

German Catholics have left their mark on history of Manhattan

NEW YORK – German Catholics are such a modest presence in New York that Pope Benedict XVI may leave the Big Apple without meeting a single one. He will, however, see evidence of their mark on Manhattan's history, when he hosts an ecumenical prayer service April 18 at St. Joseph's Church.

St. Joseph's Church on East 87th Street, in the city's Yorkville neighborhood, was established in 1873 to serve the needs of German immigrants. The church, built in 1895 in the Romanesque revival style, and its stained-glass windows bear inscriptions from the German-American parishioners whose donations financed the building.

St. Joseph's is the only parish in the Archdiocese of New York with a regularly scheduled German-language Mass, according to Julia Winter, a longtime parishioner. She said the monthly Mass draws as many as 100 people, many of whom come from outside the parish.

"We are the only German Catholic presence in the archdiocese," Winter said. "We have a German ministry. It's not just a Mass."

The ministry includes occasional concerts, baptisms, funerals or commemorative Masses celebrated in German, as well as an informal housing referral service for young Germans coming to New York as interns.

The Yorkville neighborhood, once a center of all things German in Manhattan, is German mostly in memory now.

Monsignor Lawrence Connaughton, pastor of St. Joseph's from 1995 to 2007, said: "Most of the commercial German establishments are gone now, but the richness of the German community is real, as far as continuity and linking to prior generations. They are the roots of the (St. Joseph's) church and all the things that we have here are thanks to them."

Father Boniface Ramsey, a priest of the Archdiocese of New York who occasionally celebrates the German-language Mass at St. Joseph's, traced the history of the Germans in New York.

"The German immigrants were always fractured; they were Lutheran, Catholic and Jewish. And they assimilated pretty well to begin with," he said.

Nonetheless, Father Ramsey said that New York was the third-largest German-speaking city in the world at the turn of the 20th century, after Berlin and Vienna, Austria.

And today, he said, "More people in the United States claim German heritage than any other. It will be a long time before people of Hispanic heritage outnumber those of German heritage."

Father Ramsey said, "The German heritage was devastated by World War I, World War II, the General Slocum disaster and demographic changes."

In 1904, more than 1,000 German-Americans were killed when the General Slocum, a steamship carrying them on an annual outing from St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church on the Lower East Side, caught fire and burned to the water line in the East River.

Prior to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York, the General Slocum fire caused the largest single loss of life in New York City.

Father Ramsey said the tragedy "wrecked the German community in the United States." And in New York, the center of German activity moved from Alphabet City on the Lower East Side of Manhattan to Yorkville and later to the Ridgewood section of Queens.

Winter, the chair of St. Joseph's German Committee since 1971, migrated from Bavaria as a child. She said that, until the mid-1940s, the priests assigned to the parish spoke German. She said the Yorkville neighborhood began to change in the 1950s and 1960s, as small buildings were replaced by high-rise apartment buildings.

In an only-in-New-York scenario that reflects the changes in the neighborhood and

the universality of the church, the monthly German-language Mass at St. Joseph's is celebrated by a rotating group of priests that includes:

- The current pastor, Monsignor John Sullivan, an Irish-American who studied German in a Jesuit high school in Manhattan.
- Parochial vicar Father Emmanuel Nartey, a Ghanaian who speaks German as one of four languages.
- And Father Ramsay, the son of a German immigrant who attended the same school in Aschau am Inn as the pope and immigrated to the United States by herself as a 16-year-old.

Father Ramsay said his mother is a proud American who married a Scottish-American and did not teach her son German while he was growing up in Yorkville. He learned to speak German in school.

Father Ramsey said, "Julia Winter is the Teutonic spirit of St. Joseph's." Monsignor Sullivan said that she will likely be among the 10 parishioners from St. Joseph's who have been invited to observe the pope's prayer service with ecumenical leaders.

Winter is hopeful that there will be an opportunity for the pope to meet them.

"It's important for the pope to see that there are German Catholics in the city and they have a place to come to worship," she said, adding, "The pope isn't coming to look at stained-glass windows with German names. He expects to talk to a few people."