

The Church of the Magdalene

The Hudson Independent March 5, 2018



The Church of the Magdalene, located in Pocantico Hills close by the famed Union Church, may be less well-known, but the diverse faith-community's devotion to their country church, the beauty of the house of worship's interior, the gentle and humane guidance given by Father John Vigilante, and the parishioners dedication to service all combine to create a powerful Catholic community reaching beyond this small hamlet.

"The Church of the Magdalene is the only church in the Archdiocese of New York dedicated to Mary Magdalene," the church's literature proudly states. Serving 525 families who are drawn to The Magdalene from throughout Westchester, the Church was founded in 1893 as the mission church of St. Teresa of Avila Parish in what was then called North Tarrytown. Originally, Mass was celebrated in Pocantico's Lyceum building where the firehouse now stands and was attended by 40 families from Pocantico Hills and the village of Eastview. With an original cornerstone laid in 1894, the Church, funded and built by its first parish-

ioners, was dedicated in 1895 and included the country home fronting Bedford Road, which became the rectory.

James Butler, a wealthy chain grocery store owner and Eastview resident contributed generously, and many of the church's exquisite stained glass windows were donated by various Butler family members. These unique and glorious windows were created with unusual and visually effective two-dimensional leadwork; traditional in biblical narrative, grand in size, they fill the worship space with magical, colored light.

"It's a hidden treasure," says Father Vigilante, pastor and administrator. Father John, a former army chaplain who retired as a Colonel, had been president of the Academy of Mount St. Ursula's, a Catholic girls preparatory school in the Bronx, for 8 years before he arrived at Church of the Magdalene. He is revered by his congregants for his down-to-earth personality, humanity, directness and willingness to listen. Well-known for spiritual and substantive homilies that derive from life experience, his own observations and in insights, he crafts short sermons that speak directly to a congregation of all ages.

Mass at Church of the Magdalene is a casual but fervent experience enhanced by the exceptional musicianship of organist, Anne Holland, cantor John Sudol, and guitar and trumpet players Jim Hornby and James Holland. Women participate as Eucharist Ministers, and young girls join their male counterparts as altar servers. Services in this Tudor-style, white-walled country church, with its rich dark wooden archways, golden oak altarpiece and pews, and radiant stained glass windows are, indeed, special; it is a heart-warming and welcoming atmosphere in which to pray.

On the first Sunday of every month, following 11 a.m. Mass, brunch is served, thanks to Jean Sudol and her team of committed volunteers. It's a time when most of the congregation stays to enjoy delicious, home-cooked preparations, sits together and chats; new worshippers are always cordially welcomed – another way in which Church of the Magdalene creates community and why parishioners are so devoted to their church.

Local outreach, donating to those in need, and volunteering are part of the Church's lifeblood. The Magdalene has had a long-term involvement with the Thorpe Family Residence in the Bronx, providing monthly food collections, clothing at Thanksgiving and Christmas gifts. A Valentine Bake Sale was held in February with all proceeds going to Tarrytown's Food Pantry. Potluck suppers and raffles have been organized in

support of Sleepy Hollow's RHSM Life Center. Though Church of the Magdalene may be considered a small and intimate place for prayer and reflection, congregants clearly feel a connection to and responsibility for those in need beyond their immediate surroundings.

Religious education is by volunteers who teach grades one through eight, with the same loving and caring environment provided for a number of kindergartners as well. For adults, Bible study groups meet regularly. Multiple volunteer Committees of the Parish Council, headed by David Impasto, insure that all aspects of Church life and administrative duties are attended to.

"I have been a parishioner at the Church of the Magdalene for over 30 years and love being a member of this parish," said congregant Pat Smyth. "We have a beautiful and unique church building and a real sense of community in the parish." Just as the New Testament describes the penitent Mary Magdalene as one who experienced Jesus's teachings, his miracles, crucifixion and resurrection and became an ardent Christian follower, so too do the parishioners of the Church of the Magdalene worship in fervent belief at their Rivertown house of worship – a faith community and architectural gem.