

# THE MONSIGNOR — WHO COULD FORGET HIM?

by REV. WILLIAM J. CULLEN

**T**WENTY YEARS AGO this month, above an open grave a parishioner sobbed, "Goodbye, Monsignor!" No one else spoke, and the eloquent silence was finally broken with the inevitable coughing and noseblowing. It was farewell to a personage, nay, to an era, when the mortal remains of Monsignor Bernard J. Quinn were laid to rest in Holyhood Cemetery on that lovely spring noonday, four days after his death on April 7, 1940.

I remember Father Quinn twenty years before that. He had been assigned to our parish. Our Lady of Mercy. "He was a chaplain," people said. Yet the tall, spare priest of quiet demeanor and throaty voice looked anything but "Army." He was handsome in a very clerical sort of way, wore hornrimmed glasses, and was a living advertisement for kindness. It was difficult to think of him in connection with machine-guns, mustard gas, tanks, biplanes, khaki or anything else suggestive of the barbarities of total war.

"He's got charge of colored Catholics," was another thing said about him. So, on Sunday afternoons in the parish auditorium (formerly the parlors of two brownstones on State Street) Father Quinn taught his people. Later we found out that he had previously preached and taken a collection at every Mass in another Brooklyn church. Every Sunday morning found him collecting. Every Sunday afternoon left him teaching. His Lord's Day schedule closed with Benediction at five o'clock.

For the rest of the week, this young curate with the mission assignment took the regular rotation of duty in a downtown parish. Our Lady of Mercy Church then covered sick-calls from Brooklyn and Holy Family Hospitals. The three ambulances of these institutions handled most of the



Rt. Rev. Bernard J. Quinn: Founder and Pastor of St. Peter Claver Parish, 1922-1940.

business section's accident cases. Raymond Street jail was also in the parish, and weekly confessions and Sunday Mass were demanded there. Father Quinn's days were active and his nights were far from restful.

At different odd times for the next five years, Mrs. Mahon, our neighbor across the street, would be selling tickets for "Father Quinn's Plays" at the Academy of Music. " 'Nothing But The Truth' they're having this year," she'd say, and my mother would go off on the great night to see the production of the new Claver Players. "Grumpy" and "Seven Keys to Baldpate" were also in their repertoire; and these were attended in turn.

Then came the news of the wonderful novenas up at the new church on Ormond Place (now Claver Place). "Seven times on Monday and once on Sunday they have them," 'twas said.

"And they're so crowded you can't get in," was the warning. And it was true. But what was not mentioned were the unusual numbers of converts also who were baptized on Sundays after the last Mass. Such astounding figures as 153 in four days in 1932, and 83 in two days in 1933 — averaging well over 200 instructed adult converts a year — are all in the record. Truly here was St. Peter Claver again!

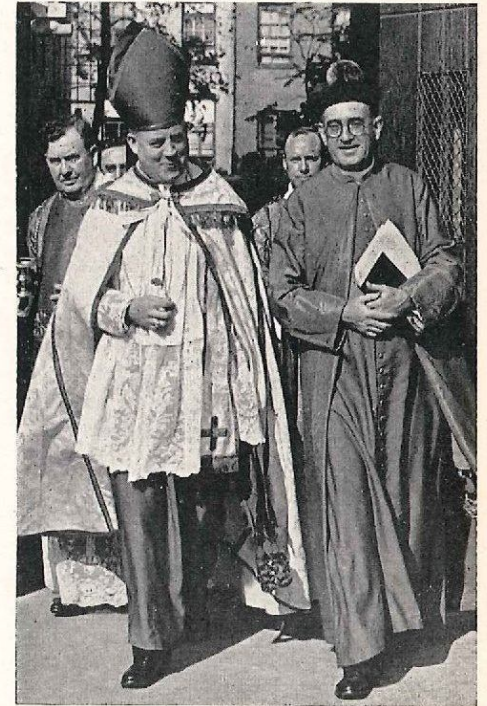
On June 23, 1934 I met the Very Reverend Monsignor Quinn as his new curate. I watched him bless ten thousand novena devotees Monday after Monday. I saw him answer voluminous mail in between hours and give advice immediately after each service until it was time to give the next one.

The new school was his pride and joy, and the orphanage at Wading River, Long Island, as the people of the parish claimed, was "his heart." There he went on a Tuesday afternoon only to return on Saturday morning for another busy weekend.

In the fall of 1934, our pastor was named Right Reverend Monsignor Quinn, but the honors lifted no responsibility. He listened. He offered advice. He was sympathy personified. Dreary depression days had closed their stifling fingers all about. But at St. Peter Claver's the novenas went on, and converts came in. Now, however, the parish was an empire boasting of a church, school, convent, rectory, recreation center, seamen's mission, fifteen catechism centers in Brooklyn and a new mission in Jamaica, plus the Little Flower House of Providence in Wading River.

This was all too much for one man, and the strain told. I attended the parish outing in 1937 when the pastor graciously greeted over a thousand parishioners and their friends. That evening the break came. Monsignor Quinn took so ill that his physician ordered a rest. And that rest was so imperative that only in the following February could that giant

frame again carry the gigantic responsibility. 1937 had been the year of his Silver Jubilee of priestly ordination, and its first half comprised the last good months for the Monsignor. For three years he failed until the inevitable. But the twelve years from 1922 to 1934 had witnessed an unheard of accomplishment; namely, the building of an entire parish plant



The late Bishop Thomas E. Molloy, assisted Monsignor Quinn dedicated the new parish school in 1931.

with the largest recreation center in Brooklyn, and a complete child-caring institution on Long Island. And all free of debt!

The "King" is dead, yes! But memories of him linger and stories about him are told and retold. I remember the one about the Bishop, a character in the cast of "Nothing But The Truth." Inappropriately he appeared for the performance wearing tan shoes. To the delight of the cast, Father Quinn swapped shoes, and then

brought down the house when he came on stage between the acts to thank his benefactors and show off his sporty footgear.

Then there was the time he won a Ford in a raffle. Parking the car (it was easy then) at Franklin Avenue and Fulton Street, he shopped in the corner drugstore. Five minutes later he came out to find the car gone. It was stolen, and the theft was reported in that very evening's "Brooklyn Daily Eagle." By the next nightfall there were enough donations to purchase five cars.

One Monday evening the novena crowd at the eight o'clock service were laughing at the hoarse voice of the Monsignor. When he gave forth a particularly raspy sound he joked, "A little rock 'n rye would fix that!" Before he retired that evening, some thirteen bottles of the potent palate-easer were delivered to the rectory.

Everyone has his pet expressions. The Monsignor's favorite to those complaining about occupational troubles was always, "The first hundred and fifty years are the hardest. After that it's every other seven." To those

who knew it well, the shortened and more familiar version was, "First hundred and fifty!" The philosophy behind it could have been that worse can be expected, or who said this was the best possible world anyhow? His farewell was usually, "Abyssinia." Corny, but apt.

Every one knew Father Quinn, or said they did. It was easy to see why. For instance, he didn't just go up to a station-agent and buy a railroad ticket for Wading River. He engaged the lady at the window in a polite conversation. From street cleaner to banker he met people on even terms. The mild blue eyes and the solemn visage seemed to draw out troubles and soak them up. People felt relieved after talking to him.

Sometimes the Monsignor suffered for this. Not all the problems were real, and those with imaginary ailments frequently cornered him. Still he listened, and listened, and listened. On some such occasions, after a wearying account of apparent hallucinations, he would reel into the rectory, light up his pipe, take three or four puffs and go out to give the

next novena.

Not always, however, in these encounters was he cornered. Behind the face that favored Ed Wynn there raced a lightning mind. Senior man and seminary class leader, without offense he could usually sidestep with tact the harmless but wearing type. So, once when a tense individual walked into the sacristy a moment before a scheduled novena and announced that he could walk no further since his stomach was in one leg weighing him down, the Monsignor calmly made a few passes over the afflicted's limbs and solemnly announced, "Half is in your other leg now. There'll be no trouble walking." And the patient tripped out happily.

Of these momentary solutions he could recount hundreds, but not always with Solomon's success. One day we were waiting for an afternoon novena service. Into the sacristy there stalked a towering Amazon. Monsignor, vested for the altar and reading his breviary, was her target. "The devil's got me," she announced in a train-caller's tone. Hardly looking up, the pastor asked me to get the holy water, led the good lady to a prieu-dieu behind the main altar and after reading a few psalms over her, confidently said, "There, dear!" What followed was almost unbelievable.

She began to jump and shout. One "Praise the Lord" could have been heard in Illinois. Out in the church, people also waiting for the service were startled at the voice coming from the altar. It continued, and the jumping continued while the puzzled and embarrassed Monsignor was endeavoring to calm the jubilation with ineffective chidings like, "Now, dear!" "Just a minute, dear!" "Stop this instant!" "Quiet!"

Then the old brain snapped into action. Holding the good lady by the arm he began to jump with her, first up and down and then in the direction of the rear door. When it was safely closed behind the shouter, now

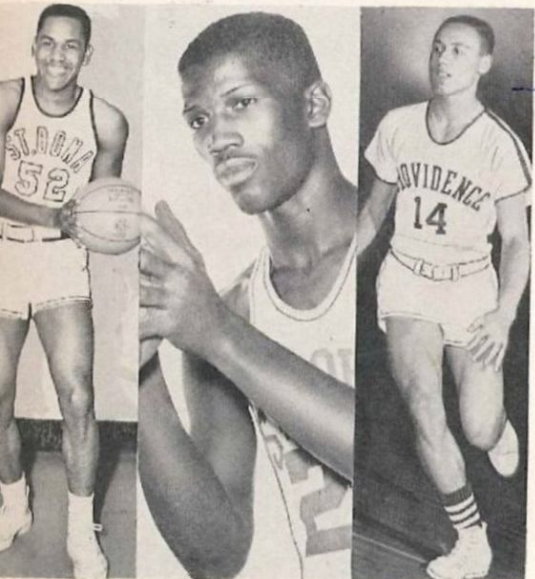
on Jefferson Avenue, he let out a relieved "Whew!", and glared at his doubled-up assistant. "What's so funny?" just turned silent mirth into howls that put me out into Jefferson Avenue too.

Behind the pious talk of Monsignor was a pious heart. Surrounding that holy heart was a soul dedicated to the service of his Master. Not only did he love everyone, he even sounded like he did. Not only did he love God, he showed that he did. Only a notebook, accidentally found, betrayed his countless private devotions and practices. His public novenas and Masses focused everyone's thoughts on God. Lines of penitents outside his confessional were eager to get near him and nearer Him. His resonant baritone prayers and hymns guided the voices of thousands directly to their Creator. He was a priest, and to his dying day was called "Father Quinn," not by the title of prelacy to which he was entitled.

Twenty years ago this month, when his body lay in the center aisle, it was only proper that Carib and Gael, Ethiopian and Italian, veteran and orphan should be at his side throughout the night sending up a steady stream of prayer for the man dressed in the violet vestments of the God he served for them.

And when thousands of people led by his friend, Bishop Molloy, and hundreds of priests listened to the impressive eulogy of his successor-to-be, Monsignor Raymond J. Campion, they had already joined with the celebrant to offer their finest gift, the Mass, for Father Quinn visible for the last time in St. Peter Claver Church.

Later that April 10th, when hundreds drove to Holyrood to surround the resting place of their pastor, their fellow priest, their brother, perhaps the outspoken, "Goodbye, Monsignor!" could have been surpassed. But who would think clearly enough then to say simply, "Goodbye, Father?"



Tom Stith, Tony Jackson and Lenny Wilkins: Brooklynites all.

## COURT STARS

Three Negro aces, all of Brooklyn, were selected for THE TABLET'S 11th annual All-American basketball team. Coaches representing more than 80 Catholic Colleges made the selection. The Brooklynites to make the First Team of outstanding court stars representing this country's major Catholic colleges are Tom Stith of St. Bonaventure's University, Tony Jackson of St. John's University, and Lenny Wilkins of Providence College. The only Catholic player of the competent Negro trio, Lenny Wilkins is a member of Holy Rosary Parish. The other stars of the distinguished quintet are Tom Meschery of St. Mary's and D. DeBusschere of Detroit.