

On the Occasion of the Parish's 75th Anniversary Honoring Our Past, Inspiring Our Future -- Remembering Fr Mac



He died 28 years ago on December 2, 1987, and it has been 37 years since he retired as our pastor, yet Fr Mac's impact on the Catholic Community in East Lansing is still evident as much more than the State Historical Marker honoring him which stands next to the St Thomas Aquinas Bell Tower. He was a man of many talents, insights, a gifted counselor and educator, and a prayerful apostle.

His Early Years in Ubly

Jerome Vincent MacEachin was born on December 6, 1904, in the small village of Ubly, which is in the heart of Huron County in the tip of Michigan's Thumb. Fr Mac was also buried in Ubly, in the tiny St. John Cemetery. Fr Mac was Ubly's only native son ordained a priest and he was its longtime #1 Citizen.

Jerry MacEachin's ancestors emigrated from Invernesshire, Scotland following promising opportunities in lumbering. They came through Williamstown, Ontario and eventually into Michigan. His father, John Daniel, affectionately known as J.D., was born April 26, 1865. His mother, Mary Jane, more often called Mother Mac, was born December 4, 1873. They lived on neighboring farms and both came from families with seven children. They were married at St Agatha's Church in Gagetown on January 4, 1891 and settled on a small farm in Sheridan. Four years later they moved seven miles east into a home in Ubly just 100 yards from what would become a key influence on young Jerry, the mission church of St John the Evangelist. Jerry made his First Communion and was confirmed at St John's.

J.D. and Mother Mac had 11 children, 10 of whom lived to maturity – Roy, Frances, Cornelius, Dugald, Norman, Jerome, Sarah, Isabel, Kenneth and Angus. J.D. was the local blacksmith and Justice of the Peace. At age 10, Jerry began working as a parish janitor sweeping floors, shoveling coal into the furnaces, and answering the door at the rectory.

Jerry became a close friend and admirer of his employer and pastor, Fr Frank Barveja. He shared a similar admiration for St John's next pastor the youthful, Fr Michael Barnette. Jerry's heart was deeply saddened in 1918 when, while he was alone with his mentor in the rectory, Fr Michael was stricken and died from a flu epidemic. Ubly's next pastor, Fr John E Martin who later served in the Diocese of Lansing, influenced and guided Jerry into the seminary.

His Seminary Experience

Jerry had completed the 8th grade in the Ubly Public School in 1919. However, when he went that fall to attend Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, Jerry was asked to repeat the 8th grade for more preparation. So he attended St Vincent's Parochial School in Detroit and entered the seminary in the fall 1920, at age 16.

During his summer breaks, Jerry returned to Ubyly to earn tuition money. He was very resourceful in finding various jobs. Among them Jerry became a talented magician and played the drums with a band in dance halls around the state. His flair as a 'showman' stayed with Jerry throughout his life. One summertime story is of the drummer lying down on the floor with a golf ball perched on his head. Jerry allowed one of his fellow bandsmen to take a swing. Of course, he missed and Jerry ended up with 12 stitches. Later on, Jerry became the Seminary's barber and sold grooming items to his clients.

Jerry completed his seminary training for the priesthood at Sacred Heart in 1928 and that fall moved to St Mary Seminary in Norwood, Ohio for his theological training. Four years later, on May 22, 1932, Fr. Mac was ordained by his Bishop, Michael Gallagher, at Saints Peter and Paul Church in Detroit. Bishop Gallagher had also confirmed Jerry MacEachin years earlier.

Eight days later on Memorial Day, Monday, May 30, Fr Jerry returned to Ubyly to celebrate his first mass with his clan at St John Church. Fr Martin, who had encouraged Fr Mac to enter the seminary 12 years earlier, delivered the homily.

His First Years as a Priest

Fr Mac's first assignment was to St Paul Parish in Owosso from June 25, 1932 through September 12, 1938. While assigned to St Paul, the Diocese of Lansing was created by Pope Pius XI and Fr Mac was incardinated (instituted/assigned) to the new 15-county diocese. Its other major cities included Flint, Jackson, Battle Creek and Kalamazoo.

