



Our Lady of Mount Carmel: *A Beacon Across the Waters*

Rev. Jesus Carlo Merino



The icon of the *Madonna Bruna*
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At the heart of every immigrant story is a sojourner's prayer whispered in hope—and for many Italian families who arrived in America from the Port of Naples, that prayer was offered to Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

After the Unification of Italy in 1861, waves of southern Italians departed their homeland seeking a better life. As they stood at the edge of the port, just a few hundred meters away, one sight stood tall above the city skyline: the brilliant bell tower of *Il Carmine Maggiore*—the Basilica of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Rising 75 meters into the sky and adorned with colorful tiles, the tower served as both a visual landmark and a spiritual anchor. It was the last thing many immigrants saw as their ships pulled away from the coast—and the first vow they made to God: to give thanks to the Blessed Mother of Mount Carmel if they arrived safely in their new home.

Inside that Neapolitan basilica is a sacred image known as *la Madonna Bruna*—the Brown Madonna—believed to have miraculously floated across the sea from the Holy Land. Whether by miracle or mystery, the icon has been revered for centuries. Some say the Carmelites have guarded it since the 13th century, others say as far back as the 8th. She is considered a Black Madonna, a title given to many images of Our Lady that have deep roots in miracle stories and spiritual favors. Over time, candle soot, incense, and the sheer presence of countless pilgrims have darkened her image, but not her power.

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And when Italian immigrants landed in America, they brought more than luggage. They brought a living faith. And with it, the devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel flourished in communities across New Jersey. In cities and towns where Italians planted roots, churches blossomed in her name: Our Lady of Mount Carmel – Newark (1889), Lyndhurst (1966), Montclair (1907), Jersey City (1905), Orange (1896/1902).

Even more striking: “Our Lady of Mount Carmel” is the most common parish name in our diocese—a sign of how deep this devotion runs. Bishop Winand Wigger, who led the Diocese of Newark in the late 1800s, had a special love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus. And while, sadly, only seven Sacred Heart parishes remain today, Mount Carmel churches still thrive.

And beyond New Jersey, perhaps the most famous Mount Carmel shrine is on 116th Street in Manhattan—once a powerhouse of miracles, where Pope Pius X crowned the image and pilgrims would leave their crutches and wheelchairs beneath the altar. It’s a shrine not only of healing, but of heritage.

Here in Berkeley Heights, the devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel took deep root through the faithful witness of Italian immigrants who founded the Mount Carmel Society over a century ago. Since 1909, the annual Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel—with its vibrant procession, joyful Mass at the Church of the Little Flower, and community celebration—has been more than just a tradition; it’s a living expression of gratitude, faith, and identity. Just as the bell tower of Naples was a beacon for those leaving home, so too has this devotion become a spiritual landmark in our town, Berkeley Heights—uniting past and present, heritage and hope, at the heart of Little Flower Parish, where I am blessed to be the pastor.

May the love of Our Lady remain a visible sign of hope for all—seen from afar, steady as ever, pointing always to her Son.

**OUR LADY OF MT. CARMEL,
PRAY FOR US!**



The *Basilica Santuario del Carmine Maggiore* in Naples.
[Photo by Baku /CC BY-SA 4.0,](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *The Rev. Jesus Carlo (JC) Merino was born in Taytay, Philippines. After a successful career as a musician, musical arranger and orchestrator, he discerned a calling to the priesthood. Fr. Merino earned a bachelor’s degree in Humanities from the University of Asia and the Pacific in Manila. He began his seminary training at the University of Navarra in Spain and completed his studies at the Immaculate Conception Seminary at Seton Hall University. He was ordained in May 2017.*

In 2023, Fr. Merino was installed as the eighth pastor of the Church of the Little Flower in Berkeley Heights, a community which he loves deeply. He also serves as chaplain to the Berkeley Heights Police Department. Fr. Merino credits his faith and his vocation to the prayers of his parents. His interests include music, technology and media, traveling, and good food! Above all, he is passionate about building friendships and small Christian communities.

Newark's Our Lady of Mount Carmel Feast Celebrates 135 Years!

Louis A. Nicastro

The 135th Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Newark's historic Down Neck neighborhood marks a significant chapter in the enduring devotion of Italian immigrants to the Virgin Mary. This year's celebration is not just a vibrant cultural festival but also a religious observance, commemorating the intersection of faith, heritage, and community pride. For over a century, this feast has been a reunion for Down Neck's scattered Italian community, as well as a place of welcoming for new attendees from the neighborhood's emerging immigration diasporas.

