

"I love you, I am proud of every one of you and I would willingly shed to the last drop my life's blood for the least among you."



Monsignor Bernard J. Quinn (1888-1940)
Known to many as Fr. Quinn

His priestly life was a consummation of the sacrificial love which he had expressed so intensely to his parishioners in the above quotation from his first pastoral letter to them in 1922.

FOUNDER

*St. Peter Claver Church, Brooklyn, New York in 1921,
St. Benedict the Moor Church, Jamaica, New York in 1932
and*

*The Little Flower House of Providence in 1930
(now The Little Flower Children's Services
at Wading River, Long Island)*



Through God's Providential design, Bernard J. Quinn was born January 15, 1888, the same day that Pope Leo XIII canonized Peter Claver, a 17th century Spanish Jesuit missionary. Peter Claver had given his life in service to the African slaves of Colombia, South America, by defending their human rights. Bernard Quinn did likewise for Blacks in the Diocese of Brooklyn, New York. His life would be linked after death to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the pre-eminent African American Civil Rights champion, who was also born January 15th but in 1929.

January 15 was therefore an auspicious day for Claver, Quinn and King who in their own particular times shared a common destiny of defending the human dignity of African people in the Americas and in promoting fraternal love among the human races, as mandated by Christ's commandment for us to love one another as He has loved us (John 15:12).

Bernard Quinn was born in Newark, New Jersey, to Irish immigrant parents, Bernard and Sarah Quinn, who had two other sons and four daughters, one of whom became a Sister of St. Joseph in Watertown, N.Y. The father supported his family as a longshoreman. They were poor but deeply religious and happy. The Quinns were members of St. Patrick's pro-Cathedral in Newark, New Jersey, and later joined St. Michael's Parish in the same city. Bernard attended the latter's school where his elementary school teacher, Sr. Modesta, (of an unknown religious community) had an enduring influence on him by teaching the boy how greatly Jesus loved him. Bernard felt the love of the Lord as an intimate friend for all his life.

Inspired by the example of his parish priest, Fr. William Richmond, Bernard showed a strong interest in the priesthood and entered St. Charles College, a high school and college preparatory seminary in Ellicott City, Maryland. Upon his graduation he was not lucky to be provided a place in a seminary to continue his studies for the priesthood by his diocese and was recommended to the Brooklyn Diocese where he entered St. John's Seminary in 1906. The Vincentian priests at that time directed the seminary. In the seminary, Bernard grew in his love for Jesus piously devoting himself to his own unswerving practice of praying daily in the chapel. At the same time he was very sociable and athletic and lived with an exuberance for life as seen in his diary. Bernard dearly loved his family and ceaselessly wrote letters to them.

After his ordination to the priesthood June 1, 1912, Fr. Quinn was temporarily assigned to several churches and received a permanent position in 1914 at St. Gregory the Great Church in Brooklyn as curate. He fulfilled his priestly duties there with a burning zeal and wrote several pamphlets to encourage the same fervor in others. In the course

of preparing two Black women for Baptism in the Church, Fr. Quinn was seized with a passionate interest in beginning an apostolate to Blacks who, he lamented, were neglected by the diocese. He expressed his interest to Bishop Charles McDonnell, but he could not give Quinn an attentive ear, since he was very pre-occupied in recruiting chaplains to serve the American forces fighting overseas in the First World War.

Fr. Quinn volunteered for military service and was assigned to France. Shortly after arriving there, the war ended (November 11, 1918), but Fr. Quinn remained in the country to minister to the sick and wounded soldiers in army hospitals. After reading The Story of a Soul, the life of St. Therese of Lisieux, which he found by chance in the library of his army barracks, Fr. Quinn was overwhelmed with fascination about the saint. After discovering that he was stationed in the vicinity of Alencon where Therese had lived as a child, he obtained permission to visit her home. He was the first priest to celebrate Mass there before it became a popular shrine.

Returning to the diocese in 1919, Fr. Quinn received permission the following year from Bishop McDonnell to begin his ministry to the Black people of Brooklyn. Like the Good Shepherd, Quinn took to the streets in search of his flock. There was great rejoicing when he was led to Mr. Jules de Weever, the leader of the Colored Catholic Club, which had met from 1915-1916 for the purpose of asking the diocese to establish a church for Black Catholics in Brooklyn. Because they could not get support for their cause, the group disbanded. Reorganized by Fr. Quinn, the CCC joined with him in raising funds to start their church. A former Protestant church that had been converted into a warehouse depot was bought by Fr. Quinn and restored to a church. The building was blessed and dedicated to St. Peter Claver February 26, 1922.

St. Therese of Lisieux who had entered Fr. Quinn's life in the last months of his army chaplaincy in France, took on a major role in his ministry to the Blacks of the diocese. From the start of the parish, Fr. Quinn offered them to the guardianship of St. Therese and she worked tirelessly in heaven on their behalf, supplying him with an abundance of heavenly graces and material assistance for the success of his ministry. On the day of St. Therese's canonization May 17, 1925, Fr. Quinn began a weekly novena to her in St. Peter Claver Church which in time attracted vast numbers of devotees from many parishes because of reports that prayers at the novena were answered in a variety of ways due to her intercession. Though Fr. Quinn received the largesse of her help for his priestly work everyone else as well benefited. It

seemed that the entire diocese went en masse by the thousands to the weekly novena.

