

Fall 2021

A Century of Spiritan Commitment: Saint Ann's Parish, Millvale, Pa

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Recommended Citation

Ranalli, D. (2021). A Century of Spiritan Commitment: Saint Ann's Parish, Millvale, Pa. *Spiritan Horizons*, 17 (17). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol17/iss17/20>

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A CENTURY OF SPIRITAN COMMITMENT: SAINT ANN'S PARISH, MILLVALE, PA

*During the 1950s, as a young parishioner and pupil
in the parochial school at St. Ann's Parish, I was the beneficiary
of rich foundational experiences that have withstood the test
of time. For that, I remain grateful.*

ORIGINS

The Spiritans took responsibility for St. Ann's Parish, Millvale, in the Diocese of Pittsburgh in 1876, when it comprised seventy-five German-speaking families and thirty English-speaking families. The first Spiritan pastor of the new parish was Rev. James Richert, C.S.Sp. Fortunately, he was fluent in both languages.¹ Fr. Richert, a kind gentle pastor, was replaced in 1882, by another gifted linguist, Fr. Matthew Heizman, C.S.Sp. He also possessed the rugged characteristics required to energize a struggling young parish. In 1884, he opened the first Catholic school in Millvale. The ongoing meager financial status became evident in the parish accounts for 1885. Although the parish net income was a little over two thousand dollars, Fr. Heizman managed to pay \$3,493.57 off the initial parish debt of \$6,075. Fr. John Quinn, C.S.Sp., who unfortunately did not speak German, succeeded Fr. Heizman in 1887. The language issue created difficulty, which was resolved when a second Millvale parish was established. The new parish of St. Anthony, formed in 1886, was entirely German. The church was dedicated in 1887 with Fr. John Willms, C.S.Sp. appointed pastor.

The appointment of Fr. Quinn as pastor at St. Ann began what we can characterize as a litany of successive Spiritan priests of Irish ancestry. St. Ann's became known as the Irish parish in Millvale. Fr. Quinn remained pastor at St. Ann's until spring 1892, when, due to failing health, he was relieved by Fr. Edward Galway, C.S.Sp. who built St. Ann's rectory in 1896. Spiritans succeeding Fr. Galway, from 1898-1920 included Fr. George Lee, C.S.Sp., 1898-1903, 1908-1920; Fr. James Nolan, C.S.Sp., 1903-1904; Fr. Michael Ward, C.S.Sp., 1904-1908.

During Fr. Lee's second pastorate at St. Ann's, two issues of profound global impact overlapped. During the course of World War 1 (1914-18) a pandemic of Spanish influenza broke out in January 1918 and lingered until December 1920. The pandemic infected 500 million people and caused 50 million deaths worldwide.² In Allegheny County, 60,000 people were infected and 4,500 died. Houses of worship were shuttered as pastors urged congregations to worship at home. Bishop John Francis Regis Canevin agreed with these closures. Further, he committed the full force of Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Pittsburgh to fight the pandemic and offered relief at forty shelters around the diocese.³

During those trying times, Fr. Lee remained a tireless pastor determined to clear the parish of its debt. Not only did he accomplish that goal, but he also began to plan for a new church. Fr. Lee, for the first time in parish history, initiated a building fund in 1919, reaching an amount of \$2,587.02. Unfortunately, his health declined, and he requested a leave of absence. On March 4, 1920, he sadly departed from the parish that had become his home. While Fr. Lee was convalescing in the residence for priests at Duquesne University, his condition worsened and he died at nearby Mercy Hospital on January 23, 1921, at sixty-eight years of age.

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ASCENT

Fr. Alphonse Gavin, C.S.Sp., born in Limerick, Ireland in 1882 succeeded Fr. Lee in 1920. He was a person of kindness and charity mixed in with Irish wit and charm. Now, the church building fund started by his predecessor reached a new total of over \$13,000. This was sufficient to begin the construction of a new church. Fr. Gavin oversaw the project initiated in 1922. The church interior measured 100 feet by 60 feet with a capacity to hold five hundred persons and a gallery to accommodate another one hundred and fifty. The basement walls were of cut stone and exterior walls were a light-colored, vitrified brick, with stone trimmings. The rectory was moved back sixty-feet to accommodate these dimensions. The cornerstone was laid on May 24, 1923, and the dream became reality with the dedication of the new St. Ann's Church on St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1924.

By 1926, both the strain associated with the construction project along with the aftermath of a train wreck took its

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workers lost jobs,
and The Great
Depression
ensued.*

toll on the well-being of the beloved pastor. In 1926, the fiftieth anniversary year of Spiritan service at St. Ann's Parish, Fr. Gavin was succeeded by Rev. Eugene McGuigan, C.S.Sp., a native of Philadelphia, who was born in 1886, and ordained in 1912. With the splendid new parish church in place and the ongoing increases in both the number of parishioners and their children, Fr. McGuigan turned his attention toward the development of St. Ann's School. With an enrollment of over four hundred pupils, the faculty comprised nine teachers with a principal to administer, supervise, and maintain discipline at the school.

Progress continued at St. Ann's until that fateful day of October 29, 1929, when the New York stock market crashed. In the frenzy that followed, banks failed, businesses closed, workers lost jobs, and The Great Depression ensued. Severe economic deprivation took hold during the 1930s as nearly everyone, including those in Millvale, struggled to survive. In the 1932 presidential primary elections, Democrats chose Franklin D. Roosevelt to challenge President Herbert Hoover. FDR inspired hope among the people and won the election. He immediately initiated economic stimulus programs that became known as "The New Deal." On St. Patrick's Day March 17, 1936, the Allegheny River burst its banks causing considerable damage in the Borough of Millvale. In a 1936 issue of *Our Province*, Fr. McGuigan reported that "St. Anne's was a beehive of activity, a harbor for the homeless and a clothing store for the naked."⁴ The country was beginning to recover and make economic progress until World War 2 erupted in September 1939. As the U.S. geared-up for wartime production, materials critical for military use were rationed. Women were working jobs held previously by the men who had gone off to war. With perseverance, the Allies declared Victory in Europe on, May 8, 1945; VJ Day followed in August 1945.

Meanwhile, back in Millvale late in the 1930s nearing the end of Fr. McGuigan's pastorate, the parish received a gift from Edward Vero, a local business man who donated his former home on land adjacent to the school. "Bishop Boyle has permitted us to obtain the house and property next to the school... a house with ten rooms, to be used as a convent. We can get enough to furnish the house and arrange the alterations. St. Ann's will then have a complete setup."⁵ The first convent for the Sisters at the parish was dedicated on October 15, 1939. In 1940, Fr. McGuigan was succeeded by Fr. Joseph A. Kirkbride, C.S.Sp., born in 1894 and

Fr. Griffin arrived at St. Ann's with a priesthood rich in experience.

ordained in 1919.

Fr. Kirkbride had been serving since 1935 as superior of the Holy Ghost Fathers Community at St. Mary Ferndale Norwalk, CT. His pastorate at St. Ann's spanned five years until 1945, during which he strove to grow the parish and reduce the parish debt. Fr. James F. Carroll, C.S.Sp., a native of Limerick, Ireland, succeeded him. A genial person, he was for the greater part of his priesthood an academic, having served at Duquesne University as a dean and vice-president. Despite limited pastoral experience, Fr. Carroll was enthusiastic in his role as pastor and instilled new life into the parish. However, failing health resulted in him leaving Millvale after only three years in 1948, the year in which St. Ann's Church was renovated.

Fr. Joseph A. Griffin, C.S.Sp., who had already served in Millvale, succeeded him. From the outset, he had the advantage of being well acquainted with the parish and its parishioners. Born in Philadelphia in 1902 and ordained in 1928 at St. Mary's Seminary Ferndale, Fr. Griffin arrived at St. Ann's with a priesthood rich in experience. His first assignment following ordination was in the mission fields of East Africa where he ministered for eleven years making converts and building churches in Kilimanjaro, Tanzania. Numerous reports in *Our Province* chronicle his ministry there:

- "To the south west of Arusha is the mission of Ufiomi staffed by Fr. August Ashman and Fr. Joseph Griffin."⁶
- "Get the men over home to help us. Poor Gus Ash-man, Jack Kelly, and Joe Griffin are up against it, but battling hard-chin up."⁷
- "Fr. Kelly and Fr. Joe Griffin are at Ufiomi. Fr. Griffin is very keen on opening a new mission at a place called Giting, a new tribe to be tackled. He knows the country well and is a very zealous worker."⁸
- January 20, 1935, Bishop Byrne writes, "Out in the far West in the wilds, Fr. Kelly, Fr. Griffin, and Fr. Diamond hold the first trenches of the Church's long battle-line. God bless them. They are all from South Philadelphia and all good fighters. They have the hardest post and are glad to be in it."⁹
- Out in the west, there is plenty of work among the Wambulu, a splendid, intelligent people. Joe Griffin

has done wonders there and soon those people will be demanding that you hurry over to carry on his work.”¹⁰

Fr. Griffin returned to the U.S. in 1940, and following a number of pastoral appointments throughout the U.S., came to Millvale.

