

Part III of III: 1952 – 2002
Past and Prologue: Mechanicville Catholic History
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In its first century, Catholicism took root and grew in Mechanicville by transplanting an unchanging religious tradition to a new environment being shaped by the dynamic of Irish, Italian, and Lithuanian immigrants moving into an expanding milltown. In the next fifty years, by contrast, the dynamic of change came not so much from the host community as from the institution of the Church itself.

Younger Catholics may shake their heads in both bewilderment and bemusement upon reading this, but the typical Catholic accepted a number of adages as “eternal truths” half a century ago:

Once a priest, always a priest.
The Pope is always an Italian.
Marriage is forever.
The Mass always was, and always will be, said in Latin.

The last fifty years have demonstrated that these truisms may be neither eternal nor true, at least in the manner in which they were previously understood. Disproving or modifying our understanding of their applicability to Catholicism may have been the least of it because, while that process may have been earth-shaking enough, even more profound changes were at work that would drastically change the way parishioners viewed their religion and the roles they were expected to play in it. Most profoundly, the Church emerged from Vatican Council II (1962-1965) with a rediscovered sense of itself as “the people of God” where the laity was no longer expected to be merely passive spectators seeking private piety watching a mysterious ceremony which was celebrated in what was then proudly described as a “dead language.” Hereafter, they were called to be active participants, so enlivened by the communal experience of Sunday Masses that they would put the Faith into practice in homes, schools, and workplaces throughout the week. The era of the Baltimore Catechism’s rote responses to pre-digested questions formulated 150 years ago was over; a renewed interest in Biblical study, Church history, and liturgical renewal was called for- and it would involve the laity as much as, if not more so, than the clergy. But, what did this mean in practical terms, right here in River City?

When the Sisters of Atonement were brought here by Fr. Serafino Aurigemma in 1947 to conduct the Assumption parish’s catechetical program, one of their primary responsibilities involved “preparing the children” for First Communion, just as their Josephite opposite numbers had been doing for two decades with the children in St. Paul’s parish. When the Atonement sisters left Mechanicville thirty years later, First Communion preparations entailed the religious education of the parents as much as the children. The responsibility for this also had by then devolved onto a catechetical program run almost entirely by the laity, as it is now, with the nuns acting as much as coordinators as teachers. Today, this approach has been extended to the point where some parents have assumed full responsibility for the catechesis of their children in a “home-based” program engaging the family at an even higher level of responsibility.

In the early twentieth century, sodalities such as the Sacred Heart Society, the Holy Name Society, the Catholic Daughters and many others were founded by Mechanicville's two Catholic congregations so that parishioners- cut off from the larger society both by their own parochialism and the hostility of the larger society- could socialize within a context that would reinforce their Faith. These organizations provided the only outlets where the laity were permitted to assume leadership roles in the Church.

Today, though many of these organizations continue to exist, the role of the laity has expanded dramatically. Not only are they permitted to assume leadership roles; their new understanding of themselves as "the people of God" demands that they do so. What is now taken for granted in CCD, Bible studies, Prayer and Worship, the Parish Council, Pre-Cana Preparation, Hospitality, Social Action and many other committees- i.e., the participation and leadership of the laity- would have been dreaded by both clergy and laity alike fifty years ago. Although he was merely acting as a harbinger of the future, when Fr. Alfred Monte encouraged a group of "Concerned Assumption Parishioners" in 1971 to organize themselves into a parish council, he was acting in a manner that would have been regarded as subversive by priests and laity alike only a few years earlier.

