Long Island’s Historic Catholic Past

Inisfada and the St. Ignatius Retreat House

Part of the series of pastoral letters and reflections celebrating the Ignatian Year
(May 20, 2021 – July 31, 2022)
Fresh flowers filled each of the 87 rooms in the 90,000-square-foot Tudor Elizabethan-style mansion nestled within a lush 300 acres in Manhasset on Long Island’s North Shore.

Tallow candles were lit along the edges of the large circular driveway in front of the house, and the grand ballroom was laid out for 700 guests — a farewell reception to honor the papal secretary of state, who had been using the home as his base during a month long visit to the United States.

It was autumn 1936, and Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli — who would become Pope Pius XII fewer than three years later — was staying as the special guest of papal duchess Genevieve Brady at her Gold Coast estate, nicknamed Inisfada (Gaelic for “Long Island”). The cardinal was at the time the highest-ranking Vatican official to ever visit the United States.

The cardinal’s visit took him across the country for meetings in New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City before he retreated back to the home on Long Island. The high-profile trip with its celebratory ending had a hint of sadness to it, however: Once known for its high-society parties reminiscent of The Great Gatsby’s Roaring Twenties era, the farewell reception for the cardinal would be last grand celebration at the Gold Coast mansion.

The Gift of a House

Built between 1916 and 1920 by Genevieve Brady and her husband, Nicholas, Inisfada was a gift from husband to wife on their ten year anniversary. The home cost more than...
$2 million to build (about $50 million by today’s standards) and was filled by the Bradys in subsequent years with an $8 million collection of artifacts, furniture and souvenirs from around the world.

The mansion, located on what was nicknamed the “Irish Channel” along the North Shore for the number of wealthy Irish who lived on the road, was beautiful, exquisite and wonderfully typical for a wealthy, high-society family of the era.

But the Bradys were anything but a typical wealthy family. For one thing, they were devout Catholics in what was at the time a predominantly Protestant high society.

Perhaps the Evelyn Waugh book, *Brideshead Revisited* and its description of the Catholic Flyte family’s Brideshead Manor — a large, English mansion also from the early 1900s, complete with its own commissioned chapel — would be a better comparison to the Brady estate than comparisons to *The Great Gatsby*.

The Bradys hosted grand parties for friends and dignitaries, but they were better known as a quiet couple who generously donated their time and money to the Church. (For their service and many donations to the Vatican, they were honored as a papal duke and duchess in 1926.)

The Bradys made sure to have the house blessed before they moved in — by none other than the apostolic delegate to the United States, Cardinal John Bonzanno.

The Bradys paid close attention to the design of the Inisfada chapel, arguably the heart of the place. Named for Mrs. Brady’s patroness, St. Genevieve, it featured wood oak along the walls and ceiling, which were carved by hand and depicted the Stations of the Cross and Sts. Mary, Joseph and Cecilia. Stained-glass windows depicted Sts. Genevieve, Nicholas, John the Baptist, Martin of Tours, Boniface, Patrick, Michael the Archangel and Joan of Arc. Priestly vestments were stored in a cabinet carved with figures of Christ the King. Mass celebrated
by priest-friends of the Bradys was offered there every day — for the Bradys and their friends as well as their staff. The chapel was kept open throughout the day for anyone to visit. Nicholas, a former Episcopalian who converted to Catholicism before he wed Genevieve, insisted on serving at the daily Masses.

The rest of the house featured wood-carved staircases, a great hall, billiard room, library, salon, solarium, master bedroom suite and guest bedrooms.

Thirty-seven chimneys rose from the mansion’s exterior and carved granite figures of nursery-rhyme characters such as Little Red Riding Hood, Mother Hubbard and the Three Little Pigs adorned the sides of the house. (The Bradys never had any children — though it was presumed they would have welcomed them — and it was said that Genevieve wanted the carvings for her nieces and nephews to enjoy.)

The full working estate employed close to 100 workers at one point to maintain and staff the kitchen, flowing gardens, dairy, greenhouse and chicken coop.

While Inisfada was very much an expression of the Bradys’ wealth, the couple also intended it to be a gift to the nation long after they were gone.

After Nicholas Brady’s unexpected death in 1930 at age 52, it was said that Mrs. Brady found Inisfada increasingly depressing without him in it. She spent more and more time at their villa near the Vatican, Casa del Sole, and eventually she remarried, moving permanently to the residence in Rome.

With no children to leave Inisfada to, she began to look into giving the house and property to the New York Province of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits).

In the spring of 1937, the Jesuits accepted her offer. Since the millions of dollars in furnishings throughout the house were not in keeping with the spirit of poverty known to religious orders, a public auction of the interior’s paintings, tapestries, rugs, furniture, dishes, linens and more was scheduled for early May. The public was invited to visit the house and grounds for a small price of admission (50 cents); more than 11,000 visitors showed up, bringing in more than $450,000, which Genevieve Brady dispensed to charity.

The house that was a gift to her was now her gift — to the Church, the community and many charities.

