

At St. Charles Borromeo, a Baby Boom Brings Parents Together in Fellowship

by Paula Katinas, Senior Reporter

BROOKLYN HEIGHTS — There's a mini-baby boom going on at St. Charles Borromeo Church and it's leading to a big change in parish life.

According to Father Bill Smith, pastor of the Brooklyn Heights church, more than 50 babies have been born during the past three years in the parish of approximately 500 parishioners.

"We have a young professionals ministry that used to be primarily made up of singles or married people with no children," he said with a laugh. "Then one day, I turned around and it seemed like half the group was pregnant."

The St. Charles Borromeo baby boom is in sharp contrast to citywide figures, which

"We didn't have anything for young parents, and I thought we should."

Parishioner Danielle DiCicco, one of the organizers of the Family Fellowship

show a decrease in births in 2020 as compared to 2019. According to the New York City Department of Health, 100,022 babies were born in the city in 2020 —

9.4% fewer than in 2019, when 110,422 babies were welcomed

into the world. The figures for 2021 are still being analyzed by the agency.

In addition to keeping Father Smith busy with lots of baptisms, the influx of newborns has sparked new beginnings in other ways.

For example, there's a new family fellowship in the church that's specifically designed to bring parents of young children together to tell their stories, share advice and discuss raising their children in the Catholic faith.

The fellowship is just getting off the ground, said organizers Danielle DiCicco and Arianne Balducci. But the group's first meeting in early April drew 15 people and since then, more than 30 parents have contacted the organizers expressing an interest in joining.

At that first session, parents spent time discussing their choices for the best books with religious themes to read aloud to children, Father Smith said.

The next meeting is scheduled for May 15. A date hasn't been set for the June meeting, but it will feature a guest speaker, Susan Walsh, the principal of St. Saviour



The presence of so many children — like Luke Hollod (bottom left) Rivers Hollod (center), and Martin DiCicco — at St. Charles Borromeo Church has spawned the creation of a family fellowship. The moms and dads here (from left with Father Bill Smith, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Parish) Francesco Balducci, Arianne Balducci (holding baby Luka), Laura Hollod, Danielle DiCicco, and Matthew DiCicco, are excited about the new endeavor, as is Father Smith. (Photo: Paula Katinas)

Catholic Academy in Park Slope, who will discuss Catholic education.

"We hope to establish a regular schedule of meetings, such as the first Tuesday of the month, so that people can know where to find us," Balducci explained.

A few of the folks at the first meeting are members of the Young Professionals Ministry. Balducci is an example of this. She was involved there but found she needed other outlets after giving birth to her first child, a baby boy, in November.

"Your priorities change when you have children," she said.

DiCicco and Balducci envision the fellowship's future meetings as a mixture of guest speakers and group discussions about health care, child-rearing, and Catholic education.

For now, the meetings will take place inside the church. As the weather gets warmer, the sessions will likely move outdoors to a garden area outside the rectory and perhaps a restaurant.

"We're trying to leave our options open," said DiCicco, who is the mother of two children.

To attract interest in the fellowship, DiCicco and Balducci plan to reach out via email to parents of babies newly baptized at St. Charles Borromeo.

The new group is DiCicco's brainchild. She originally had an idea to bring together young families in the parish two years ago.

"We didn't have anything for young parents, and I thought we should," she recalled. "I approached Father Bill about it

and he was very receptive to the idea."

However, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, so the plans had to be temporarily shelved. This year, as COVID-19 cases decreased, DiCicco revived her idea.

"I felt it was important. It was part of moving the parish forward," she said. She found a willing and enthusiastic partner in Balducci to help get the group off the ground.

One of the best things about the fellowship is that the idea for it was generated by a parishioner, Father Smith said.

"It wasn't created from the top down," he explained. "It's important for the parishioners to take charge of these things because it shows a level of commitment from them.

"If it's their idea, they'll see it through."