

GOLDEN JUBILEE OF ST. PIUS PARISH  
December 1, 1968

Jubilee Sermon delivered by Joseph L. Lennon, O.P.  
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On this red-letter day, before we start to sing and dance, Emily Post dictates that we bow in respect to Bishop McVinney and thank him for gracing this occasion with his presence. 1968 has not been a good year for Bishops. Some jobs are rugged. The President of this country, for instance, is frequently under fire. The opposition party is all set to let him have it as soon as he stubs his toe – or even before. But he is shot at from only one side. A bishop, however, is trapped in a crossfire; he is lambasted by both far-right and the ultra-left in the Church. Indeed, so tough has become the job of bishop that there is a story told of a bishop who died and went to hell. But, *mirabile dictum!* He was there three days before he discovered where he was.

Bishop McVinney, all of us – priests, brothers, sisters, staff and parishioners of St. Pius – are delighted, if happy events like this help to make your job a little less tough. For 20 years, you have lent a helping hand to this parish and we are indebted to you for it. Bishops may have a great deal to answer for, but we are assured that your good work, as Shepherd of the flock, has been undertaken not for the hell of it, but for the heaven of it.

But why all this jubilation? The Book of Leviticus (15: 8-11) gives the answer. The Lord said, “And thou shalt sanctify the fiftieth year . . . for it is the year of the jubilee.” So the Israelites took God at His word. The fiftieth year was set aside as a time to “swing” – a time to live it up in song and mirth and laughter; a time, moreover, to thank God for leading the chosen people into the Promised Land. Sadness was to be banished; joy was to prevail. Debts were blotted out; enemies were reconciled. A happy spirit of peace on earth, good will towards men filled the hearts of all.

So the Jews had cause to glee, but what about St. Pius? Isn't it somewhat ironical that we celebrate this anniversary at the very time when the Church itself seems to be coming apart at the seams? Good Pope John opened the window to let in some fresh air; instead he let in a hurricane. Whichever way we look, the Catholic world we know seems to be turned upside down. The Pope is derided for being hopelessly out of date, heresy parades under the guise of theological speculation, Canon Law is hooted as Pharisaic legalism, conscience is appealed to, as if it were formed in a vacuum apart from the teaching guidance of the Church. On every side, we see the Church in crisis, in revolt, in upheaval. The prophets of doom proclaim this as her last agony and Catholics ask in bewilderment, “What is the Church coming to?”

At Christmastime, forty years ago, Father Cull gave the altar boys a fancy, little automatic pencil with a legend stamped on the barrel. The legend read: "I bear the title, Catholic, most honored name on earth!" The pencil is long since lost and gone, and so is the triumphalism it epitomized. Yet, at the time, it did not seem either outrageous or pathetic. It meant you stood for something and were proud of it. For when I was growing up, Catholics did not doubt the Church was the Rock of Peter; that it was the truth, and had the truth; and that those outside, although they might have the greatest good will and sincerity, were nonetheless wandering in darkness. We must have vexed our non-Catholic brethren, because we comported ourselves as if we owned the very ground we walked on, since that ground was paid for in full by the fallen blood of Jesus Christ. Our heads were held high, our manner was serene and confident. We behaved like the elect of God, for we were ever conscious of the gift of faith which lifted us above the motley ragtag of sects and schisms.

But this old view, we have come to see, was narrow-minded and tinged with a religiously monopolistic outlook, a view not completely consonant with the full message of Christ. But instead of trying to modify and clarify this viewpoint, critics of the Church, or, should I say "detractors," have gone to the grotesque extreme of rejecting her claim of speaking with the voice of Christ, and have even denied that she is the prolongation in time of the life and work of our Divine Master.

Indeed, the Church we love has become a public whipping boy. She is assailed for being corrupt, authoritarian, bureaucratic, rigid, irrelevant, and one ex-priest, *outjudasing* Judas from the rostrum of a Catholic college campus, screeches that the "institutional" church – Pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, and laity - - can all "go to hell."

