

In this year of the Bicentennial of our country, St. Thomas of Canterbury Parish is celebrating its 60th Anniversary.

A severe snow storm coupled with the arrival of a new Archbishop, George Mundelein, in February of 1916, gave the impetus for a number of laymen to request their own parish in the north part of the "Wilson Avenue District", (subsequently known as Uptown). This snow storm had prevented them from attending Mass at either Our Lady of Lourdes or St. Ita's Parishes due to the distance involved. The new Archbishop told them that if they signed up 500 families they would have their new parish. They returned four days later with the names and a new parish was born.

The parish was formally established on March 4, 1916, and was the first parish set up by the new Archbishop. He personally named the parish after St. Thomas of Canterbury to remind himself of his own call to sanctity, since like himself Thomas Becket was first a Chancellor and then an Archbishop.

Father Francis M. O'Brien, an Assistant at the Cathedral and Chaplain of the City Jail, was appointed the first pastor and given the "area of Uptown", north of Wilson Avenue, south of Foster Avenue and east of Magnolia Street to the Lakefront" as the geographic boundaries of the parish. These boundaries remain essentially the same today with some minor meanderings at the north end. Father O'Brien immediately set about the task of serving the people there amid the backdrop of the most important business, entertainment and restaurant area of Chicago outside the loop.

He rented a house at 4830 North Sheridan Road as a rectory and temporary school staffed by the Sisters of Charity of BVM. The first Mass was held in the Lakeside Theater (Lakeside Place and Sheridan Road) now Columbia College on March 26, 1916. Other services (Lent was in progress) were held at the Dorset Hotel (Argyle Street and Sheridan Road) now the Somerset House.

Shortly thereafter a six-flat at 4811 North Kenmore Avenue was purchased as a convent and Joseph W. McCarthy was hired as the Architect for a combination Church-School building. At the direction of Archbishop Mundelein, the architecture was to be "pure colonial, the only distinctively

American architecture." It was the first Catholic Church built in this style in Chicago and probably in the nation. It served as a model for St. Mary of the Lake Seminary, Mundelein, who subsequently employed the same Architect. The then new church was dedicated by Archbishop Mundelein on June 24, 1917.

The architecture it seems reflected well the feelings of the parish founders. They were urbane, affluent people who were first and foremost Americans. Though Irish surnames predominated, the parish lists, baptisms and marriages of the time, indicate a wide variety of European backgrounds. This "American" outlook gave the parish and its programs a unique elan. Being in the shadow of the Aragon Ballroom must also have helped. Memories of gala dances, parties, outings and one of the most famous young adult clubs in the city predominate in the memories of old parishioners. The priests of this period still are fondly remembered as cheerful outgoing types. Assistant Pastors such as F. J. Molloy, Anthony Burke and Frank Trainor still stand out in the memories of the people.

Father Francis O'Brien was made pastor of St. Angela Parish in 1924. A man whose name was to epitomize St. Thomas of Canterbury Parish for some 28 years was appointed Pastor, Father, and soon to be Monsignor, Edward J. Fox. Monsignor Fox built the current Rectory in 1931. He gained a wide reputation in the diocese as a firm and gentle leader of men.

In 1951 Monsignor Fox's health was failing, and an administrator, Father William Rogers was appointed. Upon the death of Monsignor Fox in 1953, Father Rogers was appointed Pastor. For seventeen years, Father "Willie" Rogers name became synonymous with St. Thomas of Canterbury. His

ebullient spirit touched the hearts of all he came in contact with. He was ever present in front of the Church greeting all by name and making many converts. A strong Legion of Mary (still very active today) and a Vincent de Paul Society were established to meet the changing needs of the neighborhood. True to its tradition, St. Thomas of Canterbury was well served in the 50's and 60's by outgoing associate Pastors, Fathers J. P. Cunningham, Sam McKay and John Tilford.

In 1969, Father Rogers was appointed Pastor of St. Albert the Great in Burbank. Father Hubert Hoffman was appointed Pastor. Father Hoffman brought with him a firm command of the Spanish language. Under his leadership services for Latins were established and the beginnings of a social outreach program to the neighborhood began. In 1971, Father Hoffman was appointed Pastor of St. Rose of Lima. The stage was set for a unique experiment at St. Thomas of Canterbury.

Uptown had changed slowly but surely since World War II. Immigrants from rural America, predominately Appalachian and Native Americans, poured in. Immigrants from across the seas, predominantly Latins and Asians arrived. The old faded hotels were filled with the elderly, the handicapped, the mentally ill. Nursing homes and medical facilities sprouted. Parts of Uptown had become what one leading magazine called in 1971, "The Toughest Neighborhood in America".

