

HISTORY OF ST. THOMAS MORE PARISH

Maneuvering his 6-foot 7-inch frame out of one of those days' mercifully larger sedans, the Rev. Francis Denis Hayes, stood on the corner of 81st and Western and peered to the north, the south and the west.

So this, he thought, was to be the new parish. A strange, scrubby looking flat expanse of prairies, alleys, streets and even more prairies, devoid of all but a few structures. He had to chuckle to himself: Only in Chicago do we call an empty lot a prairie.

Oh, but Fr. Hayes was familiar with Chicago, having been born and raised in St. Basil's Parish "on the Boulevard." He loved the city, but could this still be within the city limits? The new parish was to be built just west of Little Flower, Cardinal Stritch had told him. And there stood Fr. Hayes, just west of Little Flower, and with hardly a population, let alone parish.

With a simple glance he took in almost everything: the few scattered buildings built around the turn of the century when the area was all truck farms and duck ponds. Close to Western Avenue on the corner where he was standing, were a couple of 1920s apartment buildings. They reminded him that this was the neighborhood where there was supposed to be a "blind pig," or speakeasy. He laughed, "We'll have to make that the rectory!"

No, there were not a lot of houses yet. He could probably count every building in a square mile; but he knew there would be more; for men were coming home from the war: young men, working men, Catholic men, who had left their wives and girlfriends behind with a prayer on the lips

and a fervent hope that at war's end they'd all be found back on the Southside and raising a slew of kids.

The first year, 1946, was busy for Francis Denis Hayes. There were no books, *How To Found A Parish*, and he knew he'd have to write one himself in flesh and blood, shoe leather and seat-of-the-pants. Maybe the families in the veterans' projects on 79th were Catholic. He could probably commandeer some space there, gather whatever Catholics he could find and bring them together at the foot of a makeshift altar of God, the God who certainly was giving "joy to his youth."

Thanks be to God, there were a lot of Catholics in those projects, Irish, German, Polish, even a few African-American families, from whom came St. Thomas More's first acolyte. All of them were beside themselves with joy at the prospect of a new parish. Who wouldn't want to help?

Within a year, a Quonset Hut was constructed and by April of 1947 Mass was being celebrated on a daily basis. Father Hayes' head was spinning. It was taking shape - it was really taking shape! Oh, not just the hangar-like chapel which possessed its own homemade charms, not just the countless bungalows that were beginning to fill in the prairie blanks with families, but the spirit of the parish was being knit together so quickly. Even the builder's families were moving in, and hardly a new home was occupied that wasn't first blessed by Fr. Hayes.

Almost immediately the people were telling all their friends and relations, "We're from St. Thomas More!" Of course, this would put them on an equal footing with those



Quonset Hut - 1947.
It's easy to tell why we needed a bigger church.



families and friends from St. Sabina or Little Flower, St. Killian or St. Rita or St. Ethelreda or the 100 other older, more well-known parishes and neighborhoods.

Fr. Hayes ruefully considered the P.R. merits of the new nickname that had sprung up as quickly as a new Georgian: "Tommy More." Oh well, it's not so bad a thing. Maybe this southside easy-going familiarity with the Church and Saints and priests and sisters would help spread devotion to such a great man as Thomas More. Martyr, citizen, father and husband. Surely, Fr. Hayes thought, if Thomas More had lived on the Southside, no one would have known him by any name other than "Tommy More." It was just as well. Besides, one couldn't be too serious in the face of all the first fundraisers - the carnival on 79th and Western, the "casino" on 97th and Western, the picnics in the forest preserves near 87th.



Quonset Hut Interior - even our beginning was elegant and beautiful.

Never too far in the back of Fr. Hayes' mind was the building of a school. "Goodness," he constantly mused, "Have we got a lot of children!"

Indeed, the foundation for the first part of the school would hardly have been begun, before the need for a second part and a third part would be made evident by bands of roving 4th grade girls, 7th grade boys, and moms with strollers - always the strollers!

And Sisters! Nuns! Thank God the Sinsinawa Dominicans had been available. But, he had been fair and warned

them - there was no end in sight to the number of children that seemed to be moving in, and the Sisters would have to live in the school while a proper convent was being built.

Each evening as Fr. Hayes would finish his breviary and contemplate the events of the day, he would think, "It's busy, but this is fun!" It would take almost ten years - though it sometimes seemed as if it had been ten weeks - but the school was finally built and bursting past full with a convent of white-robed Dominican Sisters seeming like the new loving heart of this fresh Southside parish.

No one really minded the year that 200 or so children made their First Communion in the school basement. After all, it was really about Jesus, as the sister had reminded everyone. And they were going to have a splendid church one of these days!

The construction of the new church was now a happy concern. It would have to be a place worthy of God and of God's children.

Francis Denis Hayes the contractor! They never explained subcontracting and bidding in the seminary - ah, but he was a quick study. And no skimping! The rising house of God whose mountains of steel and acres of spewn mud that never seemed like it would be completed was finally dedicated in 1957. There was even an upstairs and a downstairs church. And while each shrine had its own partisans every one took great pride in the fact that the crowds were so great that Masses had to be staggered in both venues at 15-minute intervals. Was there ever a parish so grand as St. Thomas More!

Often Fr. Hayes thought back to that first day. No, it wasn't possible that St. Thomas More Parish could now be so busy, so big, so full of life and families and even vocations - having sprung so ingloriously from an endless sea of empty, weedy lots.

But he knew it wasn't a question of real estate, or bungalows or even bricks and mortar for a school, convent and church. It was a matter of people. Good, strong, beautiful Catholic families for whom Jesus, the Church, Sacraments, the sisters and priests were an environment as happily necessary as the air itself.



How many nights, how many weekends did those men and women spend going from house to house garnering pledges and support, building up spirit as well as bricks. No priest could be more grateful for such devotion. Fr. Hayes' many happy assistants also reveled in the new life of the parish. It was an adventure that few people and fewer priests could ever experience.

No one was surprised as the school enrollment swelled to over 2,000, with each sister or lay teacher handling perhaps 60 children per room. One year, in fact, there were so many sixth graders that half of them attended school in the morning while the other half went in the afternoon. And tuition was only twenty dollars a year for the oldest child and ten dollars for the second and third children. Fr. Hayes surely wasn't going to hurt those families with the fourth through fourteenth children, either.

knots of children making their way to confession on an otherwise boring afternoon.

He would give profound thanks to those Sinsinawa Dominicans for the great traditions and faith they were instilling in these dear moppets. And he did love them, with his priestly heart, as much or more than he loved their parents.

What a delight to walk around the block with his big red Irish setter "Duke" and a whole gaggle of 7-year-olds, trying to keep up with those incredibly long legs. He'd keep his stride short and every so often glance down at the little 3-footers at his knees. "Oh God," he would pray. "Keep them always this sweet, this unstained, this innocent." Duke, ever the pastor's pooch - didn't he used to go to the altar and help Fr. Hayes say Mass? - must have echoed those same feelings.



Original School Building. Notice the single floor - of course, more students meant more school.

No one was surprised at a Holy Name Society whose membership rose to at least 3,000, with 1,000 men at the Monthly Mass and legions of extra ushers to handle the crowd.

No one was surprised at a Women's Altar Guild that sponsored more festivals and gatherings than anyone thought possible. Fr. Hayes always considered the Oscar Mayer Weiner Wagon at the picnics a nice touch.

Yes, they had parties, but they also knew from whence came their vitality - the sacraments. Like all the older parishes it was more than natural for four or five priests to be busy every Saturday afternoon with lines stretching on both sides of every confessional. In fact many a Saturday, Fr. Hayes could stand on California Ave. and watch the

It was quite a time in which to live and work; and often enough, Francis Denis Hayes would marvel at the speed with which his "new" parish - only 10-15-years-old - had become like an old established parish. Whole families moving in - and not just individual immediate families - but the aunts and uncles, the brothers and sisters' families, and cousins down the block or up the street. He knew that St. Thomas More now was just like St. Basil's or "Vis" or Little Flower or any Southside parish or Westside parish for that matter. There was a wonderfully familiar and religious web that gathered everyone within its comfortable netting. This was not just a slice of the bungalow belt. This was a real community, with everyone connected by blood or friendship or faith, and everyone plugged into the heart of it all, "Tommy More."



The years flew by and, of course, as every 6-foot 7-inch Irishman knows by his creaking bones, Fr. Hayes realized that he'd have to slow up one of these days. Retirement was looming on his horizon.

For pastors, however, at least as long as anyone could remember, there had never been such a thing as "retirement." An older pastor might advance in age, but many of his duties would be given to one of the curates. He would never have to be burdened with tasks beyond his strength or energy.

with rosaries in their pockets and baby buggies at-the-ready. And just like the Southside vocations, a lot of these men's fathers were policemen or firemen or laborers. Well, mused Fr. Hayes, if that's the new one's background, he'll be certain to have his feet on the ground.

That was important, for these were turbulent times growing ever more turbulent - out in the streets - back in the pews. All the old verities and comforts were being shaken. St. Thomas More would need a pastor whose soul was salt of the earth and whose head was on his shoulders.



Sisters of St. Thomas More School, 1958-1959.

Front row: Sr. John Gorcum, Sr. M. Canice, Sr. M. Lauraine, Sr. M. Duchesne. Middle row: Sr. M. Loman, Sr. Marie Sheila, Sr. M. Moritz, Sr. M. Nicola (Superior), Sr. M. Mechtilde, Sr. M. Gracia. Back row: Sr. M. Prisca, Sr. M. Theonilla, Sr. M. Marie, Sr. M. Beatrix, Sr. M. Silvina.

But Cardinal Cody knew that the notion of retirement - even for priests and bishops - was a notion whose time had come; and Fr. Hayes figured the letter announcing his retirement would be on its way sooner or later.

And arrive it did. With no small amount of trepidation the 70-year-old patriarch of St. Thomas More looked toward his and the parish's uncertain future. What would retirement be like? Would the new pastor allow the old pastor to stay? Would they get along?

He knew the man coming was a Westsider. Well, that was good news. Westside - Southside - Kissin' cousins so to speak. Same kind of honest, rough and tumble Catholics



St. Thomas More School Band Concert - 1961. So many children have learned the joys of music right here.



James "Red" Donlan, oldest son of Sergeant James P. Donlan and Louise Frawley (even his cousin John was priest) sat across from Fr. Hayes as the two had lunch at some old familiar watering hole near Downtown. They were just going to talk things over.

Fr. Donlan was as comfortable and kind as an old shoe as he assured his soon-to-be predecessor that his faith and feelings about the Church and parish were the same as Fr. Hayes' who readily came to learn that "Red" Donlan's love of the priests and the priesthood, the Blessed Virgin Mary and all her Catholic children were not just abstract theories read in books. And yes, it was to be expected that Fr. Hayes would remain honored in the parish he founded until the day he would die in 1976.

Without a moment's delay, the new pastor set to work - assessing and evaluating all the details of St. Thomas More Parish. With creative and hardworking assistants, his tasks as pastor could not be more focused.

It didn't take Fr. Donlan long to feel as welcomed to "Tommy More" as if he were a long lost son. But of course, that was the Southside way with its priests. There was always a certain comfort in the relationship.



*Our Allen Organ - the largest organ of its kind still in existence.
Installed in 1959.*



*Opening Day - Wrightwood Boys Baseball - 1953.
Fr. Hayes and Fr. Coleman throw out the first ball.*

In fact, Fr. Donlan would laugh, and with ever so much affection, note that, for a priest, one difference between the Northside and the Southside was that in any restaurant north of Madison Street a priest might walk in, recognize and be recognized by all sorts of patrons but not be greeted by one of them. On the other hand, any priest on the Southside might find it nearly impossible to start his meal let alone finish it, for all the greeters and well-wishers he'd meet.

Goodness, he liked it here. Besides, it reminded him of growing up in Resurrection Parish.

Those mid to late 70s were, however, not the easiest times to be a priest or even a pastor. Fr. Donlan, like every other pastor in every other parish, had always to observe the ever-shifting line between social and religious changes that might be beneficial and those that might prove to be harmful to the faith and life of the parish.



The Blessed Virgin Mary would help him though, and at every Mass James Donlan would lead the people in the "Hail Mary." Well, that's the way they do it in Ireland, he thought, so it ought to help us.

And it did help - for the people never once hesitated to celebrate life and family and faith with a spirit and energy and verve that left all other parishes jealous. St. Thomas More was now almost 30 years old, and the memory of its "Homeric" 25th anniversary could only have been described as the promise of a joyful, confident future. The parish was now entering the era of musicals and madrigals. These would test the talents and time of willing parishioners.

First Masses were now being celebrated on an annual basis - some years there were even 2 or 3 young "Tommy More Boys" ordained to the priesthood. Of course, that piqued Fr. Donlan's interest, and one day he sat down at the parish record books to check. Raising his head and waving a wisp of thinning red hair back he exhaled, "Twenty-five vocations in forty years! A Record!"

No pastor could have been prouder. But James Donlan was proud not of himself but of his people and their first pastor, Fr. Hayes. He knew, as do all priests, that any good fruits he saw had been planted by others. Any harvest of souls had been sown by others. He was there just to make sure it would all be gathered in, and then patiently lay in seeds for the next crop.

Of course, he didn't mind showing off the delights of this rousing, rambunctious parish to his fellow priests. Just as the parish celebrations had grown legendary - so, too, grew the legendary generosity and hospitality of Fr. Donlan. Priests came from all over to work, to celebrate, to be re-energized by the natural goodness of James Donlan.

Yet as the happy years at St. Thomas More were counted off, he learned that Our Lord wanted to send him a cross, a medical one, no less - the better to perfect his own kind-



Our band's most recent uniforms at the dedication ceremony of "Donlan Drive."



Altar Guild Christmas Party - 1988. Fr. Donlan poses with Sister Gemma, Carol Rossi and Dolores Rickman.

ness and compassion. He would need more help.

It was a mild early summer afternoon in 1983. Deciding to answer the bell himself, Fr. Donlan hoisted himself on his worn wooden crutches, walked to the rectory entrance, opened the door, smiled that smile of his - the one that was wide and thin at the same time, and said, "Welcome to St. Thomas More, Fr. Brankin."

Fr. Donlan did not know that the new associate would one day be pastor, nor did he know that the Donlan style of being pastor was just what any associate pastor would need to learn. Fr. Donlan never said it so explicitly, but he communicated an attitude that said, "Just do good things."

And some good and delightful things occurred over the next six years of Fr. Donlan's pastorate which, in the Providence of God, would be the last span of his life. There were few who could not take inspiration from him. As his medical problems mounted, his spirit grew stronger and his good example more obvious. He was the one who



The dedication of "Donlan Drive."



gave cookies and tours of the rectory to the little ones and their parents. Probably not a few tykes went home to tell friends and family how the priests were just like regular guys - except they maybe needed a mom.

natural peaceful, patient integration. By means of cooperative and panic-rejecting measures, celebrations, block meetings, fairs and even government grants, a new spirit of community reinvigorated a hopeful parish and neighborhood.



*Holy Name May Crowning · 1990
One of our most beautiful and popular devotions.*

Of course, no one was ever amazed that a large number of young couples having been born and raised in what was now regularly called "Tommy More" moved back into the neighborhood. In so many other neighborhoods, young married sons and daughters would naturally move further out - to another parish, another town. For St. Thomas More kids, however, it seemed that what was natural was to move back in. There was even a time when seven of the nine school board parent-members had been raised in the parish. Fr. Donlan felt that was quite a tribute to the feeling of community that the pioneers of St. Thomas More had created and which their descendants had developed.

Fr. Donlan's health never really improved and in February of 1989 he was called home to God. The funeral celebration was as monumental as any priests' gathering he had ever hosted. More than one priest exulted, "Red would have loved this!"

Again, though, a new pastor was needed. Knowing that modern life and demographics were changing the life of the city as well as the parish, Fr. Brankin resolved to stay on as pastor - with the Cardinal's permission of course. His promise was to help all the older parishioners and newer ones to adjust to a future that was now on a much closer horizon.

St. Thomas More, in close harmony with Wrightwood Improvement Association, worked mightily to effect a

Day after day, despite the ever carping nay-sayers who could never believe that these crusty veterans of St. Thomas More would ever accept even a measure of calm integration, Fr. Brankin would often reflect, "How wrong they are!"

He knew that despite any small missteps along the way, attributable as always to a human nature wounded by Original Sin, a heart of goodness and a willingness to do good beat within the bosom of each St. Thomas More native and newcomer.

Who could doubt that the dream of Frs. Francis Denis Hayes and James Donlan - that the parish of their heart might last 100 years or more - would not be the same happy hope even in its 50th year! Certainly not the good sons and daughters of dear old "Tommy More!"



*Fr. Donlan and Cardinal Bernardin
caught by the camera at Confirmation in 1983.*