

CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

Issue #16

August 12, 2007

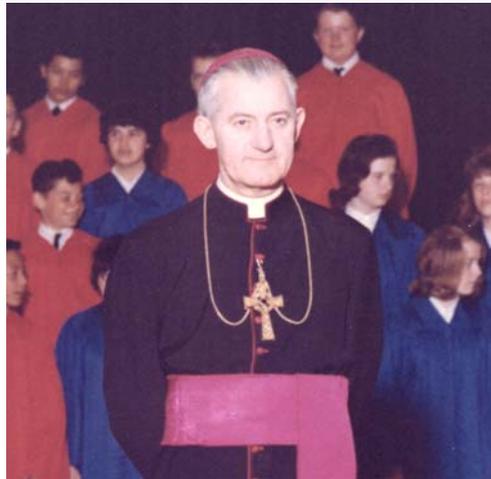
THE INDEFATIGABLE THOMAS GILL

When Bishop Thomas Gill, the Auxiliary Bishop of Seattle and the Pastor of St. James Cathedral, died suddenly on November 11, 1973, at the age of 65, tributes to him poured in from all over the world. They came from Pope Paul VI, and from Archbishop Jean Jadot, the Apostolic Delegate to the United States; from the Governor, the Mayor, the King County Executive, and other local leaders; from clergy and from laypeople, both Catholic and non-Catholic. Who was Bishop Gill?

By all accounts, he was a whirlwind of projects and ideas, an indefatigable worker. Born in Seattle on March 18, 1908, he grew up in St. Joseph's parish on Capitol Hill. He attended St. Joseph's School, then O'Dea and Seattle Prep, before going on to seminary studies at St. Patrick's in Menlo Park. An excellent second baseman, it is said he considered a career in baseball before deciding to be a priest! The Gill family was rich in vocations. Gill's mother was related to the 19th-century Archbishop Michael McHale of Tuam, Ireland; two of Bishop Gill's great-uncles were priests; and a nephew and a grand-nephew became priests as well.

Bishop O'Dea's last official act, on the very day of his death, December 25, 1932, was to sign a "dismissorial letter" for young Thomas Gill, calling him to ordination. Gill was ordained by Archbishop Hanna of San Francisco, during the months between Bishop O'Dea's death and Bishop Shaughnessy's installation. Father Gill spent a year at St. Patrick's in Tacoma with the legendary Msgr. Noonan, and was then sent to St. Mary's in Seattle. After three years in that assignment, Father Gill went to Washington, DC, where he received a Masters in Social Work at Catholic University. On his return to Seattle, he managed Catholic Children's Services (later Catholic Community Services), an agency which he helped to form and of which he was "the heart and soul." His concern for children was one of the driving forces in his ministry. He once said, "the supreme objective in this life is to offer youngsters the opportunity and the help to achieve the best possible adjustment to the real life... and that is the life that isn't destined to end under a tombstone, but is life eternal."

In 1955, Father Gill was appointed Pastor of St. James Cathedral, retaining his various other responsibilities; and the following year he was named Auxiliary Bishop of Seattle. Archbishop Connolly wondered how the new bishop would be able to spare



Bishop Thomas Gill, pastor of St. James Cathedral from 1955-1973.

time to help him, since he was already "the second busiest man in the archdiocese." Bishop Gill replied, "Well, there are a few hours between midnight and five a.m. that I might be able to assist Your Excellency." He was joking—sort of. Irene Weber, who worked closely with Bishop Gill at CCS, recalled that when he was working to establish a CCS office in Yakima, "he would put in a full day at the office in Seattle, then drive to Yakima through the snow and the rain in a 10-year old Studebaker, returning to Seattle at three or four in the morning!"

A noted orator, Bishop Gill often preached on solemn occasions at St. James Cathedral. At the Cathedral's Golden Jubilee in 1957, Bishop Gill spoke eloquently about St. James, and his love for the place and its people shone clearly in his words: "Holy, Holy, Holy is this place; for it is the House of God, and the Gate of Heaven... May it endure for ages and may the superabundant blessing of God rest forever upon all who, in His Name, rule it, serve it, use it and love it."

In 1962, Bishop Gill, with Archbishop Connolly, went to Rome to participate in the Second Vatican Council. The experience was overwhelming, he wrote on returning to Seattle after the first session. "It would take a truly insensitive man to sit in this council hall erected in the great nave of St. Peter's Basilica and not be filled with an almost overwhelming sense of history," he wrote. "Vatican II [is] an historical moment, but more—history itself moving." And in 1966, he returned to Rome for another important occasion: to preach the homily at the first Mass of the young Father Michael G. Ryan.

On November 11, 1973, Bishop Gill died unexpectedly of a heart attack in Washington, DC, where he was attending a conference of U.S. Catholic Bishops. On November 17, Archbishop Connolly presided at his funeral Mass at St. James Cathedral. "We mourn, indeed, the passing of one whom we revered as a friend, and honored as a priestly prelate," said Archbishop Connolly. "This man of God was a giant among his peers in social work throughout the entire state."

Bishop Gill had guided the Cathedral Parish through some of the most tumultuous and transformative years in American history and in the history of the Catholic Church. Just the week before he died, he installed the parish's first Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. It was simultaneously the end and the beginning of an era.

—Corinna Laughlin