

History of St. Anthony Parish

Arising out of the need of immigrants with deep religious backgrounds, St. Anthony's Parish in Taunton stands today as a monument to industriousness and faith. Immigrants from Portugal and the Azores who settled in Taunton and the surrounding area needed a church that would provide for their religious needs. This history is an attempt to tell their simple, yet profound, story. A story of faith and determination, a story of hope amidst many challenges, a story of love—love for God and for St. Anthony's Parish!

The first Portuguese to approach the environs of Taunton, Massachusetts, was Miguel Corte Real as attested by the date of 1511 on the famous Dighton Rock. It is probable that the Native Americans allowed him to come up the river as far as the present site of Taunton.

About 350 years later, in the early 1860's Portuguese immigrants began to find their way to Taunton. They drifted inland abandoning the whaling ships of New Bedford, and arriving by sailing vessels in Boston from the Western Islands, as the Azores were called in those days. They came to make new homes for themselves and their families. They came with calloused hands and a willingness to work hard. Thus they were welcomed to the farms in and about Taunton and to the city's principal brickyards. We find the original settlements of Portuguese near the brickyards of upper School Street, Hart Street, East Taunton, and the Weir. As time passed, they came in ever increasing numbers, so that by the year 1900 about three thousand Portuguese had settled in the Taunton area. Being Catholics, these deeply religious immigrants first attended the established English-speaking Catholic parishes of the city. Soon, however, they began to look toward to a church of their own, staffed by, a priest as pastor who could speak their native tongue, Their dream was soon realized one hundred years ago, as our parish family of Saint Anthony was founded.

Residents of New Bedford played an important role in setting in motion a movement whose aim was to see a Portuguese parish established in Taunton. The largest concentrations of the Portuguese were at St. Mary's Parish and at Sacred Heart Parish. On August 10, 1902, a small number of the city's Portuguese residents gathered in the Catholic Temperance Association Hall to listen to speakers from New Bedford and elsewhere urge them to imitate the example of the French-Canadians in Taunton who had recently petitioned Most. Rev. Matthew Harkins, bishop of the Diocese of Providence (which Taunton was a part of in 1902), for the establishment of a parish of their own nationality. When the promoters of the effort held a second meeting a week later, enthusiasm for the project had grown so that between four and five hundred people attended the meeting. Those present voted to send a delegation to Bishop Harkins to ask him to act in this matter. Frank Vasconcellos, one of the leaders of the movement, suggested that the Presbyterian Church on Washington Street, which had been

abandoned some years before and was then for sale, could be secured for \$10,000. Rather than send a delegation directly to Providence, the Portuguese leaders apparently first approached their pastors, Father James Coyle of St. Mary's and Father James L. Smith of Sacred Heart, who had taken a special interest in their spiritual welfare. Father Coyle called on Bishop Harkins on September 8, 1902, to talk about "various matters." The committee in charge of the movement to establish a parish rejected the opportunity to buy the Presbyterian Church because many objected that it was not central enough to conveniently serve the Portuguese settlements on either end of the city. According to the Registry of Deeds, on November 26, 1902, John DeRosa of Dighton purchased the Perkins Estate with an 80-foot frontage on Weir Street, just south of High Street, for \$4,500 as a site for a Portuguese church. This property included an impressive colonial mansion, although not in good repair. However, the committee thought it was large enough and well fitted to serve the immediate needs of the Portuguese

On January 21, 1903, Mr. DeRosa and Manuel Silva brought the deed to the Perkins property to Bishop Harkins. On the 24th the bishop came to Taunton to see the house. Father Smith met him at the depot and accompanied him to the site. The bishop felt that the property's central location was a disadvantage as it was convenient to neither of the two large Portuguese settlements. He also found the house so constructed as to present difficulties in converting it to use as a church.

