

THE MONSIGNOR — WHO COULD FORGET HIM?

by REV. WILLIAM J. CULLEN

TWENTY 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