

# Lithuanian Church in Williamsburg Is Rededicated

By Michael Rizzo



*Members of the parish lay the altar linen on the newly-consecrated altar at Annunciation Church.*

More than 600 parishioners, supporters and dignitaries attended a Mass March 24, rededicating Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Williamsburg. It was the culmination of months of renovations in a parish that has served the Lithuanian community for more than 100 years.

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio was the main celebrant.

The liturgy also officially marked the merger of Annunciation with neighboring Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish and the installation of Msgr. Jamie Gigantiello as pastor.

Under bright blue skies, parishioners carrying banners representing Lithuanian, Spanish and Italian religious organizations led Bishop DiMarzio and current and former priests of the parish into the restored church.

Inside, they saw the results of an extensive renovation that included a new ceiling, altar and restored religious statues, artwork and the church's pipe organ that was installed in 1930.

"It's a good feeling that we are preserving churches," Bishop DiMarzio said before the Mass. "We're not losing worship sites but improving them for the next 100 years."

"Nuostabu," parishioner Ausra Buoziene said about the renovations using the Lithuanian word for "beautiful." She and fellow parishioner Audrone Overas were among several people who came to the Mass dressed in traditional Lithuanian attire.

"You say wow when you see it inside and outside," Buoziene said.

"But it's still authentic," Overas added.

The Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church has served the Lithuanian community since 1914 and is the only church in New York City that holds a weekly liturgy in Lithuanian. The church also conducts Masses in Spanish and English.

Evangelization is a big part of Msgr. Gigantiello's plans for Annunciation. The multi-million dollar restoration, financed through leasing the parish's former school building, included an expanded and brightened vestibule. Msgr. Gigantiello plans a coffee bar for that area and has added a Sunday evening Mass to attract more local worshippers. He also arranged with city officials to close North 5th St. directly in front of the church to create a large plaza where community residents can congregate.

"There's a lot of young people in the Williamsburg community," Msgr. Gigantiello said. "They are searching for God. We are here for the whole community and God will call them back."

Twenty-two year old Denise Garcia was born and raised in the parish and, with her mother, is active with the church's Spanish community.

"It invites people in," she said of the renovation. "We didn't just fix the look of the church. We're trying to connect with people and connect our communities."

D'Ambrosio Ecclesiastical Art Studios directed the renovations.

"The work we had to do here was big," Anthony D'Ambrosio said, "but this church is dedicated to the people of this community."

At Mass, besides the readings in Italian, Spanish and English, soloist Simona Minns led the congregation in singing the responsorial psalm in Lithuanian. The words were displayed in Lithuanian and English on new large TV's permanently installed on pillars in the nave and vestibule.

Bishop DiMarzio consecrated the new altar by pouring and rubbing chrism oil on its marble top. He also blessed Msgr. Gigantiello as the new pastor.

"This church is a miracle," the bishop said in his homily, "and is beautiful as a place of worship," he added to thunderous applause from the congregation. "This is a living place and not just a building."

The Lithuanian Ambassador to the U.S., Rolandas Krisciunas, traveled from Washington, D.C., to attend the rededication and spoke to the congregation.

"The bond of the Lithuanian people to the church is strong," he said. "The hearts of the Lithuanian community is with this church. It will be here every time they visit."

Msgr. Gigantiello gave thanks for the support of all the communities that worship at Annunciation.

"Some people call this a neighborhood of leftovers. But I am a chef and I love to do great things with leftovers," he said. "This is God's house. This is your home. Please come."

Before the final blessing, children of the parish placed blue carnations in vases that were set before a gilded image of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn, a prominent religious painting of the Blessed Mother revered by Lithuanians.

After Mass, parishioners celebrated with Lithuanian, Spanish and Italian food in a tent set up outside the church. Then the Lithuanian community made one more memory of the day's celebration. They presented Bishop DiMarzio with a traditional wood carving of Our Lady of Vilnius just like ones that Lithuanians revere in their own homes.