A Marian Devotion with Deep Roots

The devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel has its origins in the 12th century with the Carmelite Order, which was founded on Mount Carmel in present-day Palestine. The Carmelites quickly became known for their piety, contemplative lives, and strong devotion to the Virgin Mary, who they viewed as their spiritual mother and protector. This Marian devotion became particularly significant in Europe, and by the 14th century, it began to spread to other parts of the world, including the United States, largely through the efforts of Catholic immigrants.

The Brown Scapular: A Symbol of Protection and Devotion

One of the most cherished aspects of the devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel is the brown scapular, a simple yet profound symbol of faith. According to tradition, in 1251, the Virgin Mary appeared to St. Simon Stock, the leader of the Carmelite Order, and presented him with the brown scapular as a sign of her special protection. She promised that those who wore the scapular with devotion would receive her maternal care and be spared from eternal damnation.

The brown scapular is made of two small pieces of brown cloth, connected by strings and worn over the shoulders. It is considered a powerful sacramental, a reminder of the wearer's commitment to the Virgin Mary and a symbol of her protection and intercession. For many Italian immigrants Down Neck, the scapular became a cherished heirloom passed down through generations, a tangible connection to their Catholic faith and the comforting presence of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

Over time, the scapular became a key feature of the feast, with many participants receiving their scapulars during the celebration as part of the tradition. The procession through the streets of Down Neck, accompanied by symphonic religious music, is a testament to the enduring power of this Marian devotion. Even the elderly and disabled endure walking in procession behind Our Lady of Mount Carmel under the blistering hot mid-July sun. They do so, just as their ancestors have done, for centuries.



Photo by Anthony Scillia

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The Importance of Our Lady of Mount Carmel to Italian Immigrants

For the Italian immigrants who settled in Newark's Down Neck neighborhood, Our Lady of Mount Carmel was more than just a statue — she was a symbol of hope, protection, and resilience. During the major wave of immigration from Southern Italy, following the *Risorgimento*, the Port of Naples became the main point of departure for the impoverished families seeking a better life. The last church on terra firma is the *Basilica of Santa Maria del Carmine Maggiore* located in Piazza Mercato. Many of the Italian emigrants made vows to this image of Mary before traversing across the ocean. The emigrants promised her that if they made safe passage across the sea then wherever they ended up they would erect a church dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. They also left any personal items that they were not able to take with them on the passenger liners behind as donations to the basilica.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel became the unifying Marian image for the Italian diaspora. There are several churches and shrines dedicated to her across the country. Some of the other locations where Italian immigrants settled and dedicated churches to her include Springfield, MA; Philadelphia, PA; Denver, CO; Brooklyn, NY; Manhattan, NY; Hammonton, NJ; Worcester, MA; Chicago, IL. And there are many more!



A quiet moment as feast preparations begin on Oliver Street.

The feast itself was a grand affair, often marked by a procession that wound through the streets of Down Neck, with parishioners carrying a statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and singing hymns in her honor. The streets were dotted with “stops” at the homes of parishioners. Down Neck became adorned with tri color flags and decorations, and the air was filled with the sounds of bells, the smell of zeppoles, and the chatter of families gathering for the celebration.

For many in attendance, it provided the chance to look up at the statue of our Blessed Mother and see the memories of their now-gone loved ones reflected in her eyes. Tears stream down as the band plays “Mama”. We all may be gone one day, but Our Lady of Mount Carmel will remain here with her people, the patroness of Down Neck.

The 135th Feast: A Living Tradition

As the 135th Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel comes to a close this year, the celebration remains a living testament to the deep roots of Italian-American Catholicism in Newark. The feast continues to attract thousands of people — locals and visitors alike — who come to honor the Virgin Mary and to partake in the rich traditions that have been passed down through generations. The feast organizers are hard at work continuing to grow this tradition with new musical performances, a wider array of vendors, and greater community partnerships.