Lansing's first Bishop, Joseph H Albers, selected Fr Mac for postgraduate studies at Catholic University in Washington D.C. Fr Mac completed his Master's Degree in Education in 1940 and returned to the diocese on July 1 with appointments from Bishop Albers as the Diocesan Superintendent of Parochial Schools, as an assistant pastor at St Philip Parish in Battle Creek, and as chaplain of the Leila Post Montgomery Hospital also in Battle Creek and operated by the Sisters of Mercy.

On September 13, 1941, Fr Mac was appointed pastor of St Mary, Charlotte where, during his short tenure, Fr Mac not only paid off the mortgage -- it was the first time the parish was free of debt -- he also led the celebration of St Mary's 50th Anniversary. His pastorate in Charlotte came to an abrupt end with the sudden death of Fr Cecil M Winters, pastor of the new parish in East Lansing, St Thomas Aquinas. Fr Mac arrived in East Lansing on June 4, 1943 a few weeks after Fr Winter's had suffered his fatal heart attack at age 47.

His Efforts as an Educator

Fr Mac's effort at St Thomas Aquinas and beyond can be described as both prayerful and tireless. He continued to serve as Diocesan Superintendent of Parochial Schools through July 1954 when he assumed the role as chair of the Elementary Division of the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA). While diocesan school superintendent, Fr Mac led the development of the diocesan school curriculum, created a common report card for grading, and spent hundreds of hours traveling thousands of miles throughout the country promoting and helping Catholic dioceses and parishes create Home School Councils.

In his role with the NCEA, Fr Mac delighted thousands of educators with his presentations at various conventions, intellectual forums, and led thousands of students around the nation in retreats.

Back in East Lansing, Fr Mac followed Fr Winters' path onto the campus at Michigan State College. He served as a chaplain of the Newman Center and as Instructor in Religion teaching thousands of students in hundreds of accredited classes in Theology, Liturgy, Philosophy and History; averaging nearly 400 students annually. There are some fond memories of Michigan State students being told by Fr Mac that he had enrolled them in his class, while other students recall being told by their parents that Fr Mac had signed them up. He also served as the chaplain for his dear friend Duffy Daugherty and his Spartan football teams.

It was during that time on August 8, 1954, that Pope Pius XII elevated Fr Mac to the Papal Household as a Domestic Prelate with the title of Right Reverend Monsignor.

At St Thomas Aquinas Parish, a parish school was, obviously, always a priority for Fr Mac. When the school opened in 1949 with grades 1 through 9, Sister Mary Sabina, OP served as the Mother Superior and Principal. She was Fr Mac's cousin. The 9th grade was eventually dropped and replaced by a kindergarten.

The number of children attending St Thomas Aquinas School grew from 96 students in its first year to its capacity of 451 children in just six years. There was a small faculty of just 11 -- headed by Mother Superior and Principal, Sister Mary Aurelia OP, eight more Dominican nuns from Adrian, plus two lay teachers. An addition was added in 1956 allowing the school to grow by another 250 students.

His Moving St Thomas Aquinas from the Basement Church to 24.75 Acres on Alton Road

Soon after its creation in October 1940, St Thomas Aquinas Parish would begin to experience growing pains. Even with the outbreak of World War II, the parish would double in size every few years. The rectory and Newman Center were houses in the 600 block of Abbot Road south of the Hannah Community Center. Fr Winters heard concerns that those properties were on land that was too hilly, too far from campus, and that parking was inadequate. Masses on Sunday and Holy Days were being celebrated in a movie house, the State Theatre. Through the goodwill and generosity of the theater manager, who was not a parishioner, the parish was charged rent of \$5 per week; an equivalent of \$85 per week in 2015.

Fr Winters found a more central location for a church and purchased property at 401 Abbot Road (now the site of the AT&T facility just north of Dublin Square). Architectural plans were drawn and the foundation was poured for a church that would grace Abbot Road with beauty and dignity. On Holy Saturday, April 4, 1942, the first services -- confessions -- were heard in the new 'basement' church. However, the remainder of that structure would never be completed.

