

# 1941 - 1958: The Rev. Matthew J. O'Reilly

## Before the Parish Existed



In 1941, the boundaries of St. Anthony parish (church located on the West Side of Charleston) included the city of South Charleston. Early that year, Bishop John J. Swint inspected St. Anthony rectory renovations and discussed plans to form a new parish encompassing South Charleston to be called Blessed Sacrament, and to have its own pastor to bring the Gospel message to this area.

For the interim period before a pastor could be appointed, St. Anthony assigned Rev. Joseph Norton to serve the new parish.

Father O'Reilly prayerfully accepted Bishop John J. Swint's request to become pastor of the state's 77th Catholic parish, Blessed Sacrament, created in South Charleston in 1941. The congregation grew under the guidance of Father O'Reilly. He quickly established faith formation classes for children. He first held services in a prefab church later moved to E Street, followed by construction of a rectory, school and convent by 1954. Some 125 students enrolled in six grades. With 658 members, the parish continued to grow, necessitating school expansion to eight grades. Father O'Reilly died on Feb. 9, 1958, not living to see the first class of 17 eighth-graders graduate in 1960. He created a Catholic presence in South Charleston.

## Recruiting Father O'Reilly

Father O'Reilly was born at County Kavin, Ireland, and was educated there prior to coming to America as a missionary. For many years, he rode horseback through the mountains to minister to his scattered parishes in Doddridge County. He was serving in Montgomery when Bishop Swint assigned him to establish Blessed Sacrament parish. Father O'Reilly asked the bishop for permission to bring his housekeeper, Bertie Cranbull, and his horse. Bertie came, and there are pictures of Father O'Reilly on his horse at the Indian Mound in South Charleston. Someone stabled the horse nearby.

## First Congregation and Church

Father O'Reilly visited the Catholic families in the community to ask for their help and cooperation in establishing the parish. They very willingly helped. A few of these Charter Members remain with us today. Appendix I lists Charter Members who are still living here and in other communities.

A pre-fabricated church was the first structure built at 505 Second Avenue, facing south toward the railroad. The church exterior was painted a dark brown color. One aisle ran down the middle and the pews extended to narrow side aisles. Traditionally, Father O'Reilly celebrated Mass facing away from the congregation and separated from them by a communion rail. He lived in a small frame house next door.

Blessed Sacrament's doors opened on Aug.10; with two more masses celebrated Friday, Aug. 15, for the Blessed Virgin Mary's Assumption Into Heaven. Bishop Swint dedicated the church on Aug. 17, 1941. The Belgian and French families, retail businesses owners and industry and government officials were happy to have a new church in town.

## Move to E Street

In 1948, Union Carbide expressed an interest in buying the church property. Charlie Schmidt, a parishioner and fire chief, located available property on E Street and negotiated an agreement with Union Carbide to buy the lots, move the church and put it on a new foundation at E Street. Union Carbide lifted and towed it west to its new foundation between 3rd and 4th avenues. In 1949, Father O'Reilly moved into a new solid brick rectory, built next to the church, that remains in use today.

As there were many Catholic families with young children, Father O'Reilly initiated religious education for them on Saturday afternoons. Sisters of St. Joseph, from St. Agnes parish, taught them.

Father O'reilly recruited volunteers for various liturgical, social and other ministries. Some saw needs and volunteered for specific tasks. He found leadership for the Holy Name Society. St. Anne's Guild formed and met at Elizabeth Toussaint's home. Emory and Louise Michael's two sons , Bonaventure and Raymond, served as first altar boys. Zollie Bakoss became choir director with members Vivien Schaffner, Helen Walters and Walter and Elizabeth Toussaint. Ophra Knight and Helen Coen played the organ. Charlie Schmidt put up Christmas decorations. Rose Lanning grew flowers and arranged them for the altar. Ernie Mondron and Ed and Marie Schneider led boy, girl and Cub Scouts. Rose Thompson, Elisabeth Brisley and Ray Aigner were Scout leaders.

In 1956, Father O'Reilly added a third Mass on Sunday. Rev. Boniface Weckmann came from Sacred Heart Parish to assist Father O'Reilly.

### School and Convent

In 1954, a program started to build a long-needed school. The St. Joseph teachers would live in the new convent next to the school. To finance the purchase of the property on 4th avenue next to the church and rectory, the parish conducted a pledge drive while the women's guilds held many fundraisers for the project.

Construction of the school and convent completed in 1954. Enrollment stood at 125 students in six grades. Three St. Joseph sisters and Bernice Sullivan, a parishioner, taught the children.

Since enrollment continued to grow, the school added grades seven and eight and one more St. Joseph teacher in 1955. The first class of 17 eighth-graders graduated in 1956.

Father O'Reilly died February 9, 1958, at the age of 60.  
He was pastor at Blessed Sacrament Parish for 17 years.