

Thomas Gibbons Smyth



Even over fifty-six years after his death, the founding pastor, Msgr. Thomas Gibbons Smyth, remains almost a figure of legend in Blessed Sacrament Parish. To paraphrase the eminent American Catholic historian Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, "One of the basic rules for historical narration is to treat persons and events in terms of their own time; nothing less than that that is either fair or accurate, and to this rule Thomas Smyth should be no exception." The 1987 parish history notes: "he preached oratorical homilies in a voice that needed no electronic aids, had they existed. He wrote in the parish newsletter in a similar vein."

The Church in the first half of the twentieth century was characterized by an increasing centralization of power and leaders with authoritarian temperaments. Notable prelates such as George Cardinal Mundelein of Chicago, William Cardinal O'Connell of Boston, Dennis Cardinal Dougherty of Philadelphia, and later, Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York worked hard to gain and maintain control over the ever expanding number of parishes, ministries of charity, education, and healthcare in their dioceses, along with the support systems required to maintain such a vast infrastructure.

Catholic leaders of the era wanted to demonstrate to their flocks that the immigrant days were over and Catholics had every right to take their places along side others as first class citizens. Mundelein of Chicago, for example, believed that "going first class" would show the rest of America that Catholics had indeed "arrived."

Thomas Smyth followed this lead, taking great pride that everything at Blessed Sacrament was the best it could be. For example, he forbade what he considered mundane fundraising techniques such as bingo and insisted that great care be taken in the design and building of the church and the school. It is said that he chose the title "Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament" instead of simply "Blessed Sacrament" because "he liked things in grand style."

Smyth, who was named a monsignor in 1939, served as pastor for what today seems an extraordinary forty-one years. Modern-day priest personnel polices did not arrive until the 1970s; such tenures were not uncommon in those days. Born in the hardscrabble Canton section of Baltimore in 1874, Smyth attended Loyola College and St. Mary's Seminary and was ordained in 1898. After serving at St. Thomas Aquinas in Baltimore and St. Stephen's in Washington he was appointed pastor of St. Ann's in Washington in 1909 with Blessed Sacrament added in 1911. During his tenure, the parish was established, the buildings built, the school begun, and many parish organizations started.

It was his personal style that became the stuff of legend. It seems that Blessed Sacrament's proclivity of starting Masses with a small congregation that doubles or even triples in size by the first reading is a practice with deep historical roots here in Chevy Chase. "I come before the altar of God, and God says 'where are my people?'" he declaimed on one occasion. Slipping out early did not go unnoticed. "Those people who are leaving are of course not parishioners," he told the congregation. "Blessed Sacrament people stay until the end of Mass."

While appearing curmudgeonly, Smyth apparently had a much softer side when dealing with parishioners on an individual basis. He was somewhat formal: in a manner not untypical of his time, he would address a young woman as "Miss Margaret" rather than simply Margaret,

for example. Parishioners still living today (2008) recall his love of playing bridge and telling jokes, especially ones that involved Irishmen in the punch line. One story involves a woman who, suffering from an overabundance of scrupulosity and convinced that she had forgotten a few of her sins, came to confession three times in one day. On her third entrance to his confessional, Smyth leaned against the screen, saying "Nan, now go away, and *don't* come back!" He is remembered to have done his best to provide people with help whenever possible, and was known to have special affection for the children of the parish, insisting on personally giving each one first communion up until his death, for example.

Msgr. Thomas Smyth died in the rectory on May 19, 1951.