During March 1903, the Portuguese in Taunton gathered signatures on a petition asking Bishop Harkins to give them a Portuguese priest. On April 2, 1903, Bishop Harkins appointed Father Alexandro F. Louro, then the assistant pastor of St. Peter's Church in Provincetown, to become the pastor of all the Portuguese Catholics in the Taunton area, including the Dighton's, Raynham, Seekonk, and Rehoboth. Father Louro was a native of the island of Terceira of the Azores and had come to the diocese in June 1901. Recognizing the special devotion the Portuguese had to St. Anthony, he chose to dedicate the new Taunton parish under that title. The Santo Antonio Society in Taunton was at that time the largest in southeastern New England. It might be interesting to note here that St. Anthony Church was the last parish to be erected by Bishop Harkins within the current boundaries of the Fall River Diocese, before it became a new diocese the following year.

Father Louro, a very zealous and energetic pastor, baptized the first parishioner, Francisco Luiz Jacome, son of Luduvico Moniz Jacome and Carlota Julia, on April 11, 1903. The wedding of Jose dos Reis and Maria Costa on April 20, 1903, was Father Louro's first marriage ceremony. Witnesses at this wedding were Antonio dos Reis and Francisca dos Reis. On a sadder note, Church records reveal that the first recorded funeral was that of Maria Silveira Goulart, daughter of João Silveira Goulart and Angelica Thomazia, 21 years old, who died of an accident on August 2, 1903.

Father Louro used the upper floors of the Perkins Mansion for living quarters. The first floor was used for instruction and catechism. He also transformed one of the large front rooms of the first floor into a chapel with a temporary altar for daily Mass. However, on Sundays, Mass attendance was so large that he had to rent the Temperance Hall (later known as the Casino and Eagles' Hall) on Trescott Street, and offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass on a temporary portable altar.

The next three years were hard and busy years for Father Louro. Towards the end of 1903, Father John Goulart Cardoso was appointed to assist him in his parochial chores. So great and many were his duties that early in 1904 Father Louro needed another assistant and received one in the person of Father Augusto J. Taveira. Sunday Masses were offered by these three priests in South Dighton, Seekonk, and later in a hall in the Weir.

On March 12, 1904, the Diocese of Fall River was newly established with Rt. Rev. William Stang as the first bishop. Bishop Stang evidently foresaw that Taunton would need more than one Portuguese Catholic parish. Accordingly, on December 2, 1904, he helped Father Louro purchase five house lots as a suitable building site on the corner of School and Washburn Streets. On August 15, 1905, contracts were signed to construct the rectory and the church basement on this property. It might be interesting to note here that this contract, excluding heating, was \$20,500. The entire work under the contract was to be completed on or before February 15, 1906. Before and shortly after the basement church was completed, religious feasts (festas) were held at the farm of "Tio João Leiteiro" (John Butler Souza) on Floral Street. Parishioners processed through the nearby streets, which were often closed to traffic. These festivals were both spiritual and financial successes.

Dedication ceremonies of the basement church took place on April 19, 1906. Headlines from The Taunton Daily Gazette recounting the occasion read: "Portuguese Catholics are Happy" New St. Anthony's Dedicated by Bishop Stang." Bishop Stang was assisted by Msgr. Hugh J. Smith and Rev. James Coyle in the dedication ceremonies. Rev. Manuel Viera de Bem, Pastor of Our Lady of Good Voyage Church of Gloucester, celebrated the Solemn High Mass which followed. He was assisted by Rev. Manuel Silva, Pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes (Weir) as Deacon and Rev. J. Gongalves Toledo of New Bedford as Sub-deacon. The Master of Ceremonies was Rev. Mortimer Downing of Fall River. The combined choirs of St. Anthony's and Immaculate Conception sang the Mass, with Lillian Maxwell as organist and Joseph William Fagan as choir director. The homily was given by Rev. J. D. Nunes of New Bedford. At the end of the Mass, Bishop Stang congratulated the Pastor and parishioners on their accomplishment and urged further greater sacrifices. The ceremonies ended at nearly 1 PM. A banquet was served in the rectory. Solemn Vespers were sung at 7:30 PM. The basement church was constructed by Daniel J. Sullivan Company of Taunton; the architects were Hindle and Murphy of Providence, RI. The trustees of the new church were Joseph M. Jacinto and Antone Margarido. The first official organist of

St. Anthony's Church was Mrs. Clara Carvalho of Broadway who devoted herself to fifty-one years of service. Now that was dedication!

