

A Parish of Immigrants

A 150 year journey continues

WHEN the seeds of The Basilica parish were planted in 1868, Minnesota was in its infancy, becoming the 32nd state in 1858. In the many decades that followed, tens of thousands of immigrants flocked to the state from across Europe pursuing a better (albeit colder) life.

BY JOE EIDEN



Today, Minnesota's story is not dissimilar. According to US Census data and refugee-support agencies, our state has the highest number of refugees per capita nationwide. While Minnesota has just two percent of the US population, it has 13 percent of its refugees. Our history calls The Basilica community to respond to our brothers and sisters in need.

The pioneers of the early Basilica parish emigrated from primarily Ireland and Italy. In the mid-1800s, Irish immigrants fled to the US as the impact of the Great Hunger shook the island nation. The Italian Unification caused widespread political and economic upheaval in the country, driving many Italians overseas. Fleeing famine and political unrest, these immigrants experienced perilous voyages on their way to a hope-filled new life.

Upon arriving in Minneapolis, their faith was likely one of few familiarities and yet foundational in their lives. Completed in 1868, the iconic "shed church" was described by Monsignor James Reardon — who served as pastor of The Basilica for over four decades — as "primitive," yet it served as the foundation of The Basilica community we experience today.

The Basilica community looks much different from 150 years ago. While the beautiful building we have today has stood for over 100 years (and will stand for another century thanks to restoration efforts by The Basilica Landmark), those who enter the doors daily and weekly experience a more diverse array of cultures and races than ever before. And it's no accident that this is a hallmark of the Basilica community.

In many ways, the immigrants of today and The Basilica pioneers share similar stories. In more recent decades, The Basilica has welcomed many African immigrants fleeing civil war, and our community's Latino population continues to grow. Most are in search of a better life, and for parishioners like Sonya Kith, that was the case in the early 1980s.



(Opposite) Sammy Anto;
(left) Sonya Kith

After being displaced because of the Vietnam War, Sonya's family fled to Cambodia and lived in a refugee camp, where her twin sisters were born. Her family came to Minnesota thanks to a Catholic organization, which helped her family begin a new life in Rochester. Shortly after arriving, Sonya was born in Minneapolis in 1985. A Catholic nun, Sr. Judy, took the family under her wing and was a counselor and advocate for a growing family.

It was the seeds of Sr. Judy's kindness that encouraged Sonya to explore the Catholic faith years later. "It's The Basilica's open and welcoming environment that attracted me," she says. Her daughter, sitting patiently next to her, will begin her first year in a Catholic school this year. Upon entering The Basilica's RCIA program last year, Sonya recalled the influential people who walked with her on her journey. People who personified the welcoming feeling that brought her to The Basilica. For Sonya, that refreshing openness is what affirmed her decision. Sonya was baptized and confirmed during the Easter vigil on March 31, with Sr. Judy in attendance.

The Basilica community continues the same work that saved Sonya's family. Not in the hope of planting the seeds for future RCIA candidates or Catholic school students. Rather, because it is what we are called to do: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35). The Basilica's Refugee and Immigrant Ministry is just one way we have answered that call.

It is up to our community to continue to open wide its arms for our immigrant brothers and sisters. Amidst the debate and rhetoric around the world regarding immigrants and refugees, Pope Francis continues to guide us: "A person's dignity does not depend on them being a citizen, a migrant, or a refugee," he commented this past summer. "Saving the life of someone fleeing war and poverty is an act of humanity."

Sheela Ponusammy and Anto Pitchiah moved to the United States from India in 2013 with their daughters Sammy and Shawn (now ages 10 and 7); two years later they started coming to The Basilica. "For our first two years in the US, I didn't know how people would react to us. But then we came to The Basilica and everyone encouraged us. We are thankful to God," she says with emotion thick in her voice. "The people at The Basilica make us feel like we are one family. I don't know how to explain my feelings, but it is a great thing. This church has a platform for everyone to show their love for God."

Continued



(Back) Sheela Ponnusamy and Antochandar Pitchiah;
(front) Sammy Anto and Shawn Anto

The entire family started serving as acolytes at 9:30 AM Mass three years ago, and their oldest daughter is also now a lector. "Every month, people would seek us out to say she is doing so good. I have never seen people come voluntarily to give us compliments!" Sammy celebrated her First Communion at The Basilica and she was the Lector during that Mass. "Fr. Bauer says she reads better than he does!" she says laughingly.

Fr. Bauer's poignant message at the beginning of each Mass takes on new meaning when we reflect on the impact and contribution each immigrant has made to The Basilica community over the past 150 years, "We welcome you to The Basilica of Saint Mary. Whether you celebrate with us regularly or are just visiting; whatever brings you here and wherever you are on your faith journey we welcome you."

For some, that physical journey was long and arduous. For others, our ancestors bore that heavy cross on our behalf. But our spiritual journeys, let us make those together. ✚

Joe Eiden is a parishioner and Eucharistic Minister.

THE BASILICA OF SAINT MARY is proud to partner with Lutheran Social Services to co-sponsor refugee families who are starting new lives in Minnesota after living in refugee camps throughout the world. We also partner with Advocates for Human Rights to support people seeking asylum in the United States from areas of violence all over the world.

All of the families we have sponsored have been very different. However, they have all been extremely grateful and gracious as they settle into life in Minnesota. Their lives are filled with activity as they seek to learn English, enroll their children in school, find work, and care for medical and dental concerns.

REFUGEE FAMILIES SUPPORTED BY THE BASILICA

3 families from Somalia; 1 from Iraq; 1 from Ethiopia; 1 Karen; and 3 from Burma/Myanmar.

Somalia, February 2016

A family of six: two parents and four young people. This family was originally from Somalia, but spent the last 22 years in a refugee camp in Kenya.

Iraq, July 2016

A family of two parents and three small children arrived in Minnesota. This family was originally from Iraq but was living as refugees in Turkey.

Burma/Myanmar, February 2017

The family had been living in a refugee camp in Thailand for 17 years. They are Karenni – a different ethnic group from Karen, but also from Burma/Myanmar. A mother, father, two daughters 9 and 6 years old, and a son 17 months.

Somalia, May 2017

A small family from Somalia, including a woman with a 10-month-old child, pregnant with her second child. They lived in a refugee camp in Kenya for many years.

Somalia, January 2018

A family of eight originally from Somalia. Secondary migrants to Minnesota. Mother, father, and six children: five sons, ages 15, 14, 13, 11, 9, and one daughter who is 3 years old. They now live in Minneapolis.

Burma/Myanmar, February 2018

A Karen family of eight originally from Burma/Myanmar, fled to a refugee camp in Thailand in 2006. Mother and father with six kids: two sons ages 14 and 1, and four daughters ages 12, 8, 6, and 3.

Ethiopia, February 2018

The mother and father are originally from Ethiopia, but lived in Nairobi, Kenya, for many years before coming to the US. Father originally resettled in Colorado in 2014. Mother resettled to Colorado with their two sons in 2016, and the family quickly moved to Minnesota. They now have three children – two sons in kindergarten and pre-school and a daughter who just turned one.

Burma/Myanmar, June 2018

The family is Karenni, originally from Burma. There is a mother, father, and two young daughters ages 4 and 6. They are coming from a camp in Thailand and have been there about 20 years.

THREE ASYLEE FAMILIES SUPPORTED BY THE BASILICA

Djibouti, March 2017

A mother and her teenage son are in the asylum process. Both are multi-lingual; the son speaks fluent English, French, and Arabic and his mother speaks Oromo, Amharic, Arabic, and is learning English.

Cameroon, Matched: April 2018

A mother is in the asylum process. She has a baby, born in the US, who is an American Citizen. She speaks English.

Liberia, Matched: May 2018

A single woman from Liberia is in the asylum process. She speaks English.