Notwithstanding how much St. Therese influenced his life, Fr. Quinn was a priest in the model of St. Peter Claver. Quinn, like Claver, won over many people to the Church by his open hearted kindness, patience and compassion for the downtrodden. As much as he unceasingly labored among the Black population, for the salvation of souls, Fr. Quinn gave himself with the same zeal to save them from the social ills which robbed them of their human dignity. With the growing state of homelessness among Black children in the late 1920's prior to the 1929 Depression, Fr. Quinn responded by buying land at Wading River, Long Island and setting up an orphanage there for them in 1928. The local Wading River residents were however enraged by Fr. Quinn's action of opening a home for Black children in their community. The KKK led the residents in a firestorm of opposition against the orphanage and burnt it down to the ground. Fr. Quinn was not intimidated by his hate-filled opponents and quickly built a second structure but that too was totally incinerated. He did not buckle under the forces of hate and courageously stood up the KKK and their followers, in his unflinching determination to keep the orphanage where it was. His life was in danger but he was "ready to shed the last drop of his life's blood for the least" among his people, as he had joyfully announced to them a little after the dedication of St. Peter Claver Church in June 1922.

God had other plans for him. Through the heavenly intervention of St. Therese, Quinn's life was spared and his third attempt to build an orphanage was successful. It was dedicated as the Little Flower House of Providence October 26, 1930. The brick building was built sturdily and compact, it seemed, to last all time. Fr. Quinn received from his good friend Mother Katharine Drexel (now a saint); the generous services of her Congregation the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to staff his orphanage and parish school. They were succeeded in 1937 by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

Soon after the dedication of the new orphanage, Fr. Quinn saw the completion of his new Parish Institute, a multi-purpose building encompassing the parish school, convent and parish center. The latter contained within itself a gymnasium with a stage for performances and overlapping balcony. The building also had an indoor running track, basement bowling lanes, doctor's clinic

and meeting and storage rooms. The Beaux-Arts citadel type building was not only prized by the parish but it was the pride of all Brooklyn receiving a bronze plaque in 1932 from the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce for being the most distinguished building of matchless proportions to be erected in the borough in 1931. The building was fully utilized in all the functions for which it was built. Fr. Quinn succeeded in achieving high academic standards for his parish school, comparable to the best schools of the diocese. The sports program at the parish center also excelled in city-wide championships, particularly basketball games. With his open door policy in admitting people to the parish, irrespective of their race or religion, Blacks flocked to the parish center from all parts of Brooklyn and Manhattan to play basketball and other sports. White youths played there as well. The parish institute became a Mecca of entertainment for the Black community of the area.

In all the burgeoning enterprises of the parish, Fr. Quinn fully involved his parishioners. He founded a Third Order Congregation of Black Brothers dedicated to the service of their own people. The religious community dissolved after his death but during Fr. Quinn's lifetime they worked in his Apostolate to Black Seamen and at the parish and orphanage at Wading River. One of the Brothers, Leo Caesar, became renowned for a deep prayerful life and for his outstanding service to the needy and the orphans at Wading River.

It was with feverish urgency that Fr. Quinn promoted vocations to the priesthood and the religious life among African American Catholic youth even though few of them were accepted for service to the Church. He gave a joyful, red carpet welcome at the parish to Francis Wade, his protégée who was among the first four Black priests in 1934 to be ordained from the seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, which the Society of the Divine Word had built for African American men. Soon after his ordination, Fr. Wade returned to St. Peter Claver church to offer a Mass of Thanksgiving and was made to feel like a Prince of the Church by Fr. Quinn.

As the parish outgrew itself, Fr. Quinn expanded his work to Blacks far and wide in the diocese of Brooklyn, establishing missions in various parts of the Borough. His mission of St. Benedict the Moor in Queens County became a full fledged independent parish. Through all the rapid growth and development of his apostolate, Fr. Quinn suffered ill health particularly from the financial strain of

his ever growing orphanage. The unfailing help of St. Therese of Lisieux sustained him through all his difficulties. Father Quinn lived simply. His whole life was oriented towards people, serving their spiritual and human needs in the vicissitudes of their daily lives. He displayed good humor and radiated joy to the priests who lived with him and the people whom he served in the parish.

A man of prayer, Fr. Quinn spent free moments during the day praying before the Blessed Sacrament. He found fulfillment in his daily celebration of the Eucharist which nourished him spiritually and provided the indefatigable stamina which he bore valiantly for his work. The rosary was very much a daily prayer of Fr. Quinn, who also had a most profound devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Father's own heart, like the heart of Christ, flowed over with an endless outpouring of God's love for those who were down-and-out, the hapless sinner and all who needed his services.



Fr. Quinn died at 52 years of age, April 7, 1940. Thousands of people at the funeral mourned his death, but celebrated his passing into everlasting life.

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Quintessential Priest
Editions Du Signe, Publisher 2005*

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*Fr. Bernard Quinn's Cause for Canonization was begun by the
Brooklyn Diocese on January 13, 2008.*