Earlier in 1906, Bishop Stang had decided that instead of having one Portuguese Catholic parish centrally located in Taunton, there should be two, one to take care of the Portuguese Catholics of the School Street section and another to care for those living in the Weir area. Father Manuel Silva was appointed to establish this new parish, Our Lady of Lourdes on First Street. Since there was no further need of the Perkins Estate on Weir Street, Bishop Stang sold this property to F. A. Hubbard and George H. Rhodes on August 24, 1906.

For twenty-four long and hard years Father Louro continued his pastoral duties at St. Anthony's with a stern and vigorous zeal which marked his nature as a true priest and a wise pastor of souls. Together with Msgr. James Coyle of St. Mary's, these two great men marched on as citizens and priests who became loved, revered, and respected by all in this section of the Lord's Vineyard. The friendship between these two beloved priests was indeed very special.

Msgr. Coyle made Father Louro feel very welcome in the neighborhood and provided St. Anthony Church with its first set of candles. He would help Father Louro in any way possible. Father Louro, in turn, introduced Msgr. Coyle to the Portuguese culture and encouraged him to take a trip to the Azores and Portugal, which he eventually did. There, he saw first-hand the beauty of the Islands and Portugal and experienced its culture.

During these years Father Louro paid off the holdings the banks held against St. Anthony Parish and many improvements were made. On November 3, 1919, he purchased four more lots in the rear of the church for bazaar grounds. By 1927, he had a reserve fund and was planning to build the upper structure of the church. However, time and vigorous labors had taken the toll, and he was advised to take a rest. Realizing that he could not continue his arduous duties, Father Louro resigned as Pastor of St. Anthony's in 1927 and retired to his native island of Terceira in the Azores. In 1928, Bishop Daniel F. Feehan, the second bishop of the Diocese of Fall River, appointed the gentle and kindly Father Manuel M. Couto as the new pastor of St. Anthony's. Father Couto was no stranger to the parish or the people of Taunton, for he had been Father Louro's gracious and loyal assistant since August 1919.

Less than a year passed when this new pastor of St. Anthony's, a study in contrast to the stern and vigorous old pioneer, was to have his gentle, kind, retiring character tested by the economic crash of 1929 with all its crushing effects. Soon, he was the pastor of a suffering parish: unemployed fathers, families on relief, hungry, cold, poorly clothed children and old folks. Immediately Father Couto organized a St. Vincent de Paul Society, the first in

the whole Diocese of Fall River. The first president of the St. Vincent de Paul Society was John E. Munise of Belmont Street. With this group of men, quietly and effectively, Father Couto started to help and relieve the misery that had befallen his stricken flock. This he continued through the 1930s, most of the time unassisted. Father Jose M. Bettencourt e Avila, who was sent to him in June 1930, was later appointed to Our Lady of Immaculate Conception Church, New Bedford, in October 1933. In spite of these hard times, Father Couto acquired the McGrath property on Washington Street in 1931 and converted it into a parish hall. His love and devotion to the children of the parish were manifested in his Children's Masses, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine classes, and playground.

In 1941 the threat and finally the actuality of war shocked his sensitive and nervous nature. Father Couto's heart winced when the young men of his parish, many whom he had baptized, instructed for their First Holy Communion and Confirmation, and even married, were hurried off to war. Then came the "we are sorry to inform you" casualties. This was too much for the sensitive and gentle Father Couto. Almost overnight he became the nervous, brokenhearted Pastor of St. Anthony's. Unable to carry on any longer, he resigned in September 1944. Like Father Louro before him, he retired to the island of Terceira in the Azores.

A few days later St. Anthony Parish would recover from its sluggish woes and boom with activity and excitement. The third bishop of the Diocese of Fall River, Most Rev. James E. Cassidy, assigned Rev. Manuel J. Teixeira as the third pastor of Saint Anthony's, with the command "Build a New Church." Fired with a passionate desire, the new pastor took up the challenge and spread the fire into the hearts and souls of his parishioners who had been hoping, sacrificing, and praying for a new church for almost forty years.

