

*“I love you, I am proud of every one of you and I would willingly shed to the last drop of my life’s blood for the least among you.”*



**SERVANT OF GOD  
FATHER BERNARD J. QUINN  
1888-1940**

*His priestly life was a consummation of the sacrificial love which he had expressed so intensely to his parishioners in the above quotation from his first pastoral letter to them in 1922.*

*Monsignor Bernard J. Quinn known to many as “Father Quinn”*

#### **FOUNDER**

*St. Peter Claver Church, Brooklyn, New York in 1921,  
St. Benedict the Moor Church, Jamaica, New York, in 1932  
And*

*The Little Flower House of Providence, Wading River, New York, in 1930  
(now The Little Flower Children and Family Services of New York)*

**Through God’s Providential design, Bernard J. Quinn was born January 15, 1888, the same day that Pope Leo XIII canonized Peter Claver, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Jesuit missionary. Peter Claver had given his life in the service to the African slaves of Colombia, South America, by defending their human rights. Bernard Quinn did likewise for Blacks in the Diocese of Brooklyn, New York. His life would be linked to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the pre-eminent African American Civil Rights champion, who was also born on January 15<sup>th</sup> but in 1929.**

**January 15h was therefore an auspicious day for Claver, Quinn and King who in their own particular times shared a common destiny of defending human dignity of**

**African people in the Americas and in promoting fraternal love among the human races as mandated by Christ's commandments for us to love one another as He has loved us. (John 15:12).**

**Bernard Quinn was born in Newark, New Jersey, to Irish immigrant parents, Bernard and Sarah Quinn, who had two other sons, and four daughters, one of whom became a Sister of St. Joseph in Watertown, N.Y. The father supported his family as a longshoreman. They were poor but deeply religious and happy. The Quinns were members of St. Patrick's pro-cathedral in Newark, New Jersey, and later joined St. Michael's Parish in the same city. Bernard attended the latter's school where his elementary school teacher, Sr. Modesta, D.C. had an enduring influence on him by teaching the boy how greatly Jesus loved him. Bernard felt the love of the Lord as an intimate friend for all his life.**

**Inspired by the example of his parish priest, Fr. William Richmond, Bernard showed a strong interest in the priesthood and entered St. Charles College, a high school and college preparatory seminary in Ellicott City, Maryland. Upon his graduation he was not lucky to be provided a place in a seminary to continue his studies for the priesthood in his diocese and was recommended to the Brooklyn Diocese where he entered St. John's Seminary in 1906. The Vincentian priest at the time directed the seminary. In the seminary, Bernard grew in his love for Jesus piously devoting himself to his own unswerving practice of praying daily in chapel. At the same time he was very sociable and athletic and lived with exuberance for life as seen in his diary. Bernard dearly loved his family and ceaselessly wrote letters to them**

**After his ordination to the priesthood on June 1, 1912, Fr. Quinn was temporarily assigned to several churches and received a permanent position in 1914 at St. Gregory the Great Church in Brooklyn as curate. He fulfilled his priestly duties there with a burning zeal and wrote several pamphlets to encourage the same fervor in others. In the course of preparing two Black women for Baptism in the Church, Fr. Quinn was seized with a passionate interest in beginning an apostolate to Blacks, who he lamented, were neglected by the diocese. He expressed his interest to Bishop Charles McDonnell, but he could not give Quinn an attentive ear, since he was very pre-occupied in recruiting chaplains to serve the American forces fighting over seas in the First World War.**

**Fr. Quinn volunteered for military service and was assigned to France. Shortly after arriving there, the war ended (November 11, 1918), but Fr. Quinn remained in the country to minister to the sick and wounded soldiers in army hospitals. After reading The Story of a Soul, the life of St. Therese of Lisieux, which he found by chance in the library of his army barracks, Fr. Quinn was overwhelmed with fascination about the saint. After discovering that he was stationed in the vicinity of Alencon where St. Therese had lived as a child, he obtained permission to visit her home. He was the first priest to celebrate Mass there before it became a popular shrine.**

