

Flock Returns Anew to East Harlem Madonna

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

New York Times (1857-Current file); Jul 17, 1986; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times pg. B1



The New York Times/Jim Wilson

Flock Returns Anew to East Harlem Madonna

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

Outside the Roman Catholic church on East 116th Street, so much has changed. Gone are Ferraro's Bakery and Rosie's Candy Store. Gone are Dr. Miraglia the optometrist and Dr. Spinelli the urologist. Gone, in other words, is all but the shrunken shell of the Italian-American community that once flourished in East Harlem.

But once each year, those who have left come back.

July 16 is the festival day in Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, the celebration of the Madonna. And so the alumni of East Harlem return as pilgrims, carrying candles and singing hymns, offering thanks for past graces and uttering prayers for new ones, as the supplicants have for a century.

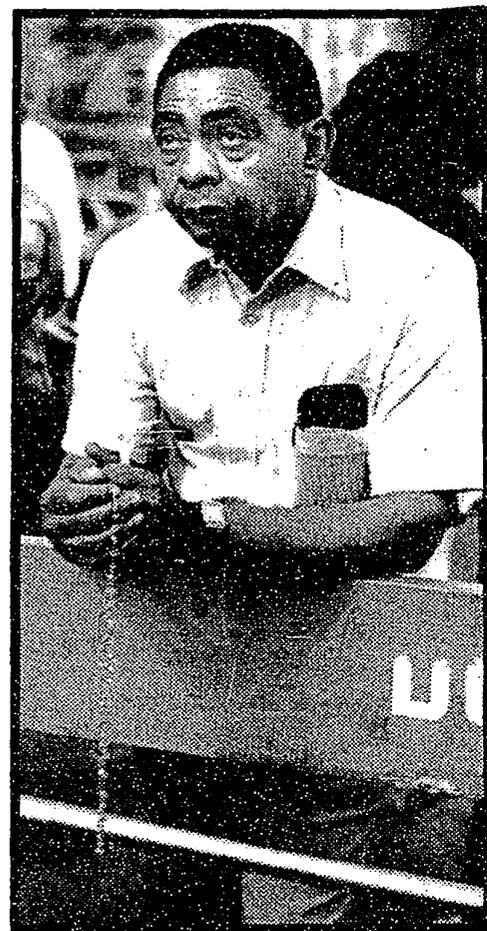
"We come together to express loyalty to the past," said the Rev. Terzo Vinci, the pastor of the church at 448 East 116th Street. "It is a past that

may not be here physically, but it is in our hearts. Some memories are very joyful, and some are so sad. But the idea of remembering is important. For when we remember, we start to live again."

The Mount Carmel festival affords the occasion to recall days of stickball and checkers, to savor again the prosciutto bread and the lemon ices that never taste so good anywhere else. "The depression that's around here now we don't see," said Vincent Vino, a junior high school teacher who now lives in Manhasset, L.I. "All we see is the old neighborhood. And this neighborhood was a real gem."

For many others, the festival is foremost a religious rite, and one of rare power. Prof. Robert Orsi of Fordham University holds that in the quality of devotion, the Madonna of East Harlem inspires a following akin to Our Lady of Lourdes and

Continued on Page B2



The Rev. Terzo Vinci, center at top, pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church on East 116th Street, leading procession of the statue of the Madonna. The Rev. Barry Bossa, near left, and Antoinette Scarvinetto instructed altar boys before midnight service. Phillip Dure, above, was one of the Haitian immigrants who joined many former neighborhood residents who return each year for the festival.





The New York Times/Jim Wilson

The Rev. Cajetan Tocco blessing Carmel Favale, 3 years old, at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church on East 116th Street. She was held by her mother, Carmel Ann, a former resident of the area who now lives in the Bronx.

Flock Gathers to East Harlem Madonna

Continued From Page B1

the Shroud of Turin — a following that at times has embarrassed Roman Catholic officialdom with its spontaneity and passion.

