
JESUITS COME TO YORKVILLE
Homily by Rev. Walter F. Modrys, S.J.
Sesquicentennial Mass – October 30th, 2016

The Nation had hardly gotten over the Lincoln assassination and the wounds of the recently concluded war. The era that came to be known as Reconstruction was just beginning. The Nation's capital was in turmoil with the radical Republicans conniving to impeach the new President. But the people here were largely impervious, still struggling with the chronic poverty that had been stalking them for generations, a burden they brought from the old country that even the promise of a new land could not totally alleviate.

The parish of Lawrence O'Toole was making its way, too. The Sisters of Charity had worked hard to found a Catholic School, and even more heroically responded to a hospital crisis when everyone else walked off the job because of the threat of a major epidemic. The diocesan priests who had served as pastors here since the founding of the parish, 15 years previous, had done just fine, especially Father Walter Quarter who was appointed to this small and out-of-the-way parish despite his high renown among clergy and people. It was Father Quarter who had saved the neighborhood from a sinister mob moving uptown during the draft riots of the Civil War.

Father Quarter was succeeded as pastor by a priest named Samuel Mully. And this transition has a lot to do with our celebration today. Father Mully had a rather checkered past. In his earlier years he had been ordained a Jesuit priest. After serving at Georgetown College along with his brother, Thomas, also a Jesuit—if truth be told, to the eternal shame of the Jesuits, this brother was one of the College officials who arranged for the sale of slaves to bail out the College's finances—our own Father Mully got into some kind of trouble which led to his dismissal from the Jesuit Order. The root of his problem bears all the marks of alcoholism, an illness which was left largely untreated in the nineteenth century. After a few years of wandering from place to place, Father Mully wound up one day on the doorsteps of Archbishop Hughes. The Archbishop took pity on the ailing priest and wisely assigned him to serve under the firm and compassionate supervision of Father Quarter. It was upon Father Quarter's untimely death that the pastorate passed to Father Mully, the former Jesuit, now in what we would call recovery. The parish was of lowly status, so the appointment of a somewhat suspect priest probably raised few eyebrows.

A few short years later, when Father Mully himself took sick, his Jesuit friends conspired together to arrange for his reinstatement in the Jesuit Order. Renewing his religious vows on his death bed, Samuel Mully died in the good graces of the Society of Jesus and was buried in the Jesuit Cemetery at Fordham College in the Bronx.

Neither the Archbishop nor the Jesuits missed the unanticipated opportunity. The Archbishop now argued that the Jesuits should assume the administration of the parish, given that one of their own had died in the pastor's office—thus removing a burden from his diocesan clergy. On the other hand, by establishing a Jesuit community at the parish, the Jesuits could more conveniently minister to the convent on 91st Street and to the hospitals for contagious diseases on Blackwell Island, later known as Roosevelt Island. The parish interests, however, were not as well served, at least in the short run. For the Jesuits at the time were mostly of French extraction and thus a poor fit for the largely Irish community that made up the parish membership. That problem was finally resolved only when more native born Jesuits came forward a generation later.

And that, my dear friends, is how the Jesuits came to Yorkville! The story recounts the rather obscure events we are commemorating today as our Sesquicentennial Anniversary.

From my entirely unprofessional historical inspection, I don't think there are any saints in the story, at least none eligible for canonization. The characters are just too human, with all the virtues and foibles that we humans tend to exhibit. But I am especially touched by Father Mulledy. I'm reminded of the thousands upon thousands of men and women over fifteen decades who have come through the doors of this parish as part of Alcoholics Anonymous, seeking sobriety or struggling to maintain it. Did any of them know that one of their forebears was the pastor who fought his own battle through many failures and played a hidden role in opening those doors?

Well, there are all kinds of stories as the years rolled on. Archbishop Hughes was criticized for building a cathedral on 51st Street, so far out of the City's center. But who among the Jesuits decided to lay the foundation for a grand church edifice facing Railroad Avenue? The worst street in the city, with horrible soot and fumes emanating from the train tracks in the open trench barely fifty feet from the front steps. Who tipped off Jesuit superiors that in another twenty years the tracks would be covered, the locomotives electrified and the worst avenue in Manhattan transformed into one of the most famous addresses in the world, Park Avenue on the Upper East Side! That decision was too clairvoyant for any simple Jesuit to make. Must have been a group of really smart lay people who got the word to a Jesuit who was smart enough to listen. It was about this time that the parish was placed under the patronage of St. Ignatius.

My own admiration always went to the Jesuits at the turn of the century—I mean from the nineteenth to the twentieth—not to be confused with my own term at the turn of the century a hundred years later. I figure from 1880 to 1915—a span of 35 years—six magnificent buildings were constructed that are still serving the people of the parish. That's one building every six years—housing two high schools, one grammar school, a day nursery, a Jesuit residence and a basilica-like Church. They were busy men. But this accomplishment undoubtedly also reflects the growth of the city, the increase in the Catholic population, the wealth that Catholics were accumulating and most of all the dynamism of the Spirit who accomplishes so much with dull and broken instruments.

But enough of history. What does it have to do with us? Now it's time—as the politicians say—to pivot to the gospel of the day—the story of Zacchaeus.

While I was pastor here, I met Zacchaeus on numerous occasions—or should I say, people like Zacchaeus. In the gospel story, Zacchaeus left his home in search of Christ, not in the first instance because he was particularly religious—his profession as a tax collector hardly recommends his religious observance. He just wanted to see Jesus. I believe a lot of people have come into this church space much as Zacchaeus when he climbed the sycamore tree—hoping to get a better vantage point to see Jesus. Some have come to hear a concert. Some to indulge in the sentimentality of midnight mass on Christmas Eve. Some because the space can be so quiet and provides a respite from the hectic city outside, or perhaps from a life filled with chaos. One man I know first came into the Church because he thought it was a bank and then was intrigued by the difference. So many people I met at St Ignatius had once felt alienated from the Church – sometimes for many years—and then returned, perhaps after wandering far and wide like our Jesuit pastor, Father Mulledy. Finding Christ usually entails a searching, a journey, and climbing to get a better glimpse of him so that he can then take the initiative and come crashing into our lives. And so often the particular spot where that encounter first takes place or first is nourished is inside this magnificent space that our forebears were sufficiently energetic to build for us.

Fifteen years ago, when we were celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of the parish, I invited an Archdiocesan priest, Father Tom Shelley, to speak to the parish about our history. Father Shelley ended his

fascinating talk by recalling an incident that is especially timely today. He said:

In 1966, at the time of the 100th anniversary of the coming of the Jesuits to Yorkville, (so fifty years ago) the sermon at the Centenary Mass on May 8 was preached by Father Pedro Arrupe, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus. Father Arrupe called attention to this double meaning of the word “church.” He took note of the splendid buildings that comprise the physical plant of this parish, but he reminded the parishioners that there was more to their church than “American bricks and Italian marble.”

“The true story of this parish,” Father Arrupe said, “is the story of every child whose faith has been born in its baptismal womb; every sinful soul that has poured out its weakness within these walls; every ear that has drunk in the Word of God from this sanctuary; every heart that has offered sacrifice on this altar; every tongue that has cradled its Eucharistic Lord at this rail; every mind that has been opened to God’s grand world in these classrooms; . . . every lonely, loveless person who has encountered in these pews the passion of Christ and His Resurrection.”

It is our role now to continue the story.