In the context of this revolutionary situation, Catholics ask, "Why bother being a Catholic?" The answer to this question is crucial for every parishioner of St. Pius. It strikes at the core of your life. Who are you? Do you want to be the kind of person and parishioner you have been for the past fifty years? Should you change your style and teach your children to conduct themselves according to standards different from those you have followed? This is a decision intimately personal – a decision that affects your very identity as a Catholic. That identity governs your reactions to life itself. Why? Because it has to do with such questions as: What does God want of me? What is my role in the mission of the Church? What values should I live by and promote in my family and in society?

Perhaps the question: "Why bother being a Catholic?" can be best answered by looking at the way this parish developed. During the past fifty years, two principles stand out: continuity and change. I say "change" because the St. Pius of 1968 is so different from that primitive parish of 1918

that it is hard to believe the transformation that took place in such a brief span of half a century.

The physical growth alone is quite phenomenal: from humble beginnings in the little chapel on the first floor of Harkins Hall, Providence College to the red brick church and school on Elmhurst Avenue in 1928, to this magnificent temple of God. From a handful of parishioners in a semi-rural farming neighborhood, to a thriving, large parish in the suburbs.

Yet size and members tell us nothing about the faith that sparked this growth. Throughout all the changes, there was a continuity of spiritual purpose and Christian practice. This is what makes the St. Pius of today identical with the St. Pius of yesteryear. Indeed, it is in this holy place that the words of Jesus Christ are fulfilled: “Where two or three are gathered in my Name, there I am in the midst of them.”

Our Lord was not telling us that God must be worshipped only in churches built of brick and mortar. But He did want to emphasize that we are social beings, and so are obliged to worship Him together, in a group, as a society. We do not live in isolation. It is only in communion with our fellowman that we save our souls. As John Donne says, “No man is an island, entire of himself.” That is why no man ever goes to heaven or to hell alone; he always brings with, or goes with, somebody else.

Daniel Defoe once satirized the Church as a place of worship in these words:

Whenever God erects a house of prayer,  
The devil always builds a chapel there;  
And ‘twill be found upon examination  
The devil has the largest congregation.

In one sense, Defoe was right. Did not Christ liken the Church to a field full of wheat and weeds? Saints and sinners fill the pews. The history of the Church is the story of a long struggle with a weak membership. Perhaps you heard of the parishioner who was chided by his pastor for not coming to Sunday Mass. He retorted sarcastically, “Father, why should I go to Church on Sunday with such a bunch of phonies?” The priest replied, “Well, son, we always have room for one more.”

But, in another sense, Defoe was wrong, because you need only to look around to see that it is not the liars, the thieves, the adulterers, the murderers who come together to worship God publicly.

Do you recall the parish missions? How could anybody forget them? For instance, the team of Eckhart and Boyd – the beef trust. The floor groaned

beneath their weight, and the rafters shook with the thunderous roar of their preaching. We thrilled to the challenge of their message. At that time, it was the missionaries' custom to urge parishioners to bring a non-Catholic friend to learn about Catholic teaching in the hope of future conversion. After one mission, Pop Russell was overheard telling a business acquaintance, "Last month St. Pius had the best mission we've had in years." "Is that so," said his friend. "Did you add any new members to your congregation?" "No," said Pop, with rather grim satisfaction, "but we did get rid of four."

No parish thrives without good priests. We've had them here. Faithful to the Dominican ideal, they have not wasted their lives trying to take back what they had first promised God in their religious vows. No whining about obedience, no cry babying about loneliness, no thumbing the nose at provincial or bishop. Just sincere, happy service to God and people.

"Faith comes through hearing," says St. Paul, so they preach the word of God. Indeed, they are avant garde enough to read Bultmann, Cullnan, Bonhoeffer, Kierkegaard, and Barth, but the chief inspiration for their preaching comes from Aquinas, the doctors of the Church, and papal announcements.