For six long years, Father Teixeira relentlessly pursued this dream. Inspired by his firm determination and organization, the people of St. Anthony's set to work on this goal. With constant urgings, coaxing, sacrificing, and heroic economy, the original building fund of \$45,000 of 1944 ballooned fabulously to the sum of \$187,000 by 1950. Bishop Cassidy consented to the sketching of a new St. Anthony's. The original basement location was rejected as a foundation of the new edifice. A new site on the other side of the rectory was chosen. Wendell T. Phillips of Milford was chosen as the architect, and the new location surveyed. Impossibilities, difficulties, and objections were encountered. First there was not enough land in the rear. Good neighbors came to the rescue as Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Noia and their son, Arthur, graciously deeded thirty-five feet of their property. Next a huge drainage pipe had to be diverted around the project. The city engineers and the sewer department solved the problem. L. M. Witherell & Sons were chosen as the general contractors.

On Wednesday of Holy Week of the Holy Year, April 5, 1950, a cold, drizzly morning, Bishop Cassidy came to Taunton to break ground for the new Church of St. Anthony. The contracts were signed and moments later,

bulldozers began the excavation. Soon a new edifice with malted milk-colored bricks and a roof of green tile, topped with a gold leaf cross and cupola—a beautiful Gregorian-styled colonial church now graced the property. Inside the church, beautiful marble altars and an altar rail, carved by Gasparri Studio Craftsmen of Italy, were set in place. Various pews, confessionals, and varied-colored stain glass windows were installed. The crowning glory and central attraction was the main altar and the hanging crucifix above it, which Mr. Phillips, the architect, had designed and created.

On Sunday, July 29, 1951, the solemn dedication ceremonies were performed by the Most Rev. James L. Connolly, the fourth bishop of the Diocese of Fall River. Assisting in the dedication ceremonies were Rev. William Morris of St. Mary's Church as deacon and Rev. Francis O'Connell as sub-deacon. Masters of ceremonies were Rev. John H. Hackett of Somerset, and Rev. Humberto Medeiros, who at the time was the bishop's personal secretary and who later became the Cardinal-Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Boston. Seminarians from the Sacred Heart Seminary in Wareham performed the chants for the ceremonies. The walls were blessed and the sepulcher containing relics of the martyrs of Saints Fulgentius and Fructuosus was sealed, and the altar prepared for its first Mass. Bishop Connolly celebrated this first Mass, and at the consecration, the sanctuary lamp was lit to burn continuously for as long as the Church is in use, except for each Good Friday, when it is extinguished. After this first Mass, Rev. Teixeira celebrated a Solemn High Mass of Thanksgiving, assisted by Bishop Connolly.

Father Teixeira, who was soon elevated to Monsignor, had an incredible plan for the old church basement--a parochial school for the children of Saint Anthony's! But first, the church debt must be paid. With constant pleas, sacrifices and a rigid economy, the people of Saint Anthony's responded to the leadership of their great pastor. They gave of their money and of themselves without stint.

While plans for the new school building were being formulated, kindergarten classes began in the old parish hall on Washington Street in 1951 with the modest enrollment of 56 students. Sister Marie Pauline Collette, a Holy Union Sister, conducted a Kindergarten class there, while living at St. Mary's Convent. The following year, in 1952, Sister Paul Winifred (Sister Mary Margaret Rommal) joined her to start the first grade, as well as to serve as Principal. After one year, both Sisters were reassigned and were replaced with Sister Celine Lucille (Sister Lillian Mignault) as Principal and First-Grade Teacher and Sister Rose Emmanuel (Sister Josephine Priscilla Whiting) as the Kindergarten Teacher.

The Sisters of the Holy Union of the Sacred Hearts staffed the new St. Anthony School, residing in a convent at the corner of School and Washburn Streets that the parishioners had purchased for them. Sister Catherine Agnes (Sister Rita Galligan) was its first principal. On September 3, 1954, Bishop James L. Connolly, accompanied by

Rev. Msgr. Manuel Teixeira and eighteen other clergy, blessed the new school and the new convent. Two days later, the Sisters invited the public to an Open House to their convent and to the school, receiving visitors from 9:45 AM until 8:00 in the evening!

