

# Incoming Priests Excited to Serve at St. Agnes

*An interview with Fr. Michael Barrett and Fr. Robert Brisson*



been nominated to take up the charge.

But their thoughts passed quickly to excitement.

Fr. Barrett, 63, said he was “happy to return home” to become pastor on July 1 of “such a beautiful and well-known parish in Midtown.”

Fr. Barrett was born in Manhattan and grew up in the Bronx. His father Patrick was a Lieutenant in the New York Fire Department and mother Margaret a nurse at St. Vincent’s Hospital. One of five children, he attended Cardinal Spellman High School, graduated from Columbia University and then spent a decade working in Manhattan for Gulf Oil Corporation and Merrill Lynch.

It was during that time he first got to know St. Agnes Parish, where he would attend daily Mass when he wasn’t able to go to St. Patrick’s Cathedral or Our Lady of Victory closer to work.

From the time of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen’s famous Seven Last Words meditations on Good Friday, St. Agnes, he said, has been a “focal point for the evangelization of Manhattan” and beyond,” and is well known for “the faithfulness of those who come to celebrate Mass and those who come to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation.”

He’s eager to have a chance to build on St. Agnes’ impressive legacy.

“St. Agnes has been here since 1873 and has been successful in its service for many years. As the faithful in the parish and I get to know each other, I’m hoping together we may discover ways to improve the evangelization of New York.”

He’s passionate, he said, about “helping souls find Christ no matter who they are or what they are doing, celebrating Mass for the faithful and helping them in Confession and Spiritual Direction.”

He added that he was interested in “fostering classes and activities to discuss and talk about Social Doctrine in business and law, as well as ethics, in all professions.”

He will be joined in that apostolic work by Fr. Brisson, 64, the eldest of four children of the late Roger and Helen Brisson from Detroit. He worked on assembly lines, in factories, restaurants and nursing homes to put himself through high school, the University of Michigan and Notre Dame Law School. After passing the bar, he served in Manhattan as an attorney in the late 1970s.

He became familiar with St. Agnes Parish beginning in the early 1990s, when he returned to New York City as a priest and would help out with Novenas to the Immaculate Conception that would take place in the parish. In recent years he has come each month to

hear priests’ confessions during the monthly afternoons of recollection Fr. Murphy would host.

St. Agnes Parish, Fr. Brisson said, is a “busy, vital, crossroads parish, frequented by every sort of person due to its proximity to Grand Central and the fact that it has genuinely tried to serve the people who frequent it, especially with Mass and Confessions.”

He said he’s excited to “learn from the life and faith of people” who frequent St. Agnes as he seeks to “preach the Word of God and the faith of the Church” and to help people advance step by step along the “universal call to holiness and apostolate in and through daily work.”

## Priestly Callings and Work

It was through a passion for sanctity and mission in ordinary daily life that God led both priests eventually to the altar.

Fr. Barrett was an undergraduate at Columbia when he was attracted by the desire to be a faithful Catholic layman in the middle of the world drawing friends closer to Jesus. That led him to join Opus Dei, Latin for “The Work of God,” which was founded in Madrid in 1928 by St. Josemaria Escriva.

Opus Dei, he said, tries to “teach lay people how to live their Christian vocation in the middle of their work and their life,” in conformity with the universal call to holiness that the Second Vatican Council brought to light.

After living and working for several years as a numerary (lay celibate member of Opus Dei) in New York, he went to Rome in 1983 to do advanced theological work, where he obtained a Doctorate in Moral Theology from the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, writing his dissertation on the morality of profit in light of Catholic Social Doctrine.

After completing his studies, the Prelate of Opus Dei, Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, called him to Holy Orders. St. John Paul II ordained him a priest in St. Peter’s Basilica in 1985.

He was the second priest to be ordained in his family within a year. His younger brother Brian had been ordained for the Archdiocese of New York by Archbishop John O’Connor at St. Patrick’s Cathedral six months prior. After parish work and further studies, Fr. Brian became a professor at St. Joseph’s Seminary in Dunwoodie, where, in 1996, he died in his sleep at the age of 42.

As a priest, Fr. Michael served in Rome and Madrid before heading to Houston for 25 years. In 1999, Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston asked Opus Dei to provide priests for Holy Cross Chapel, a sanctuary in a small office building on Main Street in the heart of downtown Houston. Fr. Barrett was the director of the Chapel for 14 years, which he considers a good analogue of preparation for the work that awaits him at St. Agnes.

In 2013 he moved to California to become theological advisor for his long-time friend, Archbishop Jose Gomez, in the sprawling Archdiocese of Los Angeles. While there, he helped out on the weekends at St. Andrews Parish in Pasadena.

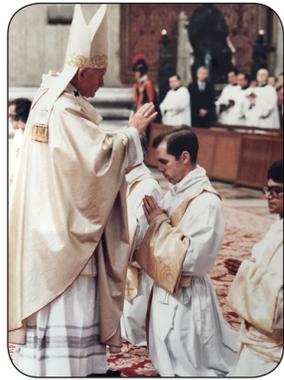


Fr. Michael Barrett  
Incoming Pastor



Fr. Robert Brisson  
Incoming Parochial Vicar

Fr. Brisson said that his life changed as a law student at Notre Dame in 1976 when he encountered, at an Opus Dei center just off campus, a group of young men serious about studies, sports, extra-curricular activities and especially understanding and sharing their faith. Eventually he became a numerary and traveled to



Fr. Barrett's priestly ordination by St. John Paul II, June 2, 1985

Rome for philosophical and theological students at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross.