**St. Ignatius College**

The Jesuits decided to first use Inisfada as a seminary. In the fall of 1937, the St. Ignatius House of Studies/St. Ignatius College welcomed its first class of 43 seminarians. It remained a house of studies for first-year seminarians for only three years, however, before the Jesuits opened the house to the rest of the order.

For the next 22 years, the house became a
home base for Jesuits who served in missions and for conducting the retreats.

As the Jesuits faced increasing costs to maintain a mansion the size of Inisfada, they knew they would need some sort of income if they wanted to keep the property. In 1962, the mansion was turned into St. Ignatius Retreat House. Although many of the features of the original house were maintained, changes were made to accommodate retreatants.

The original chapel was too small to host a lot of people at once, so the Great Hall was converted into a larger chapel for Masses. Individual dorm rooms were created for retreatants and several conference rooms were created.

For the next fifty years the house opened its doors to attendees of a wide variety of programs, lectures, and retreats for married couples, families, teenagers, young adults and religious from Long Island, the New York area and beyond. There were retreats held every weekend and even during the week — traditional Jesuit retreats based on the Ignatian spiritual exercises and days of recollection for area high-school students, and groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous held their meetings at the retreat center.

During the 1970s, Marriage Encounter weekends and family retreats were popular, as were retreats for single parents. A popular New Year’s Eve retreat and party took place for several years in the 1980s and 1990s.

The house hosted speakers such as Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., and former Sen. Alfonse D’Amato as well as Jesuit priests and professors from Fordham University. It was estimated that 800 to 1,000 people visited the retreat house each week.

But for whatever reason, the Jesuits never registered the mansion as a national historic landmark. Citing a decline in revenue and the inability to maintain the house and property any longer, after fifty years the Jesuits closed the retreat house (as well as a retreat house they owned on Staten Island) in 2012. Would the Inisfada house become a gift again?

**Current Status**

Soon after the Jesuits closed the retreat house — and despite public outcry that included a Change.org petition to save it — they sold the grand old house and remaining property to a Hong Kong-based developer for $36.5 million in 2013.

The developer demolished the house and made plans to convert the property into 46 single-family homes. The chapel was preserved, however — it was stripped down and its contents moved to a chapel at Fordham University in the Bronx before the demolition. Some artifacts such as the chair Cardinal Pacelli sat in during his famous visit were sold at auction.

The old house is now gone, leaving only trees and empty fields on the property, no further progress was made on any development. In 2019, the property listed for $110 million, and as of this past January, sale of the property at 251 Searingtown Rd. in Manhasset for $80 million was listed on real estate website Zillow.com as “pending.”
In the fall of 1936, Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Eugenio Maria Pacelli embarked on a trip to America, using Inisfada on Long Island as his base for the month-long visit. The cardinal’s whirlwind cross-country trip took him by train and plane to meetings with Church leaders, dignitaries and politicians, earning him the nickname by the press, “The Flying Cardinal.” Cardinal Pacelli was elected to the Papacy on March 2, 1939. Pope Benedict XVI declared Pius XII venerable on December 19, 2009.

Cardinal Pacelli visited Cardinal Patrick Hayes of New York and Auxiliary Bishop Francis Spellman of Boston (later the archbishop of New York), who accompanied him for much of the rest of his trip, then traveled to Washington, D.C. (where he received an honorary degree from Georgetown University); and Philadelphia. His air travel took him as far west as Los Angeles and San Francisco as well as to Chicago; South Bend, Ind. — to receive an honorary degree from the University of Notre Dame — Cincinnati; and Detroit, where he met with Father Charles Coughlin, known throughout America as the “Radio Priest.”

Father Coughlin, the founding priest of the National Shrine of the Little Flower church in suburban Detroit, had a widely popular radio program during the 1930s in which he discussed politics and current events (it was estimated at one point his weekly program had 30 million listeners). While Father Coughlin initially supported President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, he eventually became one of the president’s loudest critics. Roosevelt had sent prominent Catholic politicians to Father Coughlin to attempt to persuade him to tone down his rhetoric — to no avail. So Roosevelt reportedly asked Cardinal Pacelli to meet with Father Coughlin. After that meeting, Father Coughlin backed down in his criticism of the president, and Roosevelt was re-elected on Nov. 4.

After the election, Cardinal Pacelli met with Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, Gov. Alfred Smith, Joseph P. Kennedy and President Roosevelt before his grand farewell reception at Inisfada. Two days later, he headed back to Rome.
Although Genevieve Garvan Brady was seen as “shy, extremely apprehensive of publicity” (according to a May 1937 Time magazine article), she was with her husband, Nicholas, equally part of the most prominent Catholic lay couple in the United States during her time.

Born on April 11, 1880, in Hartford, Conn., Genevieve Garvan was raised in a devout Catholic household. One of her sisters joined the Sisters of Mercy. Her brother, Patrick, became a lawyer and also served as dean of Fordham University School of Law and was a trustee of the Catholic University of America.

Genevieve met Nicholas Frederic Brady through her brother — the two were roommates at Yale — and the couple married in 1906. (Four years later Patrick would marry Nicholas’ sister, Mabel.) From their home in Manhattan and at Inisfada, Genevieve devoted her time to acts of service: She founded the Carroll Club for Catholic young professional women; visited and donated to Catholic hospitals, orphanages and nursing homes; and succeeded Mrs. Herbert Hoover as chairman of the Girl Scouts of America. She was a Dame of the Order of Malta (a lay female member), a Dame of the Holy Sepulchre (a Vatican lay order) and received the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifrice, a Vatican decoration for service to the Church. For their donations of time and money, she and her husband were named a papal duke and duchess in 1926. Time noted that Genevieve was the “foremost member of her social class in a faith which demands completely public acts of faith of its people.”

Genevieve remained active after her husband’s death in 1930. She was awarded the Laetare Medal from the University of Notre Dame in 1934 as the most notable lay Catholic in America. That same year she also received an honorary doctor of law degree from Georgetown University — the first woman awarded an honorary degree from the university.

On March 6, 1937, Genevieve married William Babington Macaulay, the Irish Free State ambassador to the Vatican, in a private ceremony witnessed only by clergy. The two had known each other for some time through their mutual work for the Church.

The marriage was short-lived, however — Genevieve died a year and a half later, on Nov. 24, 1938, after complications from a tooth infection. She was buried beside her first husband below the main altar at the Jesuit novitiate in Wernersville, Penn.
Nicholas Frederic Brady: ‘Almighty God Owes Me Nothing’

Nicholas Brady’s story begins with his father, Anthony Brady, who built the family fortune in utilities and was president of the New York Edison Company (the precursor to Con Edison). Anthony’s was a classic rags-to-riches story: Born into dire poverty in a family that had emigrated to France from Ireland and eventually to upstate New York, Anthony started his own tea house in Albany, and his success in business grew from there. But he never forgot his humble upbringing and made sure his children knew it as well.

This is probably why his oldest son, Nicholas Frederic (born on Oct. 27, 1878), who followed his father in business, took great care in giving to charity and treating his workers with dignity. “After all, what are rich people but the trustees of God for the deserving poor and honest labor,” he once stated.

Nicholas attended Yale University and worked in his father’s businesses, but he was never given special treatment as an employee — indeed, Anthony made sure his son worked his way through departments as an apprentice and earned the living wages of other workers in the same positions. Nicholas later credited this strict training to his success and left him with an attitude of compassion and responsibility toward those who worked for him.

What Anthony did not leave his son, however, was his Catholic faith. Too busy with his work, he left the faith-rearing of his children to his wife, Marcia, an Episcopalian. But when Nicholas met his future wife, Genevieve Garvan — a devout Catholic — he converted and was accepted into the Church before their August 1906 wedding. However, his conversion was deeper than just one of convenience in order to marry in the Church.

Nicholas attended daily Mass and was an avid reader who took to heart the teachings on labor and the dignity of workers from Pope Leo XIII. “The working man’s right and dignity should come before high dividends,” Nicholas once said. While he made notable contributions to charities, he preferred to give anonymously. When his friend Archbishop John Murray of St. Paul, Minn., reminded him that his generosity would not go unnoticed by God, Nicholas responded: “Almighty God owes me nothing; I owe him more than I can ever pay.”

Nicholas Brady suffered from a disease of the spine thought to be rheumatoid arthritis. He died unexpectedly on March 27, 1930, at age 52. “Mr. Brady was regarded, both in this country and abroad, as one of the leading Catholic laymen of the United States,” read his obituary in the Hartford, Conn., Catholic Transcript. Although he was “never inclined to employ titles,” he was the first American recipient of Supreme Order of Christ papal honor, the first layman in the United States to receive the title of Papal Chamberlain, a Knight of Malta and a papal duke.

His wife received more than 700 cables and telegrams of sympathy after his death from the likes of New York Cardinal Patrick Hayes, President and Mrs. Herbert Hoover, Pope Pius XI and Gov. Franklin Roosevelt. He was buried under the main altar of the Jesuit Novitiate in Wernersville, Pa., which he had built and gifted to the Society of Jesus.

By Tina Dennelly & Sean Dolan
Image Credits

Cover

– Inisfada Mansion. Photo source: Wikipedia. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative_Commons

Page 2

– Pius XII. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Work is in the public domain.

Page 3


Page 4

– Genevieve Brady in Inisfada. Source: InisFada Long Island.

Page 5

– Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J. CNS file photo

Page 7

  New York World-Telegram & Sun Collection.
– Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr. Work in the public domain.

Page 8

– Mrs. Nicholas Brady. This work is in the public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons.
– Genevieve Brady. Source InisFada Long Island.
– University of Notre Dame Laetare medal. Source: www.nd.edu

Page 9

– Pope Leo XII. This work is in the public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons.