

SAINT ANTHONY'S CHAPEL

A Hidden Treasure of Saints, Passion, and Faith

By Kathleen N. Bishop

St. Anthony's Chapel on Troy Hill, a neighborhood overlooking Pittsburgh's North Side, is not only a story of passion and faith; it's a story of parallel lives, 633 years apart. On a narrow side street, nestled amongst modest row houses in this cliffside neighborhood, St. Anthony's is home to approximately 5,000 religious relics—the world's largest collection outside the Vatican. The chapel is well worth seeing, and the stories of the chapel's namesake and founder are well worth knowing.



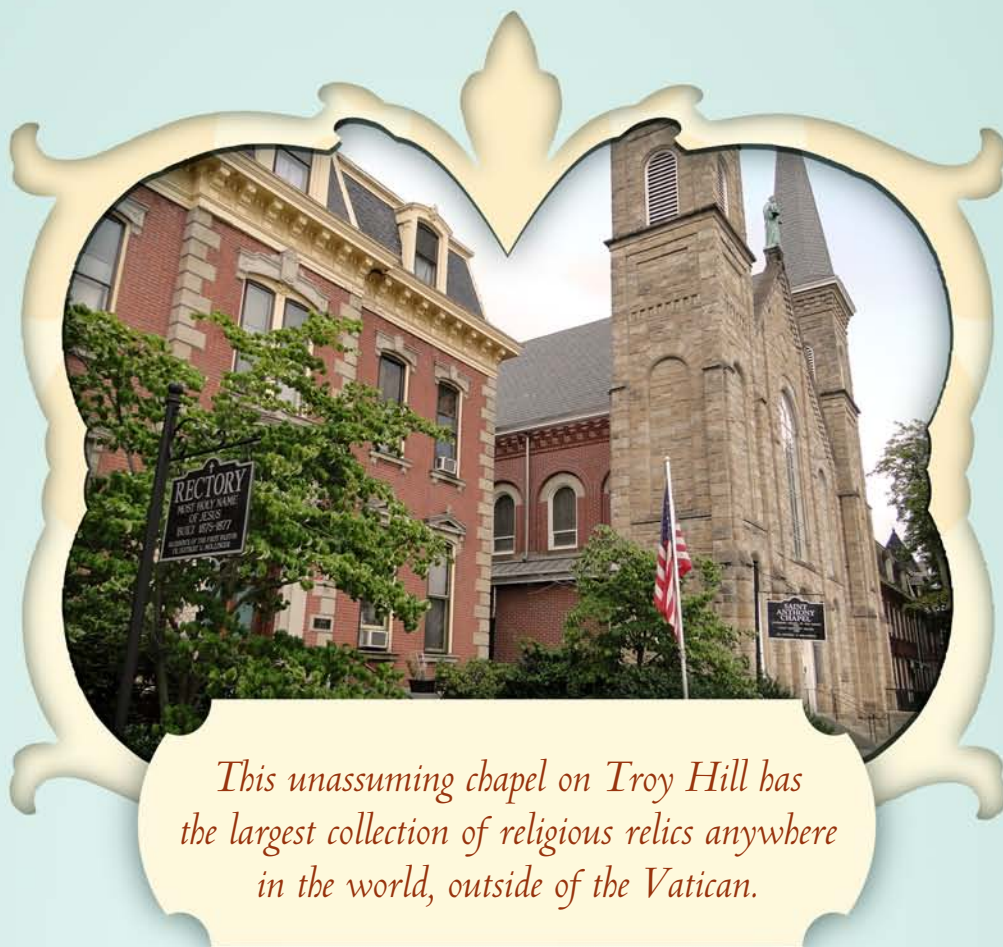


In 1195, Fernando Bulhom was born in Lisbon, Portugal, into an aristocratic family. In 1828, Suitbert Godefridus Mollinger was born into a privileged, noble family in Belgium. In their pre-teen and teen years, both boys experienced events that altered their expected life journeys. Fernando relinquished his worldly possessions and consecrated himself to God's service as a religious among the Canons Regulars of St. Augustine. Suitbert's father passed away and the grieving boy and his uncle traveled across Europe.

Inspired by the martyring of five Franciscan missionaries sent to convert the King of Morocco to Christianity, Fernando joined the Franciscans in Portugal and changed his name to Anthony. Suitbert, who was studying medicine in Italy, heard God's calling and enrolled in seminary in Ghent, Belgium. He is quoted as saying, "Physical healing begins with the strength of the spirit within," combining his love of medicine with his new calling to God.

Both men were fiery preachers, drawing huge crowds that overflowed town squares and large fields. In his sermons, St. Anthony spoke out against unjust interest rates and interceded for debtors. He encouraged those who had more to give to the poor. Father Mollinger's priestly vocation brought him to America, where he built two mission churches: St. Teresa of Avila in Perrysville, which is still a thriving parish community in the northern suburbs of Pittsburgh, and his home parish, Most Holy Name of Jesus in Troy Hill, a working-class community and home to many German immigrants.