Let this feast serve as a prime reminder of what consistent dedication looks like. Every year Italian feasts are revived across this country and even more go defunct. It is an ebb and flow, yet on Oliver Street, the legacy endures.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Louis A. Nicastro is a lifelong parishioner at Our Lady of Mt. Virgin in Garfield. He cherishes his Catholic faith and Italian heritage and promotes both through dedicated service in various parish- and community-based organizations.*

Nicastro, a founding member of UNICO of Elmwood Park, holds the position of UNICO National Youth Chair. He has also used his time and talents to benefit the Our Lady of Mt. Virgin Soccer Club, Redemptoris Mater Seminary, the East Rutherford Bocce Ball court, and the Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Feast – Newark, NJ. Nicastro was instrumental in revitalizing Catholic student life at NJIT and Rutgers-Newark, where he formerly served as campus minister.

In 2024, Nicastro was named “Renaissance Man of the Year” by the Nutley-Belleville Columbus Day and Italian Heritage Parade Committee.

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Third Annual Wreath Laying Ceremony
IN HONOR OF

St. Frances Xavier "Mother" Cabrini



Sunday, November 9th

Immediately following the 10:00 a.m. Italian Mass

Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church
259 Oliver Street - Newark, NJ

*Reception to follow at the
SPILINGESE SOCIAL CLUB - 274 ADAMS STREET- NEWARK, NJ*

Sponsors:

The Italian Apostolate of the Archdiocese of Newark
Newark East Ward Councilman Michael J. Silva

The First Italian Mission in Newark

Andrea Lyn Cammarato-Van Benschoten

When Italians began immigrating to the United States, the mostly-Irish Catholic clergy was unfamiliar with the approach to worship practiced by the newly arrived immigrants; especially those from the Mezzogiorno region. The focus on patron saints and the exuberant feasts in their honor were rich parts of the Italian faith tradition. The Irish priests hoped that, as these immigrants “Americanized,” they would ultimately fall in line with the more “acceptable” form of Irish Catholicism.

Well, that would never happen.

Birth of the “Basement Catholics”

Writer Alberto Giovannetti coined the term “basement Catholics,” referring to the commonplace practice of relegating Italian immigrants to the basement section of the church for worship, as this quote reflects:

“While all that we have spoken of refers to the upper church, let it not be forgotten that we have three Masses in the basement for the Italians of the parish, and that Father Ferretti, under Father McLoughlin’s direction does very efficient work for that portion of his flock.”

-Souvenir History of Transfiguration Parish-Mott Street, New York (1827-1897)

Italian immigrants were increasingly frustrated by the treatment from the Irish Catholic establishment. Some even established unauthorized “parishes” and private chapels within the confines of the Diocese of Newark. One such group elected to leave the Catholic Church completely and organize under the Episcopal Diocese of Newark. Ultimately, the Irish Catholic establishment acquiesced and acknowledged that parishes were needed to support the Italian immigrant community.

Old St. John’s Hall

Dating back to 1826, St. John’s Church is the third-oldest Catholic church in New Jersey and still stands today. When the church first opened its doors for worship, it was the only Catholic church in northern New Jersey and, as the Diocese of Newark had not been established yet, was within the Diocese of New York.

It was in St. John's School Hall on Mulberry Street where the earliest Italian immigrants to Newark assembled for worship in a temporary chapel. The Most Rev. Winand M. Wigger, Third Bishop of Newark, a son of German immigrants, established the first Italian mission there in March of 1882. Those first immigrants were ministered to by the Rev. Albergio Vitali. Later on, the flock was cared for by the Rev. Conrad M. Schotthoeffer, a German who became fluent in Italian while preparing for the priesthood.

The Years to Come

Around 1890, a census of Catholic parishes, completed by the Diocese of Newark for the United States government, showed fewer than 1,600 Italian immigrants living in the diocese. By 1908, over 40,000 Italian immigrants called Newark their home. This was the beginning of a great wave of immigration from Italy and many of the immigrants settled in New Jersey.

As for St. John's, in 1972 it was formally recognized with its inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. This designation cements its status as a landmark, not just for Newark, but for New Jersey's religious and social history.