On July 1, 1971, John Cardinal Cody appointed three priests to be Co-Pastors of the Parish, Father Thomas Millea, Michael Pelka and Michael Rochford. It was a new concept called "Team Ministry ". Father Millea left the team in 1973, to take the pastorate of Precious Blood Parish. As the roles have developed over the years, Father Rochford is Parish Administrator and Father Pelka, School Administrator. Father Joseph Hai, a refugee from

Vietnam, was appointed Associate Pastor in March of 1976.

The major goal of the new team was to make the parish and the Catholic Church credible to all the people of the neighborhood.

In order to accomplish this goal the following programs have been developed during the past five years in addition to standard parish operations already in effect:

Spiritual: 1) Outreach to individual shut-ins and those in institutions.

The parish currently has 2,000 Hospital and Nursing Home beds and 26 Institutions to care for. All are served by pastoral teams of clergy, religious and laity.

2) Development of Liturgy Committees, Lectors, Leaders of Song, Commentators, Lay Distributors of Communion for English, Spanish and Vietnamese liturgies.

3) A Baptismal preparation program for parents and godparents was set up. Baptisms and converts have doubled since this program began.

4) Development of Ecumenical Prayer Groups in Apartment Buildings, etc.

Educational: 1) The parish school has 185 pupils from Kindergarten through 6th grade. Seventh and eighth grades were dropped in 1975 due to the opening of the new Joan Ara; Middle School.

It provides an excellent alternative to inadequate neighborhood schools. The Staff includes 1 priest, 1 sister and 5 lay people. The Sisters of Charity BVM withdrew in 1972. In 1973 the old convent building was

sold and razed and a Senior Citizen park now stands in its place.

The park was dedicated by John Cardinal Cody on Mother's Day, 1976

- 2) A Sunday School of Religion is operated serving 200 children.

Sister Emmarita Magsamen, OSF is Director. A special Catechetical Program in Vietnamese is also held.

- 3) A Summer Bible School for neighborhood children is held each year.

- 4) Classes in English are provided weekday evenings for Spanish speaking , Burmese, Malay and Vietnamese.

Social

- 1) The parish operates a food pantry run by a full time social worker.

250 families are served each month. It is the largest free food pantry in the City of Chicago. In addition, budget counseling, ombudsmanship with agencies and family counseling are provided. Mr. David Chandler is the Director.

- 2) The parish operates a full-time Senior Citizen Office to care for the needs of the elderly. Sister Miriam Young, O.P. is the Directress and Sister Linda Brandewie, S.F.P., Associate. There is also a large Senior Citizen Club in the parish, the "Canterbury Golden Agers".

- 3) The parish operates Summer Programs each year: Job opportunities for teens, a day camp for youngsters and a nutritional site for children.

- 4) The parish provides a wide variety of services for Vietnamese: scholarships, a monthly magazine, settlement services for new arrivals, social get-togethers, etc. 65 Vietnamese Catholic Families now reside in the parish. Father Joseph Mai is Director. Sisters Martha Phuoc and Therese Lam Hong are Associate Directors.

- 5) It has been a parish policy to aid and provide expertise in helping worthwhile projects. We have helped and been involved in the formation of numerous organizations now functioning independently such as:

Uptown Peoples Action Program,

A community organization;

Uptown Senior Citizens Organization;

The Centre, Inc., a drop-in and multi-service

center for neighborhood youth;

Prologue Alternative High School;

The National Day Labor Institute, an advocacy group; and

The Amos Day Labor Agency, a not-for-profit day labor agency.

A Parish Council was attempted but failed due to language and transiency problems.

Recent milestones in the history of St. Thomas of Canterbury Parish have been the formation of the Canterbury Club (a multi-racial lay organization to aid the parish) on January 14, 1976; the formation of the Vietnamese Catholic Community of Chicago on August 15, 1976; and a formal "twinning" arrangement with Queen of All Saints Basilica that began in July, 1976

Currently residing and working in the parish are the following Congregations of women:

Lovers of the Holy Cross (Vietnamese)

Franciscan Sisters of the Poor

Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, Wisconsin

Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis

Franciscan Sisters of Springfield, Illinois

Sisters of St. Francis, Mishawaka, Indiana

and of men:

Jesuit Seminarians

Franciscan Fathers

Holy Cross Brothers

currently residing in the rectory and working in the parish are:

Rev. Mr. William O'Brien, S.J. and

Bro. Charles Smith, CSC.

The past sixty years have seen great changes in St. Thomas of Canterbury Parish.

No longer affluent and urbane, it has become a home, refuge and helping hand to the immigrant and the poor. Its current mix of 1500 families of rich and poor, young and old, handicapped, black, white, red, latin and oriental peoples make its worshipping community unique in the city, if not in all the world. It is a microcosm of the eucharistic unity^{envisioned} by Jesus, Himself, when He prayed that "all men may be one."

Rev. Michael Rochford

September 1, 1976