

THE HISTORY OF ST. COLMAN'S

For eighty years and counting, the landscape of the Main Line has been dominated by the gothic structure known as St. Colman's Church. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the corner of Lancaster Avenue and Argyle Road as being anything other than St. Colman's, the old-world architecture standing out against the new-world bustle that has sprung up around it.

However difficult it may be to imagine, less than one hundred years ago it all looked different, and without the work of many dedicated, faithful people there would be no St. Colman's, neither the spiritual community nor the building. In the year 1906, St. Colman's was nothing more than an idea, beginning as a petition from members of neighboring parishes to found a church closer to home. On January 11th, 1907, **Reverend James J. Carton**, an Irish immigrant from the Parish of County Tyrone, was appointed as pastor of the parish.

Father Carton quickly moved to establish St. Colman's, which he named after the Irish saint from his boyhood parish. The first Mass in St. Colman's history was celebrated September 1, 1907, but not in today's Church; rather, it was celebrated on the third floor of the Merion Title and Trust Company Building at the corner of Anderson and Lancaster Avenues. Forty people attended; as the congregation grew, Mass was moved to the Masonic Hall on Ardmore Avenue.

In 1908, Father Carton purchased an area of land at 110 E. Lancaster Avenue. On this site, he planned the construction of a combined church, school, and parish center; the building was dedicated by Bishop Edward F. Prendergast, an Auxiliary Bishop of Philadelphia.

On September 7, 1915, the Parish School opened its doors to students for the first time, enrolling 111 pupils. The School was staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph from Chestnut Hill. In 1923, the first class of eight years at St. Colman's School graduated, numbering 30 pupils.

The Parish was stricken with its first great loss on July 16, 1916, as the first pastor of the Church, Father Carton, who had suffered a heart attack the previous day, was called to his eternal rest. **Reverend Francis Brady** replaced him, but he left a little over a year later to become Pastor of St. Anthony of Padua Church in Philadelphia.

Our third pastor, **Father Francis I. Purtell**, was a former professor of Church History at St. Charles Seminary. He first decided that a new Church would be necessary, perhaps modeled on the old architectural style of Europe. In 1923 he began to raise funds for this new structure, and made plans to build the modern St. Colman's that we know today.

The parish needed to raise \$28,000 for the construction of their new church, a great deal of money in 1923. They began to publish a small newspaper called the Yard Mower to generate interest among the parishioners in the building drive. Father Purtell predicted that they would need to publish for over a year to raise the necessary funds, but by the time six issues had been printed the parish had raised over \$58,000! Construction of a new church began; it was built by Joseph Mandes, a famous builder on the Main Line who had also been involved in constructing buildings at Swarthmore College.

Father Purtell would not see his dream realized; he passed away on December 18, 1923 of a heart attack, the second priest in St. Colman's history to have done so. **Father Daniel L. McGinley** replaced him as Pastor, and carried out Father Purtell's plans to build the new Church. On January 24, 1926, the new Church was dedicated by Archbishop Edwin J. Byrne of Santa Fe, who had been an assistant pastor at St. Colman's as a young man.

On February 14, 1932, St. Colman's was blessed with the arrival of its longest-tenured pastor. **Father Eugene A. Kelly**, who had been present at the original dedication of the Church, would serve as pastor of St. Colman's for over 27 years, accomplishing many significant things during his tenure. He established a kindergarten for the youth of the parish, made major improvements to the church and rectory, and purchased new property to establish a Catholic "lending library," all this while managing to eliminate the parish debt by 1945. Being pastor during the Golden Jubilee of the parish in 1957, he refurbished all of the pews in the church, and had a new organ installed.

Father Kelly received the title of Monsignor in January of 1959; unfortunately he died later that year of a stroke. **Father James Graham** succeeded him as pastor of the parish in 1960, being made a monsignor himself in 1966. Monsignor Graham was in charge of making changes to the Church to comply with the Second Vatican Council. In 1969, the present rectory was constructed, which included meeting rooms and offices for the parish, while also making room for a parking lot for the Church.

The 1970s would prove to be a great time of change for the parish. Saddest and most notable was the closing of the parish school in 1976, which was consolidated with Blessed John Neumann School to become the Ss. Colman-John Neumann School in Bryn Mawr. This was also the year of the Eucharistic Congress, in which the parish fully participated. The Parish had three pastors in the years 1973 - 1984 upon Monsignor Graham's retirement; they were **Monsignor John Fee**, **Father William Pope**, and **Father Joseph St. Clair**. One of the fondest memories of parishioners from these years was the guitar Mass; a group called the Altar Egos was formed and later made a recording of the hymns that they sang at Sunday Mass.

Monsignor Francis Statkus organized the first parish pastoral council, which undertook raising money for Catholic Life 2000, carpeting the church, and refinishing the pews. He was also responsible for making St. Colman's Church handicapped accessible by building the access ramp.

In 1996, Monsignor Statkus' retirement was a cause of sadness for the parish, but he was sent off with a large celebration; he was succeeded by **Bishop Robert Maginnis**. Bishop Maginnis encouraged the refurbishing of the church organ, which had been installed some fifty years prior by Monsignor Kelly. Bishop Maginnis juggled his parish duties with his duties as an Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese, performing Confirmations and fulfilling other functions all the while ministering to St. Colman's parishioners.

In 2004, Cardinal Rigali reorganized the archdiocese, and Bishop Maginnis was asked to focus on his duties as an auxiliary bishop. He was replaced by **Father James C. Sherlock**, who was previously pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Overbrook for 19 years.

Father Sherlock carried out the organ reconstruction, the renewal of which was celebrated with a grand organ recital concert in May of 2006. He had air conditioning installed in the Church in June 2005, and has led us in our celebrations of the Centennial. In June 2007, St. Colman's became the backdrop for the filming of the movie, "Our Lady of Victory," based on the first championship season of the Mighty Macs basketball team of Immaculata College in 1972.

In June 2017, Father Sherlock entered into retirement after over 53 years of service to the people of our Archdiocese. The **Rev. John J. Ames, STD** was appointed Parochial Administrator of St. Colman's, in addition to his duties as the Newman Chaplain for Bryn Mawr, Haverford and Swarthmore Colleges. On June 23, 2018 Father Ames was installed as our current Pastor by Bishop McIntyre.

Over the years, St. Colman's parish community has been extremely blessed in the pastors we have had. We look forward to the future under Father Ames' dedicated leadership as we continue into our second century of worship as a community full of faith, love, and dedication.