Returning to the diocese in 1919, Fr. Quinn received permission the following year from Bishop McDonnell to begin his mission to the Black people of Brooklyn. Like the Good Shepherd, Quinn took to the streets in search of his flock. There was great rejoicing when he was led to Mr. Jules de Weever, the leader of the Colored Catholic Club, which had met from 1915-1916 for the purpose of asking the diocese to establish a church for Black Catholics in Brooklyn. Because they could not get support for their cause, the group disbanded. Reorganized by Fr. Quinn, the CCC joined with him in raising funds to start their church. A former Protestant church that had been converted into a warehouse depot was bought by Fr. Quinn and restored to a church. The building was blessed and dedicated to St. Peter Claver February 26, 1922.

St. Therese of Lisieux who had entered Fr. Quinn's life the last months of his army chaplaincy in France took on a major role in his ministry to the Blacks of the diocese. From the start of the parish, Fr. Quinn offered them to the guardianship of St. Therese and she worked tirelessly in heaven on their behalf, supplying him with an abundance of heavenly graces and material assistance for the success of his ministry. On the day of St. Therese's canonization May 17, 1925, Fr. Quinn began a weekly novena to her in St. Peter Claver Church which in time attracted vast number of devotees from many parishes because of reports that prayers at the novena were answered in a variety of ways due to her intercession. Though Fr. Quinn received the largesse of her help for his priestly work everyone else as well benefited. It seemed that the entire diocese went en masse by the thousands to the weekly novena.

Not withstanding how much St. Therese influenced his life, Fr. Quinn was a priest in the model of St. Peter Claver. Quinn, like Claver, won over many people to the Church by his open hearted kindness, patience and compassion for the downtrodden. As much as he unceasingly labored among the Black population, for the salvation of souls, Fr. Quinn give himself with the same zeal to save them from social ills which robbed them of their human dignity. With the growing state of homelessness among Black children in the late 1920's prior to the 1929 Depression, Fr. Quinn responded by buying land in Wading River, Long Island and setting up an orphanage there for them in 1928. The local Wading River residents were however enraged by Fr. Quinn's opening a home for Black children in their community. The KKK led the residents in a firestorm of opposition against the orphanage and burnt it down to the ground. Fr. Quinn was not intimidated by his hate-filled opponents and quickly built a second structure but that too was totally incinerated. He did not buckle under the forces of hate and courageously stood up to the KKK and their followers, in his unflinching determination to keep the orphanage where it was. His life was in danger but he was "*ready to shed the last drop of his life's blood for the least*" among his people, as he had joyfully announced to them a little after the dedication of St. Peter Claver Church in June 1922.

God had other plans for him. Through the heavenly intervention of St. Therese, Fr. Quinn's life was spared and this third attempt to build an orphanage was successful. It was dedicated as the Little Flower House of Providence October 26, 1930. The brick building was built sturdily and compact, it seemed, to last all time. Fr. Quinn received from his good friend Mother Katherine Drexel (now a saint); the generous services of her Congregation the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to staff his orphanage and parish school. They were succeeded in 1937 by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

Soon after the dedication of the new orphanage, Fr. Quinn saw the completion of his new Parish Institute, a multi-purpose building encompassing the parish school, convent and parish center. The latter contained within itself a gymnasium with a stage for performances and overlapping balcony. The building also had an indoor running track, basement bowling lanes, doctor's clinic and meeting and storage rooms. The Beaux-Arts citadel type building was not only prized by the parish but it was the pride of all Brooklyn receiving a bronze plaque in 1932 from the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce for being the most distinguished building of matchless proportions to be erected in the borough in 1931. The building was fully utilized in all the functions for which it was built. Fr. Quinn succeeded in achieving high academic standards for his parish school, comparable to the best schools of the diocese. The sports program at the parish center also excelled in city-wide championships, particularly baseball games. With its open door policy in admitting people to the parish, irrespective of their race or religion, Blacks flocked to the parish center from all parts of Brooklyn and Manhattan to play basketball and other sports. White youths played there as well. The parish institute became a Mecca for entertainment for the Black community of the area.

