News



Young worshippers with the Shalom Catholic Community attend Mass at San Damiano Mission in Brooklyn, New York, on Easter morning, April 5, 2026. (Courtesy of San Damiano Mission)



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This Easter, the Brooklyn neighborhood of Williamsburg witnessed an unusual sight: About a dozen Catholics from Italy, Brazil and Colombia, mostly in their 20s and 30s, were handing out prayer cards to passersby and saying, "He is alive!"

Some days this group visits homeless shelters. Other days, they host music festivals. This community of young Catholics is a new phenomenon in the area, the project of missionaries from the Shalom Catholic Community at the San Damiano Mission in Brooklyn.

The Williamsburg neighborhood, which was once a working-class area of mostly Eastern European immigrants, has rapidly become a home for wealthy millennials and Gen Zers.

During the 2010s, the Williamsburg neighborhood changed; churches once filled with working-class families had mostly older parishioners and shrinking congregations. This led the Diocese of Brooklyn to embark on a series of closures and consolidations for many of the local parishes.

In 2011, St. Vincent de Paul Church was sold and converted to a luxury apartment building. Three years later, St. Mary's Church of the Immaculate Conception was sold and redeveloped into apartments. A handful of other parishes in the area merged from 2007-2018. A New York Times article in 2016 described this part of Brooklyn as a religious "dead zone."



Missionaries hand out prayer cards and candy on Easter Sunday, April 5, 2026, at San Damiano Mission in Brooklyn, New York. (Courtesy of San Damiano Mission)

To help revitalize the church, the Diocese of Brooklyn collaborated with Shalom Catholic Community, a group of mostly young missionaries, to start gathering in the shuttered San Damiano Mission in Williamsburg.

Shalom Catholic Community was founded in Brazil by Moysés Louro de Azevedo Filho, who initially opened a snack bar to evangelize young people, which from there grew to more than 30 countries and approximately 11,000 missionaries. About 2,000 of those missionaries, at varying stages of formation, take vows of chastity, obedience and poverty.

On his first day in Williamsburg, Fr. Cristiano Pinheiro, a Brazilian Catholic missionary priest with the Shalom Catholic Community, said he saw hundreds of young adults packed into a lot next to the church, jumping and singing to the Black Eyed Peas, right in the middle of the COVID-19 lockdown.

A young man approached him and asked, "Did you come to kill our vibe? … What are you going to preach about in that church? That pulpit's been silent a long time."

Pinheiro remembers replying: "I'm going to preach about a love that's greater than everything. A love that embraces everyone and has the power to change anything. The only love that truly deserves the name love."

The young man said, "Well, Father, come meet your new friends."



A full church on Easter Sunday at San Damiano Mission in Brooklyn, New York (Courtesy of San Damiano Mission)

"Just hours into my first night in Brooklyn, I found myself wading into that party," Pinheiro told the National Catholic Reporter. "Everyone was drinking too much, probably spreading COVID around. People stared at me with half-smiles, as if to say, 'What's this priest doing here?' But curiosity got the better of some, and a few came closer.

"One young man told me he had 12 beers and was just getting started," Pinheiro said. "I looked him in the eye and said gently, 'Easy there brother, you don't want to end up hurting yourself.' And hearing those words, tears filled his eyes and he blurted out, 'I love you, Father!' How unexpected!"

Starting with Pinheiro and three young missionaries, the community rapidly grew over the course of five years to about 500 participants. Members of the church include young men like Elmer, who was at a bar when he heard a strange announcement, "We have a priest willing to hear confessions in the bar if you dare."

Elmer gave his confession to Pinheiro, who invited him to attend Shalom where he is now an altar server. Another young woman named Gislaine was at a house party when someone told her, "We are having a priest over." Cristiano arrived at the party, and Gislaine now sings in the choir.

In addition to their religious vocations, the missionaries often fill the role of producers and publicists, putting on music festivals such as Halleluya, retreats such as Acamps, and countless speaker series. According to missionary Bárbara Tavares de Freitas, Shalom Catholic Community frequently holds online prayer groups that close to 100 people join.

The missionaries, who are mostly millennials and Gen Z, understand the importance of reaching people where they are, which is why they are extremely active on social media, posting well-produced, short-form videos that have accumulated almost 10,000 followers on Instagram.

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"Among the many activities of the Shalom Community, the prayer groups are at the core of its apostolic mission," Freitas said. "Within the prayer groups, each member is assigned a spiritual companion — someone more experienced in the journey of faith who offers guidance and support. Men accompany men, and women accompany women. The primary goal of this spiritual companionship is to assist each person in his or her ongoing spiritual growth."

Members of Shalom say they can offer many benefits to dioceses as they look to revitalize the church. The traditional parish model is geographically assigned and mainly serves locally rooted families, while in the 21st century most young people

are highly mobile, with fewer local ties, and congregate in global online communities rather than a local town square.

Groups like Shalom operate outside the traditional parish model, allowing for innovation and flexibility to reach people in these new spheres and offering new ways for lay people, young people, and non-Catholic people to participate in church life.

"The pandemic left the church dark and lifeless after a year closed," Pinheiro said. "It was time to let the light in."