

Easter Bonnets

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FILE

It was to be a celebration that would “Knock people’s socks off” according to Monsignor Kevin Colleran.

The traditional Easter bonnets on the ladies and patent leather shoes on little kids carrying baskets filled with sugary treats and colorful Easter eggs were not to be the only sights at the 1999 Easter celebration of the Church of St. Philip Neri at 3025 Grand Concourse in the Bronx. That year, the celebration was to be a “triple threat,” functioning also as a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the church, as well as its reopening after being devastated by a fire in June of 1997. The majestic stained oak doors were to be opened again for the first time in two years, and with great pomp and circumstance, excited parishioners were to walk through them as drums and trumpets heralded their entrance, and Monsignor Kevin Colleran, the church’s pastor since 1988, would look on with great joy and pride. It was to be an unforgettable day. It was a day that never was.

St. Philip Neri, the birthplace of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, helped to save the North Bronx from the raging arsonists that swept through the Bronx in the 1970’s, and has been a haven not only for its nearly 1,000 members, but for the surrounding community as well. In addition to activism through NBCC, which organized tenant associations in surrounding neighborhoods, the church has also involved itself in boycotts against local banks who refuse to make loans to residents, provided space in its basement for voting during election seasons, and served the neighborhood’s elderly with its senior citizen’s center and Meals on Wheels program. This active support and limitless gener-

osity to the community has endeared the church to generations of local residents, who at the turn of the century were Irish and Italian, but today include an increasingly Hispanic, Korean, and Black Caribbean population. “I’m not a member, I’m registered with another church, but I come here because there’s a warmth here that I don’t feel at my church” said Rosemarie, 54, a Trinidadian who has been attending mass at St. Philip Neri for eight years and asked that her last name be withheld. “I had a death in the family, and we wanted to hold the funeral at St. Philip Neri. It willingly accepted us without asking if we were members or not, something many other churches wouldn’t do,” she said.

At one point, the reconstruction of the Church of St. Philip Neri was slated for completion in the Spring of 1999. But delays in reconstruction dashed the hopes for a triple celebration, and frustrations for parishioners and Colleran have begun to mount of late. According to a source who works for the church and wished to be unnamed, seeing reports that the restoration would be complete by Christmas of 1998, April of 1999, and November of 1999, only to have reconstruction stall, has made the issue very touchy for church members.

Not wishing to add to their own, or the Monsignor’s exasperation, many declined to comment publicly on the issue to this column. The few that would comment either declined to give their names or did not want their last names revealed. “I don’t know why the Archdiocese doesn’t have its lawyers step in, this is ridiculous” said one parishioner, who was careful to add that she knows the Monsignor cannot control the situation. “It’s these insurance companies. I

don’t blame the Monsignor, he’s not a lawyer” she said.

Although parishioners are not pressuring Colleran, they cannot help but raise their frustrations on a regular basis with the Monsignor. Even Archbishop Egan, who visited the church in the first week of November of 2000, could not help but ask Colleran why the rebuilding is taking so long.

Another church member who wished to

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remain nameless explained that parishioners have been let down about when the project would be completed so many times, that they cannot help but voice their frustrations to Colleran. “We miss this church so much. It’s been hard.” She quickly added, “We’ll make it back though, you’ll see. I have faith in that.”

Still, a fighting spirit alone apparently cannot bring back the church that is so

beloved by Northwest Bronx residents. Insurance companies are ultimately in control of when the church reopens, and with the cost of reconstruction now totaling between \$18 to \$20 million dollars according to Monsignor Colleran, each of the church’s four insurance companies must conduct its own investigation into how much must be paid.

“Ultimately, the insurance companies come in, and they have to decide how much more to give” said Colleran. Although he was careful to add that he understands there is a process that must take place, it appears that he cannot help but be as exasperated as anyone else. “They [insurance companies] haven’t been bad, they’ve been very good with us, but they keep asking for more and more information. They want to cross every t and dot every i” he said. Colleran explained that recent holdups in construction have been due to the process of gathering an exhaustive laundry list of every item the church had before the fire. Insurance companies are insisting on this because they don’t want to overpay. “Anything that we had before, [insurance companies] will have to be replaced. We had a slate roof, they had to replace that, we had stained glass windows, they have to replace them, but if we want to change anything, and it costs more, we will have to pay for that [with donations raised by parishioners].” To date, parishioners past and present, as well as many non-Catholic churches, have raised over \$1 million dollars for the church’s restoration, according to the Bronx’s Norwood News. The names of the church’s insurance companies could not be made

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