But what they do, more than what they say, shouts to the world the kind of priests they are. No sensitivity training was needed to make them attuned to the needs of the faithful. No college psychology course taught them how to gain the confidence of parishioners, establish rapport, become simpatico or empathic. They simply lived the Gospel of love, and so were close to the people. Starting with the first pastor, Father Casey, and continuing through Fathers Noon, Sullivan, Clark, Mulvey, Baeszler, Conaty, Sullivan and Father McKeon (how did Baeszler get in there; except for him it sounds like a list of the Irish Mafia!) - - the pastors, and all the priests of this parish, have had one thing in common: a care and concern for the persons they serve.

It is a truism that if you want others to think well of you, you must first think well of them; if you want to have a friend, you must first be a friend; if you want to be loved, you must first love. The parishioners of St. Pius have always esteemed and loved their priests, because the priests have always esteemed and labored for their parishioners. And God has rewarded this parish by keeping the promise He made in the Book of Jeremiah: "I will give you pastors according to My Heart, and they shall feed you with knowledge and doctrine." (3:15)

Three of these pastors are here today. Father Conaty, a man strong in faith and with a wry, puckish humor. Let me tell you a story about him. Shortly after Father Conaty arrived at St. Pius, he gave a hellfire sermon on sin. Wondering how it went over, he asked Dorothy Mallory (one of the staunch workers in this parish). "Dorothy, what did you think of my sermon

on sin?" Dorothy Mallory said, "Father, it was very good, indeed. You know, we really didn't know what sin was until you came here." His coming here made St. Pius a better parish to live in.

But what about Father Sullivan. There is a priestly Pied Piper with the charm of a "Last Hurrah" politician. He smiled and sweet-talked his way into the hearts of all parishioners by telling them how wonderful they were. And he meant it, because he knows that if you look up to your fellowman and show him that you expect much from him, then you will get much. So, he got (or should I say "you got") this beautiful church. Indeed, being holy himself, he spread holiness around him. Once, when he was flying back from St. Louis, the plane got caught in a violent thunderstorm. There was a little old lady beside him and she turned to him and said, "Oh, Father, at a time like this, I am so glad I am sitting beside a man of God." Father Sullivan replied, "Madame, I do not want to shake your confidence, but please remember I'm in sales, not management." And who will deny that: he has been a super salesman for Christ?

Father McKeon now stands on the shoulders of these giants of the past and he leads us to even greater progress. He, too, is a holy friar. Late one night, shortly after he became pastor, he was called to the bedside of a dying parishioner. Upon driving back to the rectory, he noticed a member of the Holy Name Society wending his way up the street, having drunk well, but not wisely. Father McKeon said, "Get in the car and I'll take you home." The parishioner got in the car and when they came to his doorstep, Father McKeon remarked, "Well, I think you can make out all right now." The parishioner said, "Father, I want you to come in and meet my wife." Father McKeon answered, "It's rather late, why not some other time?" The parishioner said, "No, Father, I want you to come in now because I want my wife to see what kind of company I keep." Parishioners know that if they keep in the company of their pastor, they are on the right track to heaven.

Here's one more point about the priests: They have moved solidly in the spirit of the Ecumenical Council. They have kept abreast of changes. They have tried the new, but have not thrown out the good in the old. Once upon a time a small boy was taken by his father to see his first circus. He returned home still dizzy with the wonder of it all. His mother asked him, "How did you like the circus, Johnny?" "Gee Mom," he said, "if you'd just once go to the circus, you'd never go to church again for the rest of your life."

The priests of this parish have felt no need to turn the Church into a circus in order to keep the people coming. The Rosary is still very much "in," even though Bible vigils are not "out." The old hymns are still sung, even though the "now" songs of the Church are heard, and the guitar Masses with the big beat are given their chance. Mary, our Mother, is still honored in familiar devotions, but experimentation in new forms of the liturgy are

encouraged. Parishioners dialogue with God, with their priests, with one another, and with their non-Catholic brethren, not in surreptitious rites of the underground church but in the open, joyful adoration of the overground, universal church. It is a parish suited for the modern age because it keeps attuned to the Church of the Ages.