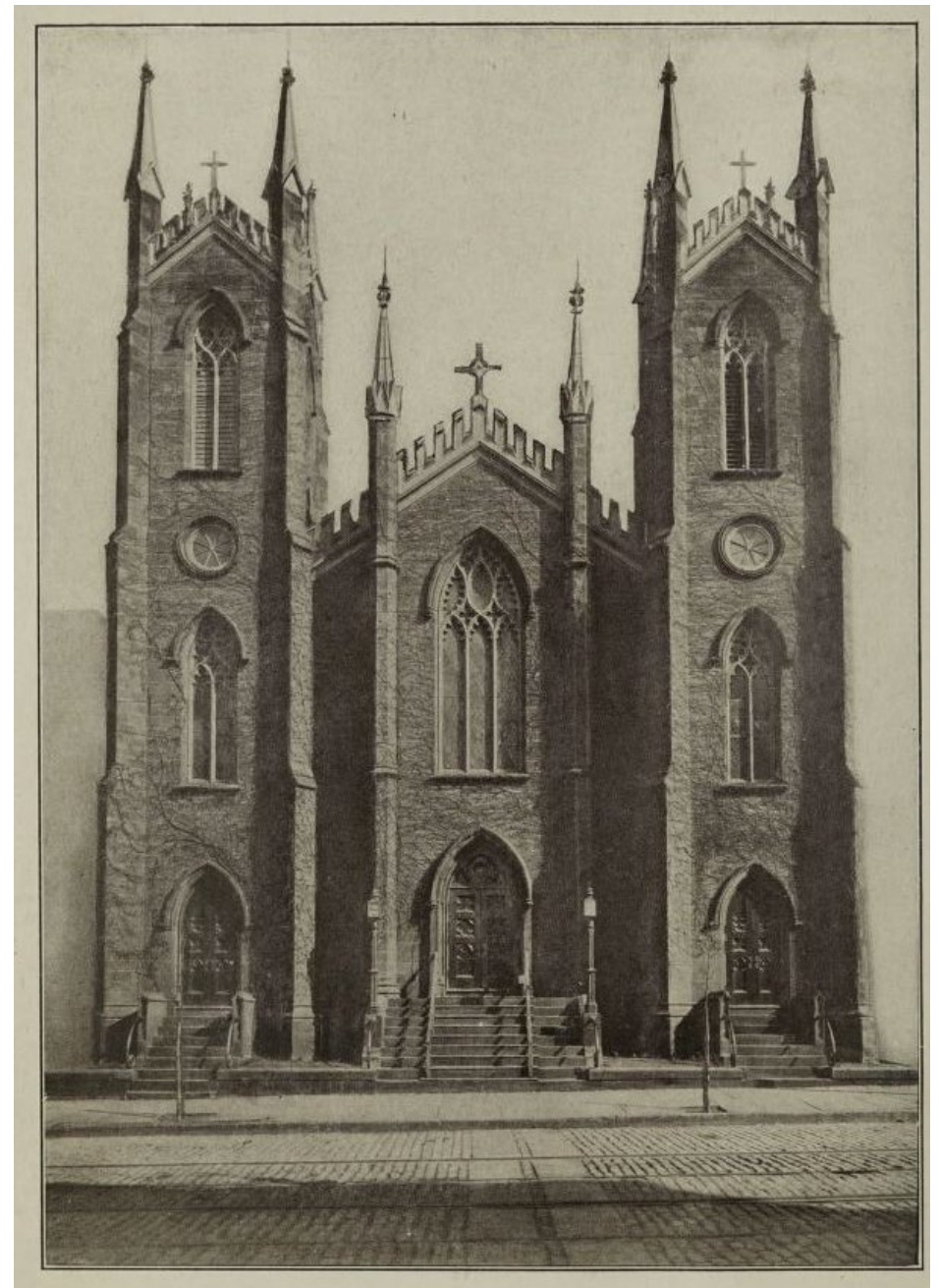
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Paul V. Flynn, *History of St. John's Church, Newark*, (1908).

Souvenir History of Transfiguration Parish—Mott Street, New York, 1827–1897 (1897).

Julius J. Spohn, *Newark's Earliest Italians*, Oldnewark.com, (2025).



Paul V. Flynn, *History of St. John's Church, Newark*, (1908) /Public Domain

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Andrea Lyn Cammarato-Van Benschoten is passionate about her Italian heritage. Born in Newark, she grew up one town over in Belleville and was taught from an early age to “never forget where you came from.” Her blog is: jerseygirlitalianroots.com and she is the author of [The Italians of Newark: A History](#). Cammarato-Van Benschoten is the recipient of the 2025 Italian Heritage Award from the Nutley-Belleville Columbus Day and Italian Heritage Parade Committee.

Andrea's next project will focus on post-WWII immigration from Italy to northern New Jersey. Please contact her if you have family stories or photos to share! She would love to hear about experiences related to religious worship (feasts, parishes, societies, traditions), businesses founded by mid-century immigrants, and their involvement in Italian social clubs and other community organizations. Andrea can be reached at jerseygirlitalianroots@gmail.com.

Maria SS. della Lavina

Fr. William Rock, FSSP

This year's *Maria SS. della Lavina* celebration occurred on Saturday, September 6. Devotion to Our Lady under this title, "of the Torrent," originated in Cerami, Sicily and was brought to Caldwell by *Ceramesi* immigrants in the early 1900s. This was the third year of the current revival, which continues to expand. A polyphonic Solemn High Mass in the Extraordinary Form was celebrated at St. Aloysius church in Caldwell, the church where a painting of the *Madonna della Lavina* is housed. Following Mass, there was a procession of the Caldwell painting of the Nursing Madonna around the grounds of the church accompanied, as it was last year, by a feast band and a Knights of Columbus honor guard. This year's celebration was marked by the debut of providing laurel branches for the faithful to carry, inspired by a practice in Cerami, as well as of some devotees donning blue or red neckerchiefs inspired by the old Caldwell society banner and the festive attire worn for the feast in Sicily. The old society banner is currently out for repair and documentation so it can be preserved and a copy can be made in the future if there is a desire.

Following the procession, there was a light reception with a display of historic memorabilia. In addition to a variety of mini Italian pastries, special cookies called *cavatieddi atturrati di Cerami*, one of the identity dishes of the *comune*, were served for the first time. Pears and figs, which are associated with the feast in Sicily, also made their inaugural appearance.

Next year's celebration is scheduled for Saturday, September 19th, 2026, with Mass starting at 11 am, again at St. Aloysius church in Caldwell. All are graciously invited to attend.



Mt. Carmel Procession in Berkeley Heights

Dan Grossano

The Mt. Carmel Society of Berkeley Heights hosted its annual Mt. Carmel procession, Mass and feast on July 16. This has been a beloved event in Berkeley Heights since 1909 when this tradition was brought by Italian immigrant families. The procession honors Our Lady of Mt. Carmel as well as honors departed members of the Mt. Carmel Society. After the morning procession around Berkeley Heights, there was a beautiful Mass at the Church of the Little Flower, picnic and then one night feast with live music, food and a drone show.



Fuoco E Gioia

A Bite of Catechism

What is Purgatory?

“All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.”

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1030

Key Points

- Purgatory is real: It is a state of purification for souls who die in God’s grace.
- It is temporary: Every soul in Purgatory will go to Heaven.
- It is not Hell: Purgatory is full of hope and God’s mercy.
- We can help: Prayers, sacrifices, and especially the Mass help souls in Purgatory.

Fraternal Correction

At funerals, people often say things like:

- “He/she is an angel now.” → No, souls never become angels.
- “He/she is in Heaven now.” → We cannot declare this. Only the Church canonizes saints.

Why This Matters

By misunderstanding this, we are not helping the deceased. If we assume they are in Heaven, we may stop praying for them. But they could be in Purgatory, suffering, and they need your prayers. Your deceased nonna, nonno, dad, or mom could be suffering in Purgatory — but because you assume they are already in Heaven, you are not helping them with prayer.

Takeaway

Always pray for the deceased.

Prayer of St. Gertrude the Great

The Promise: According to tradition, Jesus told her that each time this prayer is devoutly recited, 1,000 souls (or many souls) would be released from Purgatory and welcomed into Heaven.

Eternal Father, I offer Thee the Most Precious Blood of Thy Divine Son, Jesus, in union with the Masses said throughout the world today, for all the holy souls in Purgatory, for sinners everywhere, for sinners in the universal Church, those in my own home, and within my family. Amen.



[Philippe de Champaigne's Vanitas \(c. 1671\)](#) / Public Domain

Per i Più Piccoli

An Excerpt from *Our Friend, Mother Cabrini*

This book includes a foreword by Patrick O'Boyle of the [Italian American Podcast](#).



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"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." – Book of Psalms

As we learn sometimes, God's plans are different from our plans. Pope Leo XIII needed somebody to help her countrymen and women who were moving to the United States.

His orders were clear: "Not to the East, but to the West." Frances wanted to go to the East her entire life. The Holy Spirit had other plans for her: to help the Italians in America.