In the book *St. Anthony's Chapel In Most Holy Name of Jesus Parish*, St. Anthony is quoted as saying, "The preacher must, by word and example, be a sun to those whom he preaches. You are, says the lord, the light of the world... our light must warm the hearts of people, while our teaching enlightens them," (page 7).



This unassuming chapel on Troy Hill has the largest collection of religious relics anywhere in the world, outside of the Vatican.

St. Anthony's Chapel in the Troy Hill section of Pittsburgh. The rectory at left was home to Father Mollinger, who spearheaded efforts to build the church.

Photos by Brian Butko.

St. Anthony and Fr. Mollinger were both sought-after healers. During his lifetime, St. Anthony performed numerous, documented miracles, many of which involved healing the sick. For this he is known as the Doctor of the Church, Patron Saint of Lost Articles.

According to Sr. Margaret Liam Glenane, assistant director of St. Anthony's Chapel, Fr. Mollinger operated a part-time pharmacy in the back room of his Most Holy Name church where he prescribed various tonics and ointments to heal his parishioners. He never charged the sick for his services.

"Everyone came to Fr. Mollinger to be healed. He was known as the aging priest with a healing reputation. Cripples would leave their walking sticks and children would recover from illnesses without pills," Sr. Margaret said. Many of those crutches and canes left by the cured remained until the

renovation of the chapel in the 1970s, but most were infested with worms and had to be burned. A few, including tiny crutches used by children, remain behind glass in a small museum dedicated to Fr. Mollinger across the street from the chapel.

As it was in life, the deaths of the two men ran a parallel path. St. Anthony died peacefully at age 36, singing a hymn, June 13, 1231, of dropsy, an abnormal accumulation of fluid beneath the skin or in one or more cavities of the body. Fr. Mollinger died peacefully, at age 64, June 15, 1892, two days after the final consecration of the addition to St. Anthony's Chapel, of dropsy. He was holding a crucifix.

This centuries-spanning connection between St. Anthony and Fr. Mollinger is only part of the story. Being a man of financial means, Fr. Mollinger had a very interesting hobby he pursued with a passion. Before



A reclining statue of the martyr St. George rests beneath a case built in the form of an altar and containing relics. To the left is a case containing the skull of the martyr St. Theodore.



A statue of St. Elizabeth of Hungary and reliquaries, to the left of the Main Alter.

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– Sr. Margaret.

coming to the United States, he was an avid collector of religious relics—pieces of the True Cross, bodies, clothes, or possessions of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the apostles, saints, and popes. He also had the authentics, documentation, to prove the items were genuine.

Through his extensive travels across Europe, he befriended agents who helped him acquire more relics. During this time, there was tremendous political and religious upheaval in Europe, especially in Italy and Germany, and many churches were plundered. Church leaders feared their precious relics would be destroyed or lost forever, so they were eager to get them out of their countries to safe places. Fr. Mollinger was there to collect them.

To date, St. Anthony’s Chapel houses about 5,000 relics, most of them first- or second-class, meaning they are either remains from the Passion of Jesus Christ or a body or portion of a saint’s body, or they are items that a saint possessed (prayer book, rosary beads, vestments, etc.). This unassuming chapel on Troy Hill has the largest collection of religious relics anywhere in the world, outside of the Vatican.

“It is so hard for some to believe that these relics are real,” said Sr. Margaret, “but they all came from other churches. Fr. Mollinger did not pay for these relics because you cannot buy or sell something so sacred.”

To display his relics, Fr. Mollinger hired a local Troy Hill craftsman to make the

Cabinets. His following increased along with his relic collections and soon Most Holy Name church was too small. Dreaming of building a chapel for his relics, Fr. Mollinger faced the same financial challenges his working-class parishioners dealt with daily.

“Fr. Mollinger bought the property himself and had a rectory built. When the Most Holy Name Church committee said they could not afford to build his dream chapel, Fr. Mollinger again used his own funds to build it. On June 13, 1882, the Feast of St. Anthony, the cornerstone was laid and exactly one year later the chapel was dedicated,” Sr. Margaret said.

The relics, however, are not the only treasures housed in St. Anthony’s Chapel.

When Fr. Mollinger was in Munich, Germany, he found an artisan (of Mayer & Co., Munich) carving life-sized Stations of the Cross in wood. He wanted them for his chapel and once again Fr. Mollinger dipped into his own coffers and built an addition to the chapel to hold the wooden figures of the Way of the Cross. This addition was dedicated on June 13, 1892, the Feast of St. Anthony.