All this foo-for-rah, however, should not hide the forty-years work of the Blauvelt Dominican Sisters. Are they old nuns with the new look? New nuns with the new look? Or the same nuns with a forward look? They may have wanted to march on Selma, picket the chancery, blockade the mayor in his chambers, but putting first things first, they have been busy, busy, busy, filling our youngsters with sound doctrine and solid teaching, so that these children, growing to adulthood, have manned the posts of civilization as representative Catholic men and women. Perhaps we should call them “astronaut” nuns because they go into orbit, launched from the pad of a seven-hundred-year tradition of learning. They offer a space age education with a “tomorrow” viewpoint, but their feet are firmly planted on the ground of common sense, for they realize that nothing is accomplished tomorrow without the work of today and yesterday.

But now we come to the nitty-gritty of this celebration: the parishioners. A parish rises no higher than the nobility of its people. *Noblesse oblige!*

You have conducted yourselves in keeping with your dignity as Catholics. “By their fruits, you shall know them.” Look at the number of vocations which have come from the homes of this parish - - to date, thirty-seven priests, three Christian Brothers, twenty-five Sisters, five seminarians. Surely, our chests should swell with pride at this statistic. Blood will tell! A cliché, yes, but it does point up the fact that good families produce good people – loyal people and loyalty is a flame that warms the cockles of the heart. Indeed, the loyalty of long years is a beautiful and tender part of life. This parish has borne loyal witness to Christ for fifty years. It is a history of fidelity – fidelity to your obligations as parents, as Catholics, as citizens.

But God has especially blessed you, because of your loyalty to Him in the Holy Eucharist. Our Lord will not fail you, because you have not failed Him in the way that counts most. St. Paul says, “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.” We are all strengthened by God’s presence in our midst., on our altar, when we gather in unity at the Banquet of Love, when He comes to us as the Bread of Life so that we can truly say with St. Paul, “I live now, not I, but Christ liveth in me.” Indeed, it is through us Christians, “other Christs,” that our Lord’s presence is declared, and His work continued in the world.

On this fiftieth anniversary, St. Pius Parish faces its “moment of truth.” It stands eyeball to eyeball with its future. What that future will be, I cannot say. I am no prophet. But I do say this: whatever trials the Catholic Church

faces today, she has faced and overcome yesterday and what made our fathers strong in faith and practice should not find us timid and insecure. We are not Pollyannas, nor are we pessimists; we are simply Christians, with a confidence rooted in the recognition that men and events pass, God and His work endure.

Do you want the answer to the question, "Why bother being Catholic?" Then focus your eyes on the lives of those who lived and died in this parish. They wore their faith like a medal of honor. They were deeply conscious that they were members of the Body of Christ, that this Body, and that we are all, therefore, profoundly interrelated. It is this sense of identity with the Church that we all need to cultivate. Renewal cannot succeed without it. Any parish runs downhill when this identity is lost.

We have enough of, "Why doesn't the Church do something" type of Catholic. We need more of the kind of Catholic who says, "The Church can act only if I act in and through her." Indeed, each one of us should be willing to say, "This is my Church, the Church I love. If it does not accomplish its full mission, I hold myself, in part, responsible. I feel within myself an urgency to make myself, by the way I live and act, a more authentic living witness to Christ and His Church to the world."

With this kind of spirit, St. Pius, like the Church itself, will forge ahead in the next fifty years. In spite of present upheavals, we shall witness a sunrise, not a sunset; a second spring, not an autumn; a rebirth of fresh life ever springing up anew, because we have unshakeable certitude that "if these works be of man, they will run their course and have their end; if they be of God, no power on earth can overthrow them!"