at St. Elizabeth and Our Lady of the Holy Souls Parishes in North Philadelphia. Father O'Brien would bring a new energy, new music and new ideas to the parish, transforming the community into a family.

## **1990s**

Throughout the 1990s the parish gained a new identity for its hospitality and sense of service to the larger community. Building on the foundation of the many years of faithful witness, St. Raymond would be a leading advocate in the community for an end to violence, prejudice, and injustice of every kind. Throughout the decade a variety of priests served as Assistance Pastors and Residents including Fr. Fred Britto (the first African-American priest to serve at the parish), Fr. Mike Hennelly (who arrived as a newly ordained priest), Fr. Emil Osterick and Fr. Paul Quinter. Many lay parishioners become involved in Parish Pastoral Council, the Finance Council, the Men of St. Raymond and Women's Day.

Under the direction of some very patient and generous parents, St. Raymond developed a tremendous youth ministry program in the 1980s that grew throughout the 1990s. A Junior CYO fed into a High School CYO that was recognized as one of the best programs in the Archdiocese. Many of these young people would later form a Young Adult Ministry called the STRAYS.

As part of the St. Raymond Parish celebration of its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 1991, the Parish undertook some minor renovations of the Church. A new crucifix was added as a central focus in the sanctuary, the rear of

the Church was redesigned to offer a prominent place for Baptisms as well as to allow for Viewings to take place in Church (*the area was repurposed in 2010*). A new Altar and Pulpit were brought into the sanctuary, having been at St. Albert the Great Church in Huntington Valley for many years; these remained in use until 2010.

CARES was added as a service to our School Families in 1991 to assist the increasing number of working parents. CARES allows parents to drop off their children before the school days begins and keeps them safe until the evening hours when the parents pick them up on the way home from work. Our School continued to strive for excellence in every way. While the cost of operating a parish school continued to increase, St. Raymond Parish remained committed to this grace filled service to our parish families and the larger community.

With only a few Sisters of Mercy remaining in the Convent, the early 1990s saw the creation of Katherine Drexel Residence on our property. Twenty-five women moved into the Convent in a program sponsored by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's Catholic Social Services. A few Sisters of Mercy remained in a small apartment that was built on the third floor of the building. Many of the new residents would become active members of the St. Raymond Family throughout the years. The Archdiocese closed the program in June 2009 and St. Raymond House opened in the property in 2015 during the visit of Pope Francis; the program serves disabled individuals who had been homeless.

## **THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

As the world moved into the New Millennium, St. Raymond Parish continued to look towards its future with great hope. Father O'Brien, with the assistance of insightful parishioners, began a \$300,000 capital campaign to provide much needed renovations to the parish. The members of the Church family responded with tremendous generosity which allowed for a new roof on the Church, concrete work, parking lot resurfacing and new doors for the Church. Through these same faithful stewards, the parish was able to return to fiscal solvency and retire debt to the Archdiocese, some of which dated to the time of Father Kearney.

Father O'Brien was honored by the Holy Father with the title of "Monsignor" in recognition of his years of dedicated Pastoral Service, including his years at St. Raymond. Msgr. O'Brien's gentle manner and kind smile was a tremendous blessing to the parish. He encouraged each person to reach their greatest potential in the parish and in the world. The people of the parish will do well to remember his constant admonition: LOOK UP!

In 2007 St. Raymond reached a new milestone. Sister Gail Osborn retired as Principal of our School and began working in the Parish Office. After an extensive search, the Parish hired Mrs. Patricia Wright as our first lay principal. Mrs. Wright, who with her husband Robert had been a St. Raymond parishioner for many years, had been serving as the Eighth-Grade teacher. Her initiative, dedication and goodness have contributed to Parish School's continued growth in excellence. Our faculty is an amazing group of lay teachers, dedicated to guiding our young people to a relationship with Jesus Christ and to reach their

greatest human potential (*the parish entered an agreement with Independence Mission Schools to operate the school in 2012*).