The first day of school opened on Washington Street because the desks for the new school had not yet arrived; however, by Monday, September 20, 1954, they had. The Sisters and the students left their temporary quarters and took up permanent residence in the new Saint Anthony School. This they did with jubilation and excitement by carrying their few belongings and marching in procession from the old school to the new.

On September 23, 1954, Reverend Joseph Oliveira, Parochial Vicar of St. Anthony's, celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at the convent for the first time.

St. Anthony School had an impressive twenty-one-year history. Mrs. Victoria Carew who taught third grade was the first lay teacher in the school. The first graduating class received their diplomas in 1960. However, like other parochial schools of the time, the school was forced to close its doors in 1972 because of spiraling costs and a shortage of teaching sisters. Sister Mary Margaret Rommal had returned to St. Anthony School and was its last principal. Coincidentally, she was the first principal at the original school on Washington Street.

The parishioners were saddened on August 22, 1962, when, following a long illness, their beloved pastor, Msgr. Teixeira, passed away. The following month, Bishop Connolly appointed Rev. Maurice Souza as the new pastor of St. Anthony Church. His dedication and zeal for the teachings of the Church will long be remembered by the parishioners at Saint Anthony. He implemented the liturgical changes of the Second Vatican Council. The newly appointed monsignor was also very dedicated to the youth of the parish. The parishioners were disappointed to learn of his assignment to the pastorate of St. Anthony Church in East Falmouth on February 1, 1977.

In February 1977, Bishop Daniel A. Cronin, the fifth bishop of the Diocese of Fall River, appointed Rev. George E. Amaral as the fifth pastor of Saint Anthony's. One of the first things that Father Amaral did was to bring back the Annual Feast of St. Anthony, along with the Solemn Procession. It began once again in the summer of 1978. The religious feast (festa) stirred the memories of many parishioners, whether they recalled the feasts from their native Azores or they remembered the St. Anthony feasts of their youth, which ended too suddenly after World War II. The feast was so successful that it served as a catalyst for other feasts of religious significance and social entertainment. By 1989, the annual feast was eventually cancelled, as there were problems in recruiting volunteers to work at the feast.

During his pastorate, Father Amaral organized a parish newsletter known as the St. Anthony Messenger, published both in English and in Portuguese. The newsletter included the news and events of many parish groups, as well as the accomplishments of its parishioners within the community.

March 21, 1990 will be a day remembered by all, as a devastating fire gutted the former St. Anthony School. Many parishioners witnessed the conflagration and the tears in the eyes of the young adults were a strong indication of the love they had for the school. Before the terrible fire, the Head Start Program, Parish Religious Education Classes, and other various parish functions used the closed school building. Saddened, but undaunted, shortly after the fire Father Amaral proceeded with plans for a new facility to be known as St. Anthony Parish Center. Hackett Associates of New Bedford were hired as architects for this project and Mello Construction Inc. of Taunton constructed the building.

After Father Amaral's retirement in 1991, Rev. Manuel P. Ferreira was appointed by Bishop Cronin as the sixth pastor of Saint Anthony's. Father Ferreira continued the supervision of the erection of the parish center, one of the most outstanding structures in our community. Before the St. Anthony Parish Center was blessed by Bishop Sean P. O'Malley, OFM Cap., the sixth bishop of the Diocese of Fall River, on October 13, 1996, religious education classes had been held in the church without the benefit of separate rooms for different classes.

Parishioners also have had to bear the expense of renting local halls for church social events, such as dinners and the annual Penny Sale. In addition to overseeing the construction of the Parish Center, Father Ferreira also purchased the Noia Estate on School Street, thereby extending the boundaries of the church property from Washburn Street to East Broadway.

During Father Ferreira's pastorate here at St. Anthony's, the parish was blessed to have its first permanent deacon assigned here in the person of Rev. Deacon Thomas J. Souza. Deacon Souza was ordained on May 22, 1993 and served here at the parish with great dedication and fidelity until June 2002. He was a past president of the St. Anthony Feast Committee, as well as a parish organist and choir director.

Also during this time, our parish was blessed once again when a parishioner, Jose' P. Medeiros, was ordained to the permanent diaconate on May 24, 1997. His Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated here on the following day on May 25, 1997. Afterwards, he was assigned to assist at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Taunton, which has since merged with Sacred Heart Parish to form the Annunciation of the Lord Parish.

After Father Ferreira retired in June 2001, Bishop O'Malley appointed Rev. Henry S. Arruda as the seventh pastor of Saint Anthony's. In two short years, his enthusiasm and dedication has drawn many people into active service for the church. In fact, Father Arruda has been the driving force in making this year, our Centennial Celebration, such a memorable event. Festivities for the Centennial Celebration opened with a Proclamation delivered by Attorney Margaret Aleixo at a Founder's Day Mass in June 2002. An impressive Mass was celebrated with Rev. David Andrade, a former parishioner and current pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Fall River, as homilist. Other Centennial Celebration activities included: a Family Picnic at Cathedral Camp, the Annual Penny Sale, a Harvest Family Dinner/Dance, the sale of a special Christmas ornament depicting the facade of the Church, a Centennial Parish float in the city's annual Christmas parade, a youth Christmas play, a quilt being crafted depicting the church and various societies of the parish, a Valentine's Day Family Dinner/Dance, and a parish-wide retreat.

Father Arruda oversaw the development and construction of a Saint Anthony Garden, on the former Noia Estate. The house that once stood on that property was demolished to give way to a beautiful garden, highlighted by a life-sized marble statue of Saint Anthony, imported from Italy. The garden is also enhanced with holly bushes, flowers, and the Centennial Tree.

The centennial festivities will terminate on June 22, 2003, when a Mass and Dedication of the Saint Anthony Garden will take place. A time capsule, to be revealed in June 2053, will also be buried in the garden. A grand banquet at the Venus de Milo Restaurant in Swansea will close the Centennial Year.

Currently, Rev. Jeffrey Cabral, who was ordained a priest on June 8, 2002, by Bishop O'Malley, is the Parochial Vicar at St. Anthony Church. As his first assignment was to St. Anthony Parish, Father Cabral is following in the footsteps of Father Arruda, whose first assignment was also here at St. Anthony's. Father Jeff's enthusiasm and warmth has endeared him to all parishioners—both young and old.

Rev. Deacon José H. Medina, a parishioner, was ordained on May 18, 2002, at Saint Anthony of Padua Church, New Bedford, and was assigned here to St. Anthony Church to assume his duties as a deacon. His Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated here at the parish on May 26, 2002.

Thus, the Parish stands today—a monument to the many men and women whose self-denial realized an ideal to their forebears. St. Anthony Parish continues to serve the Portuguese immigrants of Taunton, as well as the American-born descendants of past immigrants. This parish is a tribute to the unselfish zeal of its seven pastors: Father Louro, Father Couto, Msgr. Teixeira, Msgr. Souza, Father Amaral, Father Ferreira and Father Arruda. It

is a parish placed under the protection of Saint Anthony, blessed with the grace of Almighty God, serving as an everlasting symbol of the piety and spirit of sacrifice of a devoted flock.

History of Saint Anthony Parish

Researched and Compiled by: Centennial History Committee

Rev. Jeffrey Cabral, Parochial Vicar

Mrs. Emma R. Andrade, Co-Chairperson

Mrs. Rose R. Aleixo, Co-Chairperson

Mrs. Elsie S. Abreau

Mrs. Arlene P. Gouveia

Mrs. Mary Mello

Mrs. Joanne Nolette

Mr. Edmund M. Perry

Mrs. Jacquelyn Rogers

Sources:

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Diary of Bishop Matthew Harkins

"Historical Sketch of St. Anthony's Parish, Taunton, Mass." by Rev. Msgr. Leo J. Duarte

Holy Union Sisters' Archives.

A Past to Remember, A Future to Mold--Historical Sketches of the Churches and Affiliated Groups in the Taunton District of the National Council of Catholic Women -- Fall River Diocese

Msgr. Manuel J. Teixeira's Anniversary to the Priesthood Booklet