In all the burgeoning enterprises of the parish, Fr. Quinn fully involved his parishioners. He founded a Third Order Congregation of Black Brothers dedicated to the service of their own people. The religious community dissolved after his death but during Fr. Quinn's lifetime they worked in his Apostolate to Black Seamen and at the parish and orphanage at Wading River. One of the Brothers, Leo Caesar, became renowned for a deep prayerful life and for his outstanding service to the needy and the orphans of Wading River.

It was with feverish urgency that Fr. Quinn promoted vocations to the priesthood and the religious life among African American Catholic youth even though few of them were accepted for service to the church. He gave a joyful, red carpet welcome at the parish to Francis Wade, his protégée who was among the first four Black priests in 1934 to be ordained from the seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, which the Society of the Divine Word had built for African American men. Soon after his ordination, Fr. Wade returned to St. Peter Claver Church to offer a Mass of Thanksgiving and was made to feel like a Prince of the Church by Quinn.

As the parish outgrew itself, Fr. Quinn expanded his work to Blacks far and wide in the diocese of Brooklyn, establishing missions in various parts of the Borough.

His mission of St. Benedict the Moor in Queens County became a full fledged independent parish. Through all the rapid growth and development of his apostolate, Fr. Quinn suffered ill health particularly from the financial strain of his ever growing orphanage. The unfailing help of St. Therese of Lisieux sustained him through all his difficulties. Father Quinn lived simply. His whole life was oriented towards the people, serving their spiritual and human needs in the vicissitudes of their daily lives. He displayed good humor and radiated joy to the priests who lived with him and the people whom he served in the parish.

A man of prayer, Fr. Quinn spent free moments during the day before the Blessed Sacrament. He found fulfillment in his daily celebration of the Eucharist which nourished him spiritually and provided the indefatigable stamina which he bore valiantly for his work. The rosary was very much a daily prayer of Fr. Quinn, who had a most profound devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Father's own heart, like the heart of Christ, flowed over with endless outpouring of God's love for those who were down-and-out, the hapless sinner and who needed his services.



STANDARD OF THE SACRED HEART THAT WAS ON THE DOOR OF THERESE'S CELL

Father Quinn died at 52 years of age, April 7, 1940. Thousands of people at the funeral mourned his death, but celebrated his passing into everlasting life.

Rev. Paul W. Jervis, author of  
*Quintessential Priest*  
Editions DuSigne, Publisher 2005  
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*Father Bernard J. Quinn's Cause for Canonization was begun by the Brooklyn Diocese on January 13, 2008.*

**SERVANT OF GOD, FATHER BERNARD J. QUINN CHRONOLOGY**

*“Quintessential Priest”, the Life of Father Bernard J. Quinn*, Editions DuSigne,  
Publisher 2005\*

**JANUARY 15, 1888**

Bernard J. Quinn born in Newark, N.J., on the day of the canonization of St. Peter Claver and the future birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1929.

**JANUARY 29, 1888**

Bernard J. Quinn is baptized in St. Michael's Church, Newark, N.J.

**JUNE 1, 1912**

Bernard J. Quinn is ordained a priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn in St. James Cathedral, by the Rt. Rev. Charles E. McDonnell.

**JUNE 18, 1918 to JUNE 1919**

Father Quinn commissioned as a First Lieutenant and assigned as an army chaplain of the 333<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Infantry Regiment in the Normandy region, which saw one of the deadliest battles of the First World War. He fell a victim of the monstrous war by being gassed along with a squadron of soldiers with mustard poison. After recovering, fearlessly resumed his priestly duties but suffered the debilitating effects from the gassing for the rest of his life. On January 1, 1919 he visited the Martin Home in Alençon is introduced to the future St. Therese of Lisieux, “The Little Flower.”

**JANUARY 2, 1919**

**“on the following morning, the Little Flower’s birthday, I had the supreme pleasure of offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in the room where she was born. I speak of this as a very great privilege, because I was the first priest to say Mass there.”**

**JUNE 24, 1919**

Father Quinn was discharged from his chaplaincy duties and dispatched to the battleship. *U.S.S. Leviathan* for his return to the United States.

**MAY 1, 1920**

Father Quinn receives permission from Bishop Charles McDonnell to begin his work among black Catholics.