HARVEST

*When ...
Fr. James
J. Maguire,
C.S.Sp., visited
classrooms,
pupils were
always delighted.
With thick brogue
and biretta always
resting high atop
his balding head,
we believed
he must have
regularly kissed
the Blarney Stone
in county Cork.*

Fr. Griffin's pastorate at St. Ann's from 1949–1958, was a good era for the country following World War Two. With President Dwight David “Ike” Eisenhower in the White House, times were good. Young married couples with growing families found steady jobs and saved enough to move outward from the inner cities into the suburbs. With such activity in a growing parish, Fr. Griffin benefited from the services of three assistant priests: Fr. T. Charles Dooley, C.S.Sp., 1948–1952; Fr. James J. Maguire, C.S.Sp., 1952–1957; and Fr. Francis X. O'Reilly, C.S.Sp., 1957–1960.

Fr. Griffin always carried a white bowl meerschaum pipe with curved black stem. The bowl had turned a rich golden yellow from careful handling and years of smoking his favorite mixture of Cherry Blend and Kentucky Club pipe tobaccos. In 1954, he officiated at the First Holy Communion Mass for my parochial school class and, throughout the years, he made periodic stops at each classroom to distribute report cards and present the Honor Roll Certificates.

When the elderly assistant, Fr. James J. Maguire, C.S.Sp., visited classrooms, pupils were always delighted. With thick brogue and biretta always resting high atop his balding head, we believed he must have regularly kissed the Blarney Stone in county Cork. After receiving his blessing, with wit and charm, this masterful storyteller would ask questions and weave his stories of God and His saints, St. Ann and, of course, St. Patrick in March. Spellbound, we sat in our neat rows of old-fashioned worn wooden desks listening to his every word. Born in Kilmore, Ireland in 1887, Fr. Maguire was ordained in 1917. After he arrived in the U.S., he became the first Spiritan pastor at St. Monica Church Tulsa, OK in 1929. Then during the late 1930s, he took up a position at Duquesne University teaching moral philosophy before arriving at St. Ann's Parish in 1952. He died while serving at St. Ann's, on July 8, 1957, at seventy

*We piled
into his big
station wagon
and headed
to the park
in search
of a ballfield.
As we played
softball, he would
slowly walk around
the perimeter
of the field praying
the Divine Office.*

years of age and was buried from the parish.

Fr. Francis Xavier O'Reilly, C.S.Sp., arrived at St. Ann's in 1957 as assistant pastor. Born in Waterbury, CT in 1910, Fr. O'Reilly was ordained in 1937. Before his arrival in Millvale, he had served two tours as a Spiritan missionary in East Africa and remained at St. Ann's Parish for three years until the parochial school class had graduated in 1960. He then returned to Africa for his third tour that lasted two years. Fr. O'Reilly was appointed in 1962 to St. Catherine's Parish, Riverside, CA for four years. He then worked in Our Lady of the Valley Hemet, CA; and St. Joseph Indian Mission of Soboba in San Jacinto, CA. Although seemingly a bit jittery at times, Fr. O'Reilly was more of an organizer with us adolescent boys than his older predecessor. He started a Junior Holy Name Society for the seventh and eighth grade boys and would sit in the front at our monthly meetings with a hand carved African briar pipe clenched between his teeth. For these gatherings, he organized activities such as boxing matches among the boys and he always provided a snack at the conclusion of the meetings. Each summer he would organize a Junior Holy Name picnic at North Park for members. We piled into his big station wagon and headed to the park in search of a ballfield. As we played softball, he would slowly walk around the perimeter of the field praying the Divine Office.

Fr. O'Reilly also started a bowling league for us on Saturday mornings. After bowling, he would drive us to our homes in his station wagon, forever singing Sweet Adeline out-of-tune, regardless of what was playing on the car radio. His mood would shift suddenly when the news reporter announced that another missionary nun or priest was kidnapped or murdered in the Congo. After his retirement in 1978, he remained active and was blessed to commemorate his golden jubilee as a priest in 1986. He died in his sleep on January 4, 1988, at seventy-seven years of age at Hemet, CA.

Our pastor, Fr. Griffin, was an affable person; well liked in both the parish and local communities and seemingly held in high esteem among his confreres at Duquesne University. For example, at the dedication ceremony of a new community house, February 1953, he served as Sub-Deacon and on September 14 of that same year, he marked his Silver Jubilee of ordination with confreres at St. Ann's. To celebrate Pentecost on June

9, 1957, Fr. Griffin hosted forty-four fellow priests and religious brothers at a dinner and social evening in St. Ann's Parish hall.

