

**Historical Moments**  
**Saint Joseph Parish**  
**Maplewood, NJ**  
**Fall 2025**

## **Week 1: October 11/12, 2025 - The First Catholic Roots**

Good morning/evening! I am [name] and I serve as a [Lector/on the Liturgy Committee/on the Vision Committee]. Our Liturgical Moments series returns this fall with a new focus and a new name. For the next six weeks at the end of mass there will be a brief “Historical Moment” which will explore the history of the Catholic Church in the United States as a church of and for immigrants.

It is appropriate to begin this series on the weekend of October 12th, the traditional date we commemorate Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas in 1492. While we now understand the complexity and tragedy that European colonization brought to indigenous peoples, it's also true that Columbus and the Spanish explorers who followed brought Catholic Christianity to North America for the first time.

The first Catholic Mass celebrated on what would become United States soil was likely offered by Spanish priests accompanying explorers in Florida in the early 1500s. In 1565, Spanish colonists established St. Augustine, Florida - the oldest continuously inhabited European-founded city in what is now the United States, complete with a Catholic parish that still serves the community today.

It was the Spanish Franciscan missionaries who truly planted Catholic roots in American soil. Beginning in the late 1500s and continuing through the 1700s, Franciscan friars established a chain of missions stretching from Florida through Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and up the California coast. These missionaries - immigrants themselves from Spain - came not seeking gold or land, but the salvation of souls. They learned indigenous languages, translated prayers and

scripture, and often defended native peoples against the worst excesses of colonial exploitation.

The most famous of these missionary immigrants was St. Junípero Serra, the Franciscan friar who established nine missions along the California coast in the late 1700s, including Mission San Diego and Mission San Francisco. While we must honestly acknowledge that the mission system often disrupted indigenous cultures, we also recognize that these Spanish-speaking Catholics were among the first to see the Americas as a place where the Gospel could take root in new soil, be expressed in new languages, and be embodied in new cultures.

In our own diverse parish, we see the continuation of this Spanish-speaking Catholic tradition. When we sing songs in both English and Spanish, when we honor Our Lady of Guadalupe alongside other Marian devotions, we participate in a Catholic story that began with those first Spanish missionaries over 500 years ago.

As we begin this series exploring how waves of immigrants have shaped American Catholicism, we remember that from the very beginning, the Catholic Church in America has been a church of newcomers, of those who left familiar places to live their faith in a new land.

Thank you for your kind attention.

## **Week 2: October 18/19, 2025 - Black Catholics: Faith Forged in Struggle**

Good morning/evening! I am [name] and I serve as a [Lector/on the Liturgy Committee/on the Vision Committee]. This week, as we continue our series on the Catholic Church in America as a church of and for immigrants, we turn to a community whose story is unlike any other - Black Catholics, whose faith was forged in the crucible of enslavement and sustained through centuries of struggle for justice and recognition.

The history of Black Catholics in America begins not with voluntary immigration, but with the horror of the Middle Passage. Africans brought to American shores as enslaved people included many who had been baptized Catholic in West and Central Africa, particularly in regions influenced by Portuguese missionaries. They carried their Catholic faith across the ocean in circumstances of unimaginable suffering.

In places like Louisiana, where French and Spanish Catholic colonial rule created different dynamics than English Protestant colonies, enslaved Africans often retained and adapted their Catholic faith, blending it with African spiritual traditions to create vibrant expressions of Catholic spirituality. The famous Congo Square in New Orleans became a place where Catholic feast days were celebrated with African drumming and dance.

Even under the dehumanizing system of slavery, Black Catholics found ways to live out their faith with extraordinary courage. In 1829, free Black Catholics in Baltimore established the first religious order of African American women, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, dedicated to educating Black children when they

were excluded from white Catholic schools. Their foundress, Mother Mary Lange, is now recognized as a candidate for sainthood.

After the Civil War, Black Catholics faced a double burden - racism in American society and often exclusion or segregation within their own Catholic Church. Many parishes refused to welcome Black Catholics, leading to the establishment of separate "colored" parishes throughout the South and in northern cities. Despite this rejection, Black Catholics remained faithful, building their own schools, parishes, and institutions.

The story of Black Catholics includes heroes like Pierre Toussaint, a Haitian-born enslaved person who gained his freedom and became one of New York's most generous philanthropists, attending daily Mass for over sixty years and caring for orphans, the sick, and the poor. He too is now a candidate for sainthood.

More recently, Black Catholics have been leaders in the Civil Rights movement and in calling the church to live up to its teachings on human dignity. Sister Thea Bowman, a Franciscan sister from Mississippi, became a powerful voice for recognizing the gifts that African American culture brings to Catholic worship and theology. Her cause for canonization is also underway.

Today, Black Catholics continue to enrich our church through distinctive liturgical traditions, powerful preaching rooted in both African American and Catholic spirituality, and prophetic voices calling the church to racial justice.

In our own diverse parish community, we are blessed to include Catholics whose ancestors came from Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the diaspora. Their presence reminds us that the Catholic Church is truly universal, and that faith can flourish even in the most difficult circumstances.

The story of Black Catholics teaches us that faith is not just something we inherit, but something we must actively choose and courageously live, even when the institutional church fails to fully welcome us.

Thank you for listening.

### **Week 3: October 25/26, 2025 - The Great Migration: Irish and German Catholics**

Good morning/evening! I am [name] and I serve as a [Lector/on the Liturgy Committee/on the Vision Committee]. This week we explore the two largest waves of Catholic immigration in the 19th century - the Irish and the Germans - whose combined presence transformed American Catholicism.

The Irish Catholic story began tragically with the potato famine of the 1840s. Between 1845 and 1852, over one million Irish people died, and another million emigrated, mostly to America. They arrived in cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia - often sick, impoverished, and speaking Gaelic rather than English. These Irish Catholic immigrants faced unprecedented hatred. "No Irish Need Apply" signs appeared everywhere, and the Know-Nothing Party gained political power on an anti-immigrant platform.

At the same time, German Catholics were arriving in large numbers, often settling in the Midwest in cities like Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Cincinnati – but also East Coast cities like Newark, New Jersey. Unlike the Irish, who were refugees fleeing famine, German Catholics were often seeking economic opportunity and freedom from political upheaval. They brought different priorities - emphasizing the preservation of their language and culture within their Catholic practice, establishing German-language parishes, schools, and newspapers.

This created fascinating tensions within American Catholicism. The Irish, led by Bishops like John Hughes of New York, believed Catholics needed to prove their American loyalty by assimilating quickly and speaking English. The Germans, led by figures like Archbishop John Baptist Purcell of Cincinnati, argued for what we

would now call multiculturalism - the idea that American Catholicism should celebrate diverse ethnic expressions of the same faith.

Despite their differences, both groups transformed American Catholicism. The Irish built the institutional backbone - by 1900, Irish Americans made up the majority of American bishops and priests. They created the extensive Catholic school system and proved Catholic patriotism through service in the Civil War, particularly units like New York's Fighting 69th.

The Germans contributed intellectual depth and social consciousness. They established some of America's first Catholic social service organizations and championed workers' rights decades before these ideas became mainstream. The Central Verein, founded by German Catholics in 1855, became one of the most important Catholic social justice organizations in American history.

Both groups also brought distinctive devotional practices that enriched American Catholic life. The Irish contributed devotions like the rosary, novenas, and parish missions. The Germans brought traditions of liturgical music, Benedictine spirituality - like we see in our own parish's heritage - and the concept of the parish as a comprehensive community center.

Perhaps most importantly, the Irish and Germans together established the "brick and mortar" Catholicism of the late 1800s - the thousands of parishes, schools, hospitals, and orphanages that created a parallel Catholic society within America. This infrastructure would prove essential for welcoming later waves of Catholic immigrants.

By the end of the 19th century, these Irish and German Catholics had proven that being Catholic and being American were not contradictory identities. They laid the foundation for the multicultural American Catholicism we celebrate today.

Thank you for your attention.

## **Week 4: November 1/2, 2025 - The Great Wave: Italians, Poles, and Eastern Europeans**

Good morning/evening! I am [name] and I serve as a [Lector/on the Liturgy Committee/on the Vision Committee]. This week we explore what historians call the "Great Wave" of Catholic immigration - the millions of Italians, Poles, Lithuanians, Slovaks, and other Southern and Eastern Europeans who transformed American Catholicism between 1880 and 1920.

Between 1880 and 1924, over four million Italians immigrated to America, most settling in cities like New York, Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia. These immigrants brought a Catholic faith that was sustained by the beauty of Italian art and architecture, deeply devotional and family-centered, expressed through feast days, processions, and devotions to particular saints. The Feast of San Gennaro in New York's Little Italy and similar celebrations across the country became vibrant expressions of Italian Catholic culture.

At the same time, millions of Polish Catholics were arriving, fleeing economic hardship and political oppression. Polish Catholics established over 800 parishes nationwide, often centered around their own language and customs. They built magnificent churches like St. Stanislaus in Chicago and St. Adalbert's nearby in Elizabeth that rivaled European cathedrals in their beauty and ambition.

What made this wave of immigration challenging for American Catholicism was that these new immigrants often had different expressions of Catholic faith than the established Irish-American church. Italian Catholics were more likely to emphasize family devotions over parish life. Eastern European Catholics included many who

followed Eastern Catholic rites rather than the Roman rite familiar to Irish and German Catholics.

The established Catholic hierarchy sometimes struggled to accommodate these differences. There were tensions over whether parishes should be organized by ethnicity or geography, whether priests should be required to speak English, and how to integrate different devotional practices into American Catholic life. The struggles that Italian Catholics faced were beautifully dramatized in the movie *Cabrini*, which tells the remarkable story of Mother Francis Xavier Cabrini, the first American citizen to be declared a saint, as she served the Italian immigrant community in New York, advocating for them to the largely Irish church hierarchy.

But this diversity ultimately enriched American Catholicism immeasurably. Italian Catholics gave us devotions to St. Joseph, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and others. Polish Catholics contributed traditions like the beautiful Wigilia [Veh-GEE-lee-ah] Christmas Eve celebration and devotion to Our Lady of Czestochowa. Slovak and Lithuanian Catholics brought their own rich traditions of Marian devotion and liturgical music.

Perhaps most importantly, these immigrant communities developed what historians might call “protective parishes” - comprehensive Catholic communities that included not just churches, but schools, hospitals, social clubs, credit unions, and mutual aid societies. These institutions served not just spiritual needs, but helped immigrants navigate American society while preserving their cultural identity.

This great wave of Catholic immigration reminds us that the church grows stronger not by erasing differences, but by celebrating how different cultures can express the same universal Catholic faith while also enriching it.

Thank you for your attention.

## **Week 5: November 8/9, 2025 - New Waves: Post-1965 Immigration**

Good morning/evening! I am [name] and I serve as a [Lector/on the Liturgy Committee/on the Vision Committee]. This week we explore how the Immigration Act of 1965 opened America's doors to Catholic immigrants from new regions, bringing fresh vitality and diverse traditions to American Catholic life.

In 1965, Congress passed an Immigration Reform Act that ended the nation's discriminatory quota system established in the 1920s. That quota system had favored European immigrants and severely limited immigration from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. With the Reform Act of 1965, Catholic communities that had been small minorities in America began to grow dramatically, bringing traditions and perspectives that continue to reshape American Catholicism.

Filipino Catholics became one of the largest new Catholic immigrant groups. The Philippines, evangelized by Spanish missionaries in the 16th century, developed a deeply devotional Catholic culture. Filipino immigrants brought traditions like Simbang Gabi - the nine-day series of dawn Masses before Christmas – and Santacruzán, which you may remember from Fr. Manolo's time in our parish. Today, Filipino Americans make up one of the largest Asian Catholic populations in the United States; their emphasis on family, hospitality, and Marian devotion has enriched parishes across the country.

Korean Catholics, though smaller in number, brought their own remarkable story. The Catholic Church in Korea grew primarily through lay evangelization rather than foreign missionaries, creating a tradition of lay leadership and martyrdom - 103 Korean martyrs were canonized by Pope John Paul II. Korean Catholic immigrants established parishes that served not just spiritual needs but helped

preserve Korean language and culture for second and third generations, as we know from our Maplewood neighbor, the parish of St. Andrew Kim.

Caribbean Catholics, particularly from Haiti, brought yet another distinctive tradition. Haitian Catholics maintained their faith despite centuries of poverty and political upheaval, developing a popular Catholicism that blends African traditions with Catholic devotions. Haitian immigrants have enriched American Catholicism with their devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help and their vibrant liturgical music.

Vietnamese Catholics arrived primarily as refugees after the fall of Saigon in 1975, having faced persecution under communist rule. Many were resettled in the United States through the support of Catholic Charities and local parishes. They brought a church tradition forged by centuries of missionary activity and sustained by devotion to the Vietnamese martyrs. Catholics from Viet Nam continue to enrich the church through their strong support of vocations to religious life.

Latino immigration also accelerated after 1965, not just from Mexico, but from Central and South America. Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, and other Central American Catholics brought their own traditions shaped by Liberation Theology and their struggles for social and economic justice. Brazilian, Colombian, and other South American Catholics contributed their own rich devotional practices.

And although we discussed Black Catholics in our second week, it is worth noting here that the immigration of Catholics, both clergy and lay people, from Africa post-1965 is responsible for the revival and survival of many urban Catholic parishes throughout the United States.

What distinguishes these post-1965 Catholic immigrants from earlier waves is that they arrived in an America where multiculturalism was increasingly celebrated rather than discouraged. Rather than being pressured to assimilate completely, these communities have been encouraged to maintain their cultural traditions within their Catholic practice.

In our own parish community, we see the beautiful results of this diversity. When we celebrate feast days from different traditions, when our liturgical music draws from various cultures, when we welcome refugees and new immigrants as part of our parish family, we embody the universal nature of the Catholic Church.

These newer Catholic immigrants remind us that the church is truly catholic - universal - and that every culture has gifts to contribute to our common Catholic faith.

Thank you for listening.

## **Week 6: November 15/16, 2025 - From Melting Pot to Multicultural Table**

Good morning/evening! I am [name] and I serve as a [Lector/on the Liturgy Committee/on the Vision Committee]. Today we conclude our series by reflecting on how our understanding of Catholic diversity in America has evolved from the "melting pot" model to what we might call a "multicultural table" where every tradition brings its own gifts.

For much of American Catholic history, the prevailing model was assimilation - the idea that immigrants should melt into a common American Catholic identity, usually defined by the dominant Irish-American church culture. Ethnic parishes were seen as temporary necessities, stepping stones toward joining "regular" American parishes where English was spoken, and Irish devotional practices predominated.

This melting pot approach had some benefits - it helped Catholic immigrants prove their American loyalty and avoided the kind of ethnic tensions that sometimes divided Protestant denominations. But it also meant that many beautiful traditions were lost as communities assimilated, and it sometimes created hierarchies where European Catholic traditions were valued more highly than those from other continents.

The Second Vatican Council began to change this understanding with its teaching that the Catholic Church is truly universal - that every culture has gifts to bring to our common Catholic faith. But it was the 1965 Immigration Reform Act, bringing new waves of Catholic immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, that really challenged American Catholicism to live up to this vision.

In 2000, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published "Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity," a pastoral statement that articulated a new vision for American Catholic diversity. Rather than asking immigrants to abandon their cultural traditions, the bishops called for a church that celebrates "unity in diversity" - recognizing that cultural differences can strengthen rather than threaten Catholic unity.

This document acknowledges that "the Church in the United States has been culturally diverse from its very beginning" and calls us to move beyond mere tolerance toward genuine appreciation for what each tradition brings. It speaks of building communities where "unity and diversity are seen not as contradictory, but as complementary dimensions of the Church's catholicity."

We see this multicultural table model lived out in our own parish community. When we celebrate Mass with music that draws from different cultural traditions, when we honor saints from around the world, when we welcome the distinctive devotional practices that different communities bring, we're not creating division - we're revealing the true richness of Catholic faith.

Our Holy Family chapel honors saints from Africa, Italy, Ireland, Mexico, South America, and the Philippines. In the music side chapel, we find Our Lady of Fatima from Portugal, and in our stained-glass windows in the choir loft we see mostly German Benedictine saints watching over us. Our parish embodies unity in diversity every time we celebrate the liturgy together.

This evolution from melting pot to multicultural table reflects a deeper theological truth - that God's love is so vast that no single culture can fully express it. We need the contemplative traditions of European monasticism and the vibrant celebrations

of Latino popular religion. We need the social justice emphasis of German Catholic tradition and the family-centered faith of Filipino communities. We need the prophetic voice of Black Catholic tradition and the devotional richness of Eastern Catholic rites.

As we conclude this series, we're reminded that being a church of and for immigrants is not just about our history - it's about our present calling. In a world still marked by displacement and migration, American Catholics are called to continue welcoming the stranger, not as people to be changed into our image, but as bearers of gifts we need to receive.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops invites all Catholics to take the “Cabrini Pledge” so that Catholics can contribute to the national conversation about immigration with consciences formed by scripture, church teaching and the unique history of our church in the United States. Information about the Cabrini Pledge is on the bishops’ website, in the bulletin and in the back of church.

The story of Catholic immigration to America teaches us that diversity is not a problem to be solved, but a blessing to be celebrated. We are strongest not when we all look and worship alike, but when we bring our different gifts to the one table of the Lord.

Thank you for your kind attention throughout this series. Please continue to share your feedback and suggestions for future Historical, Liturgical or other Moments.