Michael Ashmore of Shaler Township, a suburb north of Pittsburgh, has visited St. Anthony’s a number of times. During his first trip to the chapel, his reaction was not what he expected. There was no glowing warmth of holiness emanating from his soul. His gut reaction was visceral.



Sister Margaret Glenane, assistant director of St. Anthony’s Chapel, holds a reliquary containing a tooth of St. Anthony, its most venerated relic.

“Looking around at thousands of bones, it was very strange, nothing overwhelmingly holy. These people were killed and their bones are here. It was hard to feel a religious experience,” he said.

“The second time I took my brother and I could tell he was having the same reaction I had. The third time, I was more prepared. I was ready to start thinking and reading about the lives of these people, the saints and martyrs. It didn’t bother me at all because I was thinking about what they said or did. When you see a piece of the True Cross, you realize how amazing the Creator of the universe is. He created that tree His son was crucified on,” Ashmore said.

Viewing the Way of the Cross evokes similar feelings. To be crucified was perhaps one of the most horrific ways to die and Jesus Christ did it willingly. Seeing the event played out before you, life-sized and in agonizing detail, it’s hard to feel the serenity of your faith, at first.

“Look into their faces. Their expressions are amazing, the Romans, the Pharisees, the Jews, their anger and hatred. Look at Jesus’ face and you will see forgiveness. When Jesus forgave all of them, I have to believe they all went home knowing they didn’t accomplish what they set out to do—make Jesus beg for mercy. Defeat him,” Ashmore said.

One hundred years after Fr. Mollinger’s death, almost 780 years after St. Anthony’s death, without clearly intending to, Ashmore and thousands of other yearly visitors to the chapel are on what Sr. Margaret calls pilgrimages.

“All denominations come here. We are open to everyone. This is a special place. When you come to St. Anthony’s and realize people died for their faith instead of denying Christ, it gets you thinking about your own faith. Faith is a special gift from God. It needs to be nourished through prayer and mass, but many people are too busy to put God first in their lives, to trust in him. Our lives are so much more meaningful with faith,” Sr. Margaret said.


After Fr. Mollinger passed away, his will was never found. His descendants stripped the chapel of all items they could sell and left behind those they could not, the relics and the carvings. Over the years, the chapel slipped into a slow decline. In 1974, restoration efforts began. Troy Hill was still a working-class neighborhood, but the chapel and its treasures were too meaningful for the residents to let go.

“Troy Hill stood up for its own and raised the money needed for the repairs. The money

came in mostly in pennies and nickels, not dollars. It took six years to raise the money to save the chapel and on June 13, 1992, with renovations completed, the residents of Troy Hill celebrated the 100th anniversary of St. Anthony’s Chapel (on the Feast of St. Anthony, of course),” Sr. Margaret said.

Today the chapel stands, not glamorous, but solid, like its neighborhood. The relics line the walls, floor to ceiling, and more are added every year. They’re dusty. Their reliquaries are tarnished, but they are the most beautiful objects you may ever see. According to Sr. Margaret, there are 22 slivers of the True Cross, two pieces of the Last Supper Table, two pieces of the Blessed Mother’s clothing, a piece of St. Joseph’s staff, along with all the bones, skulls, and teeth of several saints and the full skeleton of St. Demetrius. The Stations of the Cross are almost too much to bear as you look at them and ask yourself, “Could I do that for my faith?”

Masses, weddings, and communions are held in the chapel. It is open for tours every Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday, and daily for worship. At the beginning of June each year, special prayers are added to the Novena Prayers, culminating in the Triduum of St. Anthony, June 11, 12, and 13.

For more information, call (412) 323-9504 or visit St. Anthony’s website at www.saintanthonyschapel.org/. 



Saint Stephan is portrayed in one of the stained glass windows made in Munich in 1890.

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Kathleen Bishop has held positions of communications director, staff writer, and freelance writer. She is a Pittsburgh native and lives with her husband and children in the northern suburbs.

St. Anthony’s Chapel in Most Holy Name of Jesus Parish (Pittsburgh: J. Pohl Associates, 1997).

St. Anthony’s Chapel, www.saintanthonyschapel.org/index.cfm?load=page&page=162

St. Anthony’s Chapel, www.saintanthonyschapel.org/index.cfm?load=page&page=175

“Thy Saint’s Keeper: The Story of St. Anthony’s Chapel,” (video), St. Anthony’s Chapel, (1995).

Interview, Sister Margaret Glenane, St. Anthony’s Chapel, Troy Hill, May 2010.

Interview, Michael Ashmore, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, May 2010.

Father Suitbert Mollinger discovered an artist in Germany carving life-size Stations of the Cross in the 1850s. The intricately detailed carvings, such as number 7, "Jesus falls again," still grace the sanctuary of St. Anthony's.