The “whole thrust of Opus Dei is to offer spiritual guidance to anyone who is interested on how to live an integral Christian life that touches every dimension of his or her activity,” something, he said, that very much appealed to him.

After the completion of his studies, he was called to the priesthood in 1985 by Blessed Alvaro del Portillo and ordained in Spain by Archbishop Miguel Roca Cabanellas of Valencia.

He has served as a priest in Madrid, Ciudad Real (Spain), Milwaukee, South Bend, San Francisco, New Rochelle and, since 1998, in Manhattan, where, in addition to offering retreats and spiritual direction to many in the apostolates of Opus Dei, he has also regularly celebrated Masses in various Manhattan parishes and has offered several hours of confessions each week for nearly 20 years at Holy Innocents Parish.

Despite 31 years as a priest, he knows he's in for a change come the beginning of July.

While the Prelature of Opus Dei is in charge of one other parish in the U.S., St. Mary of the Angels in downtown Chicago, and also runs Holy Cross Chapel in Houston and the Catholic Information Center in Washington, DC, “I've never had a typical ‘parish priest’ work experience,” Fr. Brisson said.

For that reason, he is asking the parishioners of St. Agnes to pray for him and to have a “bit of patience and a sense of humor,” because they'll be dealing with a “rookie parochial vicar” who will be learning a new rhythm to his day-to-day priestly work.

One of the adjustments will be to living in a rectory.

“I'm accustomed to sharing meals with 15 or 20 people,” he said, where he has lived at the Murray Hill Conference Center at the Corner of 34th and Lexington. Now he'll be living and eating with Fr. Barrett and occasionally Bishop John O'Hara, who will retain a room at St. Agnes for whenever he is in Manhattan.

### Prepared for Hard Work

The priests know the rep-

utation for the amount of Masses and Confessions regularly offered at St. Agnes, and while that workload might scare away some priests, it's something about the assignment that excites them both.

“Celebrating the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation,” Fr. Barrett said, “is what I love most about the priestly life.”

Fr. Brisson added, “You are conscious of something going way beyond your own strength and intelligence and talent. Yet you watch the power of Word of God and the sacraments make such a difference in people's lives when my own advice and bright ideas fall so far short.”

The priests are grateful for the diligent work of the priests who have preceded them at St. Agnes who have built up the parish and kept it vibrant.

Fr. Barrett said that Fr. Myles Murphy “has done great work at St. Agnes,” which is why so many “have a high regard for him.”

He added that Fr. Murphy has given him a tour of the parish, gone over the finances and history, offered help in making a smooth transition and has said he stands ready to offer future advice if needed after he becomes pastor of Our Lady of Victory Parish in Manhattan the day Fr. Barrett succeeds him at St. Agnes.

The Opus Dei priests are likewise grateful for the example of priestly zeal shown by their spiritual father, St. Josemaria Escriva, who was ordained a Diocesan Priest in the Archdiocese of Zaragoza, Spain, worked in parishes, ministered to the sick, taught catechism, worked with the young, heard confessions of women religious and carried out so many other priestly ministrations. He was eventually asked by Spanish bishops to preach retreats to diocesan clergy all over Spain after the trauma of the Spanish Civil War.

He was a priest's priest, said Fr. Barrett, and a model of pastoral “dedication.”



Fr. Barrett with sisters Aileen, Marie & Teresa.

## What is Opus Dei?

Opus Dei is part of the Catholic Church, established as a personal prelate of by St. John Paul II in 1982. The name is Latin for “Work of God.” Founded by St. Josemaria Escriva through divine inspiration in 1928, Opus Dei offers support and guidance to help all those who want (whether or not they are members) to aim at holiness in their ordinary lives, especially through their everyday work. It is open to everyone, men and women of all walks of life. There are all kinds of people in Opus Dei: bus drivers, electricians, hairdressers, professors, lawyers, doctors and engineers, taxi drivers, etc. The main characteristics of the spirituality of Opus Dei are awareness of being a child of God and acting accordingly; finding God in everyday things; charity and apostolate; love for freedom; prayer and sacrifice; and trying to live the faith in every aspect of one's life. Priests of Opus Dei are not religious such as Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans, etc. They are secular clergy (as are Diocesan priests) who belong to the Prelature rather than to a Diocese. When Opus Dei priests are asked to run a parish in New York—like Fathers Barrett and Brisson will serve at St. Agnes—they do so at the request and under the guidance of the local bishop, Cardinal Dolan, and seek to serve parishioners just as any Diocesan priest would do who administers a parish, fostering parishioners' spiritual growth from the richness of the Church's full treasure of spirituality rather than exclusively from a particular spiritual formation.

For more information about Opus Dei, please visit: [www.opusdei.org](http://www.opusdei.org).

“He prayed for diocesan priests, had many priest friends and spent his whole life helping priests be good and faithful.”

Fr. Brisson said that St. Josemaria “loved all the parishioners and didn't make distinctions between the simple and the more sophisticated. He pushed himself to be there for them.”

They're counting on his prayers, and the prayers of the parishioners of St. Agnes, to help them similarly be the good and faithful servants at St. Agnes that, they say, God desires and his people deserve.

— *Written by Fr. Roger Landry from interviews with Fathers Barrett and Brisson in June 2016.*