The rapid growth of the parish can be attributed, in part, to thousands of servicemen coming for training at Michigan State and living in the more than one hundred Quonset huts built on campus (where the Breslin Center stands today). Fr Winters said that as many as half of the soldiers in those Army detachments were Catholic. Then after World War II and with passage of the GI Bill, thousands of new students and their families would come to Michigan State.

When Fr Mac arrived in June 1943 following Fr Winter's death, he recognized the Abbot Road church site would be inadequate and a new chapter in the history of St Thomas Aquinas would begin. Fr Mac arranged for the purchase of 24.75 acres on Alton Road. It would be the first part of Fr Mac's grand vision.

St Thomas Aquinas Parish School opened in 1949 and it was quickly followed by construction of the convent which opened in 1951. Between the basement church on Abbot Road and the chapel in the school on Alton Road, seven masses were held each Sunday.

By the mid-1950's, plans for a new church and student center, which would become St John, were perfected. With the blessings of Bishop Albers, Fr Mac and his assistant, Fr Robert E Kavanaugh, traveled thousands of miles throughout Michigan with student and alumni leaders meeting parents, alumni, and student groups to raise the funds. More than 100,000 letters were mailed during that campaign. Bishop Albers also gave generously from the personal gifts given to him from the occasion of his 25th Episcopal Jubilee in 1954.

It was during this time that Fr Mac drew upon the talents of his many friends including MSU coaches and Fr Theodore Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, for his campaign.

It was only after the opening and dedication of St John Church and Catholic Student Center on January 12, 1958, with Fr Kavanaugh serving as its pastor, that Fr Mac was able to focus on an answer to another prayer, one that was his favorite – the building of St Thomas Aquinas Church on his other campus -- Alton Road. Fr Mac continued his untiring efforts with the planning, fundraising, and construction our current church its attached rectory (now parish offices). Ground was broken in 1966 and the church was completed in 1968.

His Special Loves: "My Good People"

For more than a decade during his early tenure at St Thomas Aquinas, Fr Mac's mother, Mary Jane, and his oldest sister, Frances, took care of the parish rectory. In the program dedicating St John, it was written: "Many notables and illustrious personalities, untold numbers of students, were the recipients of the gracious hospitality at the Rectory during the hallowed years when 'Mother Mac' and 'Frances' supervised the mechanics that make for domestic tranquility and make a house a happy home." In 1955 they returned to Ubyly to enjoy retirement.

That love and kindness they provided was also the hallmark of their son and brother, Fr Mac. He was known to drop in to visit his families and offer his blessings. He was always charming, ever gracious, and beloved.

Fr Mac was always willing to take other priests in residence as they studied at Michigan State or had other duties in the Lansing area.

Fr Mac was always willing to go where he was needed offer retreats or offer his skills, talent and warmth in preaching to begin fundraising campaigns. Notable efforts included campaigns in Detroit, Jackson and Saginaw.

Fr Mac also carried the badge of the Michigan State Police and served as its chaplain from its headquarters on Harrison Road.

As a recreational opportunity and in spite of taking a golf club to his head during his seminary days, when Fr Mac had a few hours of free time, he would head to the links where he was able to shoot in the low 40's for nine holes.

Fr Mac stepped into retirement in February 1978. He was named Pastor Emeritus and succeeded by Lansing's Auxiliary Bishop, James S Sullivan. Fr Mac lived in the St Thomas Aquinas rectory and continued to preside at mass until dementia slowed him in his final years. Just before his death, Fr Mac was moved to the Dimondale Nursing Center operated as a part of St Lawrence Hospital. Fr Michael Murphy, who had succeed Bishop Sullivan as pastor in 1985, had parishioners volunteer to stay at Fr Mac's bedside until he died peacefully on December 2, 1987.

Fr Mac was always known for his quips. Some of them included:

"If you have a problem come over and let us help you with it. If you don't have a problem, come over and tell us how you do it."

"If everyone waited until he could do a job so well that no one could find fault with it, nothing would ever be done."

If you cannot help us, we want to help you. But if you can help us and don't... God help you."

"There are no office hours for the man who loves God."

"The soul of education is the education of the soul."

And from one from St John, *"You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."*

Sources:

Diocesan Archives
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St John Church and Catholic Student Center Dedication program, January 12, 1958
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