

THE *TABLET*

LaGuardia Finally Opens Interfaith Chapel for Travelers

September 25, 2024

By Bill Miller



The LaGuardia Airport Terminal C Interfaith Chapel in East Elmhurst, N.Y., is seen Sept. 24. (Photo: Gregory A. Shemitz)

EAST ELMHURST — The new chapel in Terminal C in the renovated LaGuardia Airport is now officially open for prayer.

The much-anticipated Interfaith Chapel built by Delta Air Lines was officially dedicated on Tuesday, Sept. 24.

Airport chaplains representing Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism, plus officials from Delta and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, filled the 560-square-foot chapel for the ceremony.

Father Chris Piasta, a longtime Catholic chaplain at LaGuardia and JFK International Airport and pastor at St. Bonaventure-St. Benedict the Moor in Jamaica, who was a driving force in the chapel's creation, commented on the chapel's sacred presence in a portion of "prime real estate" in the airport.

"I am beginning to understand what Moses felt like when he saw the burning bush," he told the audience. "And then he was told to remove his sandals because the land that he's standing on is sacred land.

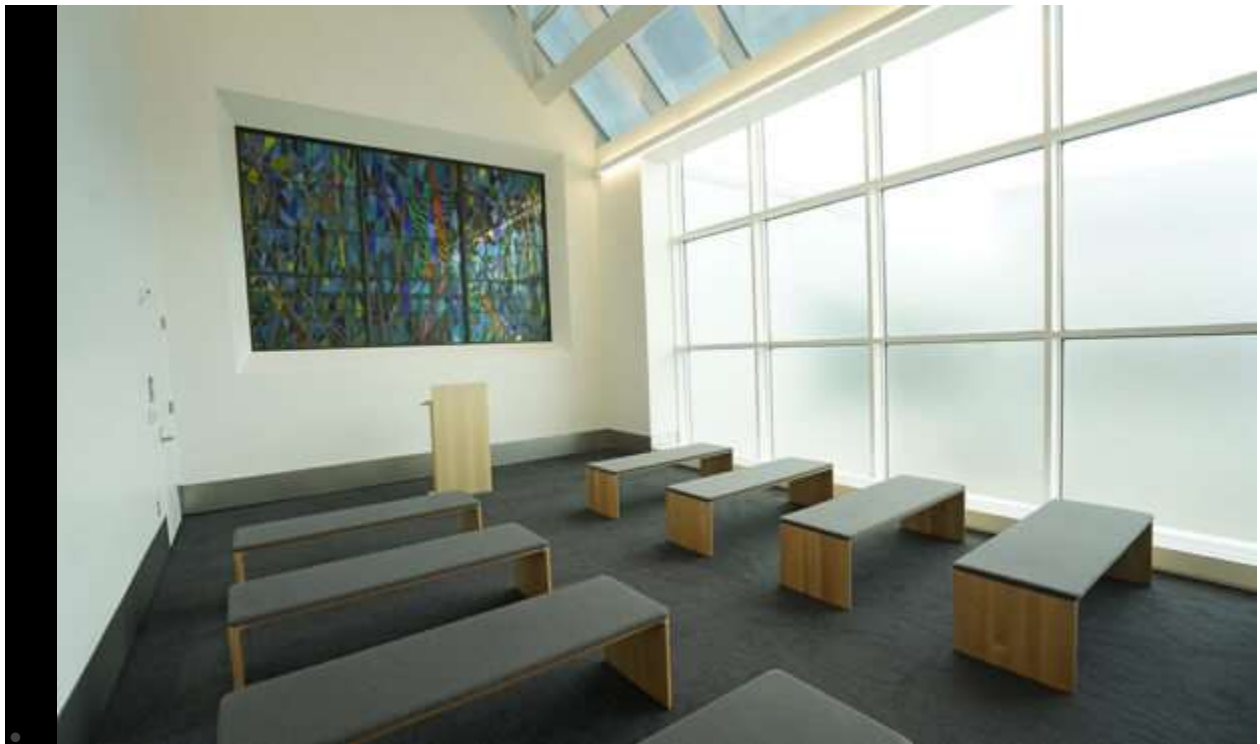
"In that sense, this is a sacred space — a very special space — here at LaGuardia," Father Piasta added.

Deacon Tom Reilly, a former airport chaplain at LaGuardia and JFK who is now retired in Florida, played a key role in bringing the need for the chapel to the attention of Delta Air Lines CEO Ed Bastian. He also commented on the importance of airport chapels.

“About 10 years ago,” Deacon Tom recalled, “another airport Chaplain came up to me and said, ‘You know, every day there’s somebody at an airport who is crying for some reason — the loss of a loved one or whatever it might be.’”

“That underscored, for me, the importance of airport chaplaincy, and also places like this, for people to come upon comfort,” he added.

In October 2021, the Tablet and Currents News were the first to report on Father Piasta’s efforts to get a chapel in LaGuardia as massive renovations began to Terminals B, C, and D.













(Photos: Gregory A. Shemitz)

Father Piasta sought a chapel for religious services but was offered a meditation room in the renovated Terminal B. However, he said the meditation room was too small to celebrate Mass.

Bishop Emeritus Nicholas DiMarzio then asked Vincent LeVien, director of external affairs for DeSales Media Group — the ministry that produces The Tablet — to get involved. LeVien called contacts at the Port Authority to stress the need for an interfaith chapel, as well as Gov. Kathy Hochul's office.

Around the same time, Bastian congratulated Deacon Reilly for becoming a millionth-mile traveler on Delta flights during his career in advertising. The deacon emailed the company's CEO to thank him, but added the request for a new chapel in the new Terminal C.

Bastian thought that was a great idea, and he got Delta's Ryan Marzullo, who oversees Delta's construction projects at JFK and LaGuardia, to look into the possibility.

LeVien also called longtime friend Patricia Ornst, Delta's managing director of state and local government affairs, seeking her help.

Marzullo and Ornst got busy making chapel a reality, and new opportunities emerged. The Delta design team expanded the chaplains' original request of 300-400 square feet to 560 feet.

The plans also include high ceilings and large exterior windows. The team completed the new chapel with two stained glass windows from the old Our Lady of the Skies Chapel at JFK Airport.

After the chapel opened, Imam Essam Mahmoud, the Muslim chaplain, took time for a prayer session. Using a compass app on his phone, he oriented himself east toward Mecca, as is the custom in his faith.

“There are no words that can fully express our individual and collective appreciation for your efforts,” Imam Mahmoud said in his comments. “Prayer is very important. Just as food is important to feed our body, prayer is important to feed our soul.”

Rabbi Ari Korenblit, a Jewish chaplain at the airports, praised everyone involved in making this new “house of prayer” where weary travelers can find spiritual respite on their journeys: “Peace should emanate from here to the four corners of the earth.”