In June of 2008 Msgr. John O'Brien retired as Pastor of St. Raymond after twenty-one years of faithful service. Justin Cardinal Rigali appointed Father Christopher M. Walsh as the 8<sup>th</sup> Pastor of St. Raymond. Like several pastors who preceded him, Father Chris came to St. Raymond after years of teaching high school. The youngest Pastor in the Archdiocese at the time of his appointment, Father Chris built on the legacy of Msgr. O'Brien and the other men who have served our Parish Family. During his time as Pastor, Father Chris retired the parish debt, led the parish through the time of pandemic, initiated a beautiful way of being a church through life groups, the promotion of racial healing and reconciliation through conversations on race and the initiation of town halls.

In June 2022, Father Jeffrey Rott was assigned to Parochial Administrator of the parish, bringing his own unique gifts and talents to the service of the Parish Family.

In 2015, as Pope Francis visited Philadelphia, the former Convent was re-opened at St. Raymond House, permanent supportive housing for men and women. The program, operated by DePaul USA, recognizes the dignity of each person they serve and honors them as a sister of brother following a period of homelessness.

During the tumultuous year of 2020, as the world dealt with the Corona Virus Pandemic and our nation dealt with horrific racial disparity and injustices, Saint Raymond sought to be a leading faith community. The parish partnered with Jefferson University to offer COVID testing and



provided financial assistance to those facing obstacles caused by the pandemic. Saint Raymond's "Digital Campus" was enhanced to provide improved live streaming and increased opportunities to engage on the digital continent. The parish hosted numerous webinars and small group conversations on racial inequity and historical issues that have led us to the disparity of today.

## **THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT**

God is good – all the time! All the time – God is good! God has blessed St. Raymond Parish from its earliest days in 1941 and that blessing has never stopped. While the City continues to change and experience decline in some ways, St. Raymond remains a beacon of light at the top of Mount Airy, inviting all to a relationship with their Loving God.

You have read our history; please consider being a part of our future!

## **SAINT RAYMOND'S FIRSTS**

The First Baptism recorded as St. Raymond Church as that of James Roger Fox who was baptized in the Nolan's home on March 21, 1942 by Father Kearney.

The First Marriage celebrated at St. Raymond also took place on March 21, 1942. The happy couple was Francis Ganzel and Margaret Keeley.

The First Death recorded in the Parish Records was sadly an infant, only fifteen months old. Janice Flacco died on February 27, 1942.

The First woman from the St. Raymond to enter Religious Life was Sister Debra Farwell, MSHR whose parents were founding members of the parish. Other women of the parish followed her into Religious Life including: Sister Jeanne Hunter, OP; Sister Carol McCaffrey, SSJ; Sister Mary Jane Morrison, RSM; Sister Joan Schwabenland, RSM; and Sister Eileen Frances Wilkinson, SSJ (who later resigned from religious life).

The First man to be ordained from St. Raymond was Father John Laky whose family was among the first members of our Parish. Father Laky was ordained in 1942 for the Diocese of St. Cloud, Minnesota and served as a faithful priest until death in December 1991. Other priest sons of the Parish include Father Joseph Tyson (Ordained for the Society of St, Joseph, the Josephites; he died in 2011). Father Howard Hetzel, Father Joseph McLaughlin (Ordained in 1966 and currently Pastor of St. Vincent de Paul Church in Richboro, Pennsylvania); Father John Ryan (served the Paulist Fathers and the Diocese on Honolulu, he died in 2021); Father William Trader (Ordained in 1974 and currently serving at Daylesford Abbey); Father Nicholas DeProspero; Father Georges Thiers (Ordained in 1972 and currently the Superior of the Congregation of the Oratory in Philadelphia); Father John Paul (Ordained in 1972 and removed from the priesthood in 2014 after he was found guilty of the sexual abuse of minors); Father Robert McLaughlin (Ordained in 1973; he died in May 2010); Father Michael Carroll, CM (Ordained in 1977 and currently Director of the Miraculous Medal Shrine); Father Jack Lydon, OP (who serves with the Dominican Friars of the Southern Province) and Father James Butts (Ordained for the Vocationist Fathers in 2002 and currently serving in New Jersey).