**DECEMBER 25, 1921**

The Parish of St. Peter Claver is formally founded.

**FEBRUARY 26, 1922**

St. Peter Claver Church., the first church for black Catholics in the Diocese of Brooklyn is dedicated by Bishop Thomas Molloy.

### **JUNE 1, 1922**

Father Quinn wrote his first pastoral letter to his parishioners by which he pledged ***“to willingly shed to the last drop my life’s blood for the least among you.”***

### **MAY 17, 1925**

Sister Therese of the Infant Jesus and the Holy Face O’Carm. (Therese Martin) is canonized in Rome. The event is commemorated at a novena celebration at St. Peter Claver Church which is extended to fourteen days on account of people who were deeply moved by the experience. Subsequently, the novena became a perpetual event drawing huge crowds to it at the church with approximately 10,000 devotees attending each Monday and over 2 million attendees within 5 years. (As will be reported in the February 23, 1930 edition of The Brooklyn Daily Eagle.)

### **March 12, 1927**

Father Bernard J. Quinn, pastor of St. Peter Claver Roman Catholic Church, purchased a farm in Wading River, New York from Mr. Oliver Paine for the sum of \$49,104.40 with the intention of opening an orphanage on this site. This money came from funds received from his parishioners, the St. Therese Novena Devotees and a bequest from Mother Catherine Drexel (the foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and future saint.)

### **MARCH 7, 1928**

Father Quinn’s orphanage for black children is burned to the ground by the KKK. He builds the orphanage, and it was once again incinerated in November that year.

### **FEBRUARY 23, 1930**

2,200,000 persons have sought the aid of the Little Flower, at the weekly novena averaging 10,000 a week, reported by The Brooklyn Daily Eagle.

### **In JUNE 1930**

The Apostleship of the Sea for black seamen is established by Father Quinn.

### **OCTOBER 25, 1931**

The dedication of St. Peter Claver Institute. The building is awarded a bronze plaque for being the most attractive building to be erected in Brooklyn that year.

**October 26, 1930**, the Feast of Christ the King, was the dedication date of The Little Flower House of Providence, with Bishop Thomas Molloy officiating.

**NOVEMBER 20, 1931**

Fr. Quinn outlined the formation of his religious community, the Oblate Brothers of Mary to Bishop Molloy.

**OCTOBER 30, 1932**

The establishment of St. Benedict the Moor Mission in Jamaica, N.Y. It becomes the second black parish in the Diocese of Brooklyn.

**JULY 1, 1936,**

The parish launched a summer camp in Wading River, N.Y.

**APRIL 7, 1940**

Father. Bernard J. Quinn died after a lengthy and painful illness from carcinoma.

**APRIL 8, 1940**

The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, reported on the funeral of Fr. Quinn who is acknowledged by blacks to be "A Champion of Negro Rights."

**JUNE 22, 1947**

Bishop Molloy unveiled a bronze head cast of Fr. Bernard J. Quinn in St. Peter Claver Church as a tribute to him by parishioners "for his admiration and devotion to the Negro People."

**OCTOBER 3, 1950,** the same bishop dedicated Monsignor Quinn Memorial Chapel, a Tudor and Gothic styled church, on the grounds of the orphanage for the daily worship of orphans and lay and religious staff, who had no adequate space there for that purpose. There was an exuberant financial response to the project by hundreds of devotees of Quinn who attended the dedication of the chapel, which was built to perpetuate a lasting memory of him.

**JANUARY 15, 1988,**

The centenary of Father Quinn's birth was celebrated with the attendance of a great crowd of people at a Sunday Mass on January 17, in St. Peter Claver Church. There was a commemorative concert afterwards in the parish center where the centenary of St. Peter Claver's canonization and the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were observed. From then onwards the writing of the biography of Fr. Quinn was pursued by this author.\*

**JANUARY 13, 2008**

The Cause for Canonization of Father Bernard J. Quinn was opened by Rt. Rev. Nicholas DiMarzio, Bishop of Brooklyn.

**OCTOBER 17, 2008**

Father Bernard J. Quinn was declared "Servant of God" by the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints.