

Tridentine Community News

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Tridentine Travelogue: St. Agnes Church, New York City

Most Catholics over the age of 40 have heard of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. He was a televangelist before the world knew what the term meant, albeit for the Catholic faith. 30 years before EWTN existed, Bishop Sheen enjoyed a highly-rated, prime-time network television show. For many years, his home base was St. Agnes Church, on 43rd Street in central Manhattan, just a stone's throw away from Grand Central Station. Today, St. Agnes is one of New York City's busiest Catholic churches and is the site of Manhattan's first Sunday indulgent Tridentine Mass.

St. Agnes has an amazing Mass schedule: 7 Daily Masses. 10 Holy Day Masses (not including Vigil Masses). 6 Sunday Masses. 1 Tridentine Mass per week on Sunday, but attendance at that packed Mass exceeds all of the other Sunday Masses combined. Its registered parishioner count is rather low, but St. Agnes attracts a transient congregation from throughout the New York metro area, as well as daily Mass-goers from the office towers that surround the church.

Known as a bastion of Sacred Tradition, St. Agnes is served by numerous resident priests, a rare sight these days. St. Agnes tends to attract academics and intellectuals: Until a few years ago, one of its residents was the well-known convert, author, and orator, Fr. George Rutler. Another was the prolific speaker Fr. John Perricone. Due in part to the abundance of qualified speakers, the 1999 Latin Liturgy Association Convention was held at St. Agnes.

One of the most odd experiences this writer has ever witnessed occurred at this renowned church around 1990: St. Agnes had a passageway/storage area behind its high altar. The two entrances to this passageway were covered with red velvet curtains, like the ones covering a similar passageway behind St. Josaphat's high altar.

While attending a Tridentine Mass there being celebrated by an Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of New York, one of the red velvet curtains caught fire. Altar servers rushed to try to put out the flames, and in minutes, firemen showed up and definitively extinguished the fire with heavy-duty equipment. All the while, the bishop continued to celebrate the Holy Mass! There was no pause at all. No distraction, no commentary, nothing. It was as

though the fire were not even occurring. Despite sizable flames occurring just a few feet away, the bishop simply went on.

A similar incident proved to be the downfall of the edifice: Just a few years later, in 1992, another fire burned down the main church.

For six years, the parish held its Masses in a gymnasium-turned-chapel in the former parish school while a new church was planned and built. Despite the humble setting, the crowds continued to come: 8 Daily Masses and 16 Holy Day Masses were held.

The parish fought with the Archdiocese to construct a traditional-looking church. They won the right to have a communion rail, but lost the battle for a high altar. Nevertheless, the resulting freestanding altar is built to support *ad orientem* celebration of the Holy Mass. While the church lacks the appearance of a traditional sanctuary flanked by side altars, it does look recognizably Catholic, certainly more so than many newly constructed churches today.



a higher quality of construction. One can only hope that it has a top notch fire protection system.

Those who attend St. Josaphat will be interested to know that one of the regular celebrants of St. Agnes' Tridentine Mass is Fr. James Miara, who has celebrated the Traditional Mass at St. Josaphat on two occasions during visits to Detroit.

Strangely, St. Agnes does not have a web site. And despite its thriving Tridentine Mass, one rarely hears anything about this church outside of New York circles. Perhaps its popularity with locals and its reputation are all that it needs to prosper.

Questions? Comments? Ideas for a future column? Please e-mail tridnews@stjosaphatchurch.org with your thoughts.