

On Saturday, May 8 at 5:00 P.M.

50th Anniversary Mass—Msgr. McLaughlin

Homily by Msgr. Edward Ryan; photos by Fr. Jan

This Mass, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the death of Msgr. Joseph McLaughlin—founding pastor of Our Lady Queen of Martyrs Parish—was celebrated by Msgr. Edward Ryan, who knew him well and whose stirring homily we excerpted as follows:

The lead editorial in the edition of *The Brooklyn Tablet* fifty years ago bore the title, “A Mighty Oak Has Fallen.” The editorial paid tribute to the recently deceased Msgr. Joseph R. McLaughlin, founding pastor of Our Lady Queen of Martyrs Parish. In appearance, Msgr. McLaughlin was nothing at all like a mighty tree, much more like the kindly, old parish priest portrayed by Barry Fitzgerald in *Going My Way*. A parish priest he was from the day he set foot in the still rural village recently named Forest Hills, until the day he handed his spirit over to his Redeemer. Permit me to share a few stories with you:

One summer day in 1946, my grandfather suffered a cerebral hemorrhage that proved to be fatal. Dad called requesting that a priest come to our home, and to his surprise the cleric who came was the pastor himself, Msgr. McLaughlin. He did not simply perform the ritual, but spent a good bit of time at grandpa’s bedside, trying to break through his coma. “Dennis, can you hear me? Can you hear me, Dennis?” Thirteen summers later, Msgr. McLaughlin was admitted to hospital; at about the same time, I picked up a persistent fever that put me in the same hospital also. After visiting me, Mom and Dad stopped to see the pastor. “I must get up to see the boy,” he said when they told him I was there.

As an altar boy I became familiar with his routine. Women would come into the sacristy requesting the blessing of new mothers, popularly known as *churching*. I would grab the holy water and a candle and accompany him to the altar rail. He once confided that, as a young priest, he thought it great fun to go out to the altar rail, stop in front of the elderly ladies kneeling there in prayer, and *church* them.

Four times each school year, Msgr. McLaughlin visited every classroom in the school to distribute report cards. He invariably told the same two jokes. We did not quite understand them in first grade, thought they were really funny in third grade, considered them corny in sixth grade, and groaned at them in eighth grade.

But it was a stroke of genius that inspired him to invite the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to staff the beautiful school that opened its doors more than eighty years ago—today it’s hard to believe that at that time many teachers entered classrooms without an undergraduate degree; but our teachers were all graduates of Marywood College, and the distinguished roster of alumni attests to Msgr. McLaughlin foresight.

Of all Msgr. McLaughlin’s achievements, the building of this church was the crown. Throughout this Easter season, we have been reading from the book of Revelation, where we listened in as the saints in heaven offer ceaseless praise before the throne of God. Msgr. McLaughlin was acutely aware that the heavenly liturgy has its echo here on earth in the Church’s worship, and so he commissioned the distinguished architectural firm of Maginnis and Walsh to design and build this beautiful sanctuary. Its restrained elegance, its fine lines and exquisite details lift the congregation into the space where heaven and earth meet and kiss. The ornate high pulpit has been the forum for distinguished preachers, including the most famous voice of the Catholic Church in America, Archbishop Fulton Sheen, whose Good Friday meditations filled the church and school auditorium to capacity, and was amplified out into the plaza on Ascan Avenue. For me to walk into this church is to find myself flooded with memories: memories of Msgr. McLaughlin and Fr. Conroy, of Mother Wenceslaus and Sister Hubertine, of Sunday Children’s Mass and Wednesday afternoon Benediction, of Christmas Midnight Mass, of moments of silent prayer.

Like Msgr. McLaughlin, most of the people I have mentioned are now joined to the ranks of the blessed in heaven. But still there remains here in this church the ineffable sense of the divine presence that captivated me in my youngest years, and propelled me to the service of the altar. In the end, that is the greatest gift of the mighty oak of a man who built this parish from scratch on a former rhubarb farm and who served it so well for forty-two years.



Msgr. Ryan and Fr. Passenant in the sacristy, before Mass



Fr. Passenant introducing Msgr. Ryan to the congregation