"They begged to be nurtured through another year," Professor Orsi wrote of East Harlem's Italians in his recent book, "The Madonna of 115th Street." "And they knew that the path to the divine was the same dense and trying and joyous and painful path that they trod everyday."

Symbols of Afflicted

No longer do the worshipers purchase wax models of the limbs or organs they prayed the Madonna would heal, as they did into the 1950's. No longer do they carry candles as large as the graces they sought, lurching toward the altar under the weight of their wishes. Smaller symbolic tapers these days suffice.

But still some arrived for the midnight mass yesterday on crutches and in wheelchairs. The infirm were carried up stairs, the blind led to the pews. One family had marched uptown from 34th Street in the rain a few days earlier, another had walked from Brooklyn, barefoot. All carried the same hope.

"The Blessed Mother over there, she takes care of everybody," said Rosa Morrone, whose family owns a bakery on East 116th Street. "Maybe you got a son looking for a good job. Or your son's trying to get off drugs. Maybe you've been sick. You come and you pray and the Blessed Mother takes care of you."

Mrs. Morrone's son-in-law, Peter Tiscione, served as grand marshal of the festival's two parades, Tuesday night and yesterday morning. He is a

building engineer, an educated man, and he is someone who quite simply attributes his survival from a case of double pneumonia during childhood to the Madonna's intercession.

Such faith is the rule, not the exception, during the festival. It has its origins, Professor Orsi says, in the immigrant experience. Most of the Italians who fled to East Harlem left what they called "la miseria" — the disease, unemployment and malaise of their homeland — only to find the new miseries of tenements, exploitation and an alien culture in New York.

For solace and for a touch of home, the Italian community of East Harlem took up two collections in the 1880's. The first purchased the statue of the Madonna from the craftsmen of Polla, Italy. The second built the church. The people called it "la casa della nostra mamma" — the house of our mother.

Comfort From the Madonna

"The minute the people here saw the Madonna, they felt they were home," said the Rev. Barry Bossa, a priest at Our Lady of Mount Carmel. "It became for the Italian immigrants what the Statue of Liberty was for immigrants in toto — the mother who understood all the problems."

So well did those immigrants succeed, moving on to Long Island and New Jersey, that their old neighborhood almost vanished. Where 85,000 Italians lived in the 1920's, now fewer than 1,000 hang on. The rides and gaming tables and food booths that once augmented the spiritual side of the festival have dwindled to one or two sausage stands, lonely in the night air.

Yet just when it appeared that the festival itself might falter and die a few years ago, something happened: Haitians began arriving in New York.

In their homeland, many of them had worshiped the Madonna at Ville de Bonheur, the mountain town where she was said to have emerged from a palm tree. Even though most of New York's Haitians settled in Brooklyn, a few heard of the Madonna in East Harlem, and of her power to perform miracles. They joined in the festival and they told their friends. And their friends told their friends.

Hymns Sung in Creole

On Tuesday night, perhaps half of the 1,500 people in the candlelight procession were Haitian. As the parade wound through the streets of East Harlem, some blighted and some proud, the sounds of faith mingled — a brass band playing "Ave Maria," church bells pealing, marchers singing hymns in Italian and Creole.

"I guess this is God's way of getting people to work together," said Mr. Vio, the teacher. "Twenty years ago, this never could have happened."

This year it did, effortlessly. When the midnight mass began, two of the altar boys were Haitian. Their father had carried a Haitian flag in the preceding parade. White and black sat together in the darkened church, joining in prayer, shaking hands in fellowship, listening to Father Vinci speak of change and constancy.

"Today, July 16, it is as beautiful as it was 102 years ago," he told the congregants. "It is just as enchanting. Just as comforting."

Earlier in the day, in the quiet of his study, he had expressed a similar thought. "When people see the street, so broken down, they feel depressed," he said. "Then they look at the church. And the church is the same, the altar is the same, the Madonna is the same. Here, inside, time has stopped."