Fr. Griffin and his assistants fostered a harmonious parish, and, with the sisters maintained a well-functioning school. So well, in fact, that the parish faced yet another acute crisis to accommodate an excess enrolment of two hundred pupils. As this was the Baby Boom era across the nation, projections were that this trend would continue; so, yet another building project seemed inevitable. For the short term, a stopgap measure was again the solution to bide time. St. Ann's parish rented the unused second floor of Millvale Second Ward Public School where the two, sixth grade and two, seventh grade classes were temporarily relocated.

Fr. Clement A. Roach, C.S.Sp., succeeded Fr. Griffin in November 1958, who lived in retirement at Duquesne University and celebrated his Golden Jubilee in 1978. He died in Pittsburgh on July 2, 1979 in his seventy-seventh year. Fr. Roach, a New York native, born in 1901 and ordained in 1926, arrived at St. Ann's with rich and varied experiences. His first appointment was to South Philadelphia where he became an advocate for the minority community. As Rector of St. Peter Claver Church, he spoke on local radio broadcasts and the Philadelphia press interviewed him due to his support for the "Negro Apostolate." In 1935, he opened a mission house for the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement with President Franklin D. Roosevelt recognizing his work in 1936.¹¹

Fr. Roach continued his apostolate through a series of assignments in the Deep South, where his knack for fund-raising and building became well known. As pastor, in 1940, he dedicated Blessed Martin de Porres School at St. Peter Claver Church, Oklahoma City, where the following year he built a new lunchroom. In 1942, after a fire had badly damaged the church interior, he completed the renovation with support from parishioners and benefactors. In 1945, he was founding pastor of Holy Spirit Parish Kansas City, MO. Within less than eighteen months, he built a new church there, "starting from scratch in a poor Negro community."¹² Four years later, he became pastor of Sacred Heart Parish Lake Charles, LA, where he oversaw the construction of a new recreation center and high school classrooms. While there, he celebrated the Silver Jubilee of his priesthood on August 28, 1951 and was reassigned as pastor of St. Edward New Iberia, LA in 1957. There he made plans and broke ground for a new church. In 1958, after a wait of forty long years St. Edward's had "...a

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permanent church thanks to the resourcefulness of the previous pastors and the ingenuity and knowledge of the present pastor, Fr. Roach."¹³

When Fr. Roach replaced Fr. Griffin as pastor at Millvale his reputation had preceded him. Parishioners were not quite sure what to expect after working for over a decade with the genial Fr. Griffin. On his arrival in November 1958, he straight-away established a building committee for the much-needed new school. Characteristically, Fr. Roach took charge and it was "full steam ahead" from then on. A fund-raising campaign was initiated, and he began to preach his "Green" sermons at Sunday Masses. He unhesitatingly asked for money and urged "Silent" collections, the implication being he was not expecting coins or extra change, but preferably large denomination paper money or checks. Next, building committee members made personal visits to parish families soliciting pledges of financial support; annoying some parishioners. The approved plan included a new three-story school building with eight classrooms – four each on the first two floors – and an integral convent and chapel on the third floor. The new building would be in addition to the existing old eight-room redbrick school building. A groundbreaking ceremony took place on July 10, 1960. Fr. Roach offered the first Mass in the new convent chapel one-year later on August 19, and the dual-purpose building was dedicated on December 10, 1961.

The 1960s are variously characterized, but suffice to say these were tumultuous times both for society at-large as well as for Catholicism. John F. Kennedy was elected in 1960 as the first Catholic U. S. President. Punctuating that decade, we experienced the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, a moral revolution, a grim series of political assassinations, and the war in Viet Nam. In the Catholic Church, Pope John XXIII convened the hope-filled Second Vatican Council that had worldwide reverberations. Back at the parish, Fr. Roach renovated the church in 1964 in accordance with the decrees issued by Vatican II. So, indeed the world and the church had changed during the 1960s.

In December of 1970, the old wood-frame church was torn down to make room for a new multi-purpose hall. The old building had served the parish well for nearly a century. Fr. Roach in 1971 oversaw the construction of the parish social hall, but later that year became seriously ill. Pastor Emeritus Clement A. Roach died at seventy-four years of age on Friday April

11, 1975, while in residence at the Vincentian Home. Rev. Regis C. Guthrie, C.S.Sp., was appointed interim administrator until a successor to Fr. Roach was identified.

Demographic shifts occurred as segments of the population migrated from inner-city ethnic parishes.

DECLINE

Beginning in the 1960s and extending throughout the 1970s, the factors listed above resulted in upheavals throughout the world. The cumulative effect of those factors and others affected Catholic parish life, including the parochial school system. Demographic shifts occurred as segments of the population migrated from inner-city ethnic parishes outward into affluent suburban territorial parishes; fewer new vocations coupled with those leaving religious life contributed to dwindling numbers of priests and sisters; enrollment in parochial schools plummeted.

It became increasingly apparent that Millvale could no longer support three Catholic churches in existence.

Amid this turmoil, Fr. Norman G. Hannahs, C.S.Sp., arrived in 1975 as the new pastor. He was fortunate to inherit a hundred-year-old, debt-free parish. Fr. Hannahs proved to be a prayerful man who excelled in human relations as he cared for his parishioners and brought improvements and peace to the parish. By the late 1980s, with demographics shifts in full swing, it became increasingly apparent that Millvale could no longer support three Catholic churches in existence, each with its own parochial school. The three pastors began their deliberations. These were Fr. Hannahs at St. Ann's, Fr. Robert Spangenberg at St. Anthony's, and Fr. Hroboka at St. Nicholas's. Whereas in the 1960s each of the three parochial schools in Millvale had enrolled between 600-700 pupils, enrollment by 1987 had diminished dramatically to 187 at St. Ann's, 193 at St. Anthony's, and 126 at St. Nicholas's. Predictably, these schools merged into one — Holy Spirit Regional Catholic — with operations consolidated in the former St. Anthony facility.¹⁴

Fr. Hannahs was pastor from 1975-1989. On learning that he was leaving St. Ann's, parishioners signed and delivered a petition urging that he be permitted to remain as their pastor, but to no avail. Fr David L. Smith, C.S.Sp., succeeded him as the last pastor. Pittsburgh Bishop Donald W. Wuerl, in a letter dated March 1994, announced the suppression of both St. Ann's and St. Anthony's as part of a diocesan wide reorganizational plan.¹⁵ A transition period beginning March 11 would precede the merging of the parishes on May 27, 1994, with the new parish known as Holy Spirit Parish having two "worship sites," one at St. Ann's and

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the other at St. Anthony's.¹⁶

The last Mass celebrated as St. Ann's Parish by Fr. Smith took place on May 22, 1994. At that time the pastor at St. Anthony Parish was Rev. Albert M. Seichephine, C.S.Sp. The resultant newly designated Holy Spirit Parish remained entrusted to the Spiritans with Fr. Seichephine appointed its first pastor (1994-1996). He died on September 3, 2007, at 81 years of age. Fr. Smith took up an appointment as Chair of the Department of Psychology at Duquesne University where he was later appointed superior of the Trinity Hall community (1995-2004). He subsequently became superior of the Spiritan Community in Florida. He died in Pittsburgh July 21, 2011, in his seventy-ninth year.

Fr. John R. Weber, C.S.Sp., replaced Fr. Seichephine as pastor at Holy Spirit from 1996 until 2001. The two "worship sites" continued to function for nearly four years but the end was inevitable.¹⁷ A final Mass at the old St. Ann's "worship site" of Holy Spirit Parish in the Borough of Millvale was celebrated on February 22, 1998, after which the buildings were closed.¹⁸ St. Ann's Church was deconsecrated and the building was sold in 2000. Following considerable renovation, the building opened in 2002 as an entertainment venue under the name of Mr. Small.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Fr. George Spangenberg, C.S.Sp. served as the final Spiritan pastor at Holy Spirit Parish Millvale from 2001-2005, at which juncture the Diocese of Pittsburgh began to assign diocesan priests, thus ending Spiritan presence there.

EPILOGUE

The Spiritans who served at St. Ann's Parish for well over a century ministered tirelessly, not only to the needs of parishioners, but also to the wider Millvale community. The dedicated priests from the Congregation of the Holy Spirit along with the devoted Sisters of St. Francis offered their best, not only during good times of growth and ascent, but also more importantly during harsher times of war, pandemic, economic depression, and multiple floods. As the Spiritans administered the sacraments to loyal parishioners from birth to the grave, the Franciscan sisters instilled in their pupils' strong foundations in the precepts of the Catholic faith. So too, they provided a solid education in the liberal arts, together with good doses of legendary discipline and self-control.

The priests and sisters remained steadfast in honoring

their commitments through the decline and eventual suppression of the parish.

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ABBREVIATIONS

OP *Our Province*. A Collection of the Newsletters of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit Province of the United States.

<https://digital.library.duq.edu/digital/collection/cdm-spoprin>.

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