In another regard, Catholicism in Mechanicville and America at large re-oriented itself toward the larger society when it discovered the Kennedy family living in the White House and Pope John XXIII in the Vatican. The Greek-derivative term "ecumenical" became a word Christians of all persuasions learned to both spell and pronounce by the late 1960s. But, before local Catholics could embrace Mechanicville's other Christians (Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians), they had to learn to deal with fellow Catholics worshipping across the street from each other. Fifty years ago, rare was the child baptized in either local Catholic congregation who had parents from different parishes, much less from different Faiths. A possible watershed event, now long-since forgotten, occurred at a week-long joint parish mission conducted in 1969. Sponsored by the Diocese, it attracted hundreds of Catholics from both parishes, and while a good deal of self-examination was encouraged, it focused as much on the community at large as it did on the individual. Large-group and small-group discussions examined issues such as the appropriate role the laity should play in liturgical celebrations and parish councils, adjustment to the novelty of hearing the Mass said in English rather than in Latin, the changing roles of priests and religious, and raft of other issues raised by the aftermath of Vatican II. All of this was followed by a communal penance service- a first for most parishioners. Because sessions were held on alternate days in both churches, the mission marked the first time many Mechanicville Catholics had crossed the invisible line of demarcation which had separated the two congregations for sixty years.

Five years later when a management-consultant firm advised the Augustinian Order to close its upstate New York parishes in the face of declining vocations, a proposed merger of Mechanicville's two Catholic parishes received a chilly reception at a public meeting attended by a crowd of nearly a thousand. The editor of the Augustinian *Provincial Newsletter*, following a tour of upstate New York in the summer of 1974,

noted that a majority of priests opposed closing any parishes and “those who favored it were largely ignorant of the situation in the ... area.” There matters stood for nearly three years.

When the merger issue re-emerged in 1977, petitions with over 1,000 signatures of Assumption parishioners protesting the move were presented to Fr. Howard Hubbard, Acting Head and soon-to-be named Bishop of the Albany Diocese. Although telling the local press that a final decision in the matter would not be subject to any “voting procedure,” Hubbard went on to note that the petition raised “real concerns,” given the fact that the signatures of more than half of the adult members of the parish had been collected in less than three days. He also stated that “the importance of identity in one’s whole life process ... cannot be minimized.” Assumption parishioners stated that they merely wished to preserve a dynamic institution whose extinction threatened their ethnic identity and “sense of shared experience.”

Following meetings with representative groups on both sides of the issue, the newly-appointed Bishop won concurrence from the Augustinian Order that it would continue to staff the newly-merged Assumption-St. Paul Parish. Yet, though united, the merger agreement stipulated that both parish’s church buildings continue to be used for daily and weekly services, a practice followed today. Additionally, an Ethnic Affairs Committee was to be incorporated into the organizational structure of the parish.

The merger issue may have been unnecessarily complicated by the enthusiasm for “architectural correctness” that came into vogue in the aftermath of Vatican II. Gratian, a twelfth century religious commentator, proclaimed that “paintings are the Bible of the laity,” and throughout the ages, Catholic churches have been noted for their murals, statues, and paintings. However, it became *au courant* during the 1970s to subscribe to the dictate that such visual representations had been intended for pre-literate congregations and were now *passé*. In keeping with this philosophy, when the Church of the Assumption was “renovated” at the time of the merger, all statuary and pictorial traces of its heritage as an Italian ethnic parish were removed- Sts. Rocco, Anthony, and associates being relegated to exile in the belfry. However, when St. Paul’s Church was renovated fifteen years later, the same diocesan architectural consultants who had provided advice on Assumption’s renovations issued *mea culpas* for their past over-zealousness in favoring the austere look. In contrast, they now recommended that St. Paul’s statuary and paintings be restored to their original brilliance and given added prominence through the use of special lighting to highlight them. The irony of the contrasting approaches taken with the two restorations was not lost on everyone.

In other cases, enthusiasm for change may have overstepped its bounds here and in other parishes throughout the country. Older Catholics today nod in recognition when listening to well-known comedians jest about the legendary sense of guilt Catholics formerly embraced, a product of parental and religious training that encouraged them to go to Confession weekly, or at least monthly. Little wonder then that it was the rule of thumb in the 1950s that St. Paul’s and Assumption conducted four-hour weekly Saturday Penance services. However, such practices went by the boards in the 1970s. The recent trend toward infrequent confession led Fr. Frank Gallogoly (who served here both as an Associate and as Pastor) to express amazement at how angelic Mechanicville

Catholics had become in the interim between his first and second local assignments in the 1970s and 1990s.

Other recent changes have struck a chord of regret rather than discord. After more than six decades of service, St. Paul's Parochial School closed its doors in 1988. During its years of service, many of its graduates had achieved academic distinction, often excelling when they went on to Mechanicville's and other area high schools. Its fate came on the heels of other school closings that occurred throughout the diocese, attributed in large part to the inability of parishes to incur the costs of hiring paid lay faculty to replace the teaching orders of nuns whose volunteer efforts had previously subsidized Catholic education throughout the diocese. In the case of St. Paul's, the school's financial problems were exacerbated by the fact that they arose at a period of economic decline in the area.

In another regard, Mechanicville Catholics took pride in the prominence achieved by native-son, Monsignor John Nolan, who for many years represented the Papacy in the Middle East as the head of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association. An outstanding homilist, parishoners always looked forward to hearing him preach at Mass during his numerous visits here. Because of his extensive first-hand experience in a critical part of the world, Monsignor Nolan's opinions were much sought after by the national media at times of crisis in the Middle East, and he was as likely to be quoted by NBC News as by the diocesan *Evangelist* in such instances. Pope John Paul II recognized his efforts on behalf of Palestinian Christian refugees by raising him to the episcopacy in 1988. Bishop Nolan died in 1997 and is buried in the local parish cemetery.

Celebrating 150 years of Catholicism in Mechanicville, the question arises: where does this period fall in the larger scheme of things? However, answering that question would require us to stand outside of Time, viewing the End- something only God can do. Yet, having become a living part of that history, each Catholic must become his or her own historian in an attempt to make sense of it all. As it celebrated its sesquicentennial, the parish membership included more than thirty parishioners who were over ninety years of age-the oldest among them enjoying her 103rd year. As a group, they have represented the last connection to the "heroic generation": outcast immigrant refugees who struggled to keep body and soul together, often having to fight to maintain their dignity in a society that did not always welcome them, a generation which experienced two world wars and a Great Depression. And through it all, they kept the Faith.

What is the challenge confronting the children and grandchildren of this "heroic generation"? Enjoying the benefits of freedom and the abundant fruits of their labor, they may well be facing the "adversities of affluence" rather than their ancestors' challenge of poverty. Yet, while the demands on them may be new, they are no less challenging than those faced by their predecessors. How to keep, not body and soul, but families together; how to protect the young from the allurements of an increasingly materialistic popular culture; how to sustain one-parent families; how to care for the

elderly and protect their dignity- these are but a few of the challenges they face now and will continue to face in the future. Seventy-five years ago, Catholics joined with other Mechanicville Christians to “keep holy the Sabbath” by prohibiting the showing of motion pictures on Sunday afternoons. Today, Sunday services of all faiths are compelled to compete with youth soccer, basketball, and football- and religious indifference.

Older generations often toiled long and exhausting hours in the factories, mills, and rail yards of Mechanicville, but in many cases, two and three generations of the same family worked side by side- and were able to walk to and from their places of work. That world has long since ceased to exist, never to return. Yet, despite the fact that many of our young people must leave the area to find employment after completing their education, the parish remains a dynamic Catholic community with active sodalities, numerous volunteer committees, and choirs renowned for their musical virtuosity. Continuing to be staffed by two Augustinians, the parish is a highly spirited as well as a deeply spiritual Catholic community, displaying hospitality, openness, commitment and love in its on-going relationship with the devoted and exemplary clergy who serve it

Thus, while many of today’s challenges may appear daunting, the 150th commemoration marks a celebration not only of past triumphs over adversity, but also, a recognition that even in the darkest hours (maybe *mostly* in those darkest hours), it is Faith that sustains our lives. Recognizing this, the legacy of this history requires that it be passed on to future generations by being lived it each day.