

## Saint Elisabeth's Stories and Issues

We'll make use of these as we explore issues of pastoral oversight and strategy at St. Elisabeth's South Philadelphia in the mid to late 1970's.

*Your analysis* – *There is a place for your analysis after three of the sections below. Make notes to use when we are in session.*

You can get an impression of the parish and it's setting by looking at -- [Pictures of the parish 1975 - 81](#) and reading "The Local Context" below.

### The local context (no analysis on this section)

An early meeting of long-term parishioners was gathering in the second floor of the clergy house in what was to become the new vicar's living room. Rose had been part of the Italian congregation at the parish some 30 and 40 years earlier. She had worn all black for many years since her husband died. Rose waved Robert over to a window overlooking Mifflin Street.

*Rose said*, "Father, did you notice the new street lights in front of the clergy house?"

*He replied*, "Yes, I did they brighten things up and make the area safer."

*Rose said*, "My niece Anne on City Council arranged for them."

*Robert said*, "Please give her my thanks. I appreciate what she did."

*Rose*, "Do you vote Democrat Father?"

Another conversation with Ed, the parish musician took place at the same window.

*Ed*: As he pointed to the right. "You noticed the flower shop on the corner?"

*Robert*: "Yes, do we get our flowers there?"

*Ed*: "No Father, you should never go there asking for flowers."

The owner was a mid-level leader in the Philadelphia Costa nostra.

Wilma, then Vicar's Warden, was married to the owner of a towing service and gas station. Her kitchen was a sort of community hub. Drivers, her children, police officers, neighbors would wander in and out all day. There was coffee and talk. Robert made it a practice to join the group every couple of weeks.

A few years later, when Denise was the new Vicar's Warden, she was making her way home after a vestry meeting. She saw police cars racing to an area about 1 ½ blocks ahead of here. Angelo Bruno, the leader of the Philadelphia Costa nostra, had just been shot and killed as he sat in his parked car. This was the beginning of a more violent period.

Mr. C was the owner of "the flower shop." When Robert arrived back at the rectory one night, Mr. C. was sitting on his stoop with a cigar and glass of whisky. He waved Robert over.

*Mr. C*: "I just want to say how happy I am to see the programs for children at the parish."

*Robert*: "The parish is working hard to make them successful."

*Mr. C*: "Well, if there's anything I can ever do to help, you know. like with the police or anything. Just ask."

On several occasions Father Gallagher had to get in between groups of boys or a group going after one boy. Several times a group of white boys going after a Black boy. Once two white gangs facing off. Usually with baseball bats. He'd come running out of the rector in a black cassock. "You aren't allowed to fight here! He'd insist. They always walked away in different directions. At one point he discovered that some of the bats were being hidden within the ground ivy around the church.

One evening Robert was meeting in the first floor coffee hour room in the rector with Heidi, a young woman taking charge of the church school. There was a knock at the door. A neighborhood man was at the door.

*Man:* "Can I go into the church to light a candle and pray."

*Robert:* "Of course." And lead him down the hall through a door that went into the church.

Several minutes later the man comes back into the hallway. Stands just outside the where Robert and Heidi were meeting. And pulled out a small revolver.

*Man:* "I'm going to kill myself."

*Robert:* "No you're not. You're not allowed to kill yourself on church property." He put the gun away and left. Robert saw him later in the week at the Broad and Snyder newsstand.

"One parish I served was in an old city neighborhood with brick row houses, narrow streets, and corner stores. While shopping in one of the tiny grocery stores I was moving along the constricted aisles seeking a can of tomato sauce. In the next aisle two women were leaning into one another, whispering. The one said, "He's my priest (a nod toward the aisle I was in); I belong to St. Elisabeth's." I had no idea who she was.

What I do know is that the parish had a long-standing link with people in that community. The parish was nearly one hundred years old. During the 1920s it had celebrated the Eucharist in Italian. Copies of the Italian 1928 Book of Common Prayer were still in the parish office. During the Depression it had used up its endowment to provide heating oil for people in the neighborhood. When there was a parish fair the games for children were conducted on the principle of having every child win a prize every time. The prizes were worth more than the quarter the child paid to play. We lost fifteen cents every time the game was played. We ran a summer day camp for children, sponsored a community education center, and helped form a neighborhood community organization.

Then there were the bells. Some years before I arrived in the parish there had been a dispute in the neighborhood over the electrical bell system in the church tower. For years the bells rang the Angelus at 6 a.m., noon, and 6 p.m. A couple of newcomers to the area had a scheme for purchasing the old row houses, renovating them and selling the house to young professionals. It was a plan to gentrify the neighborhood and make a lot of money. They decided that they didn't like the bells ringing, especially early in the morning. So, they petitioned the Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I) to order the church to stop the noise. I guess the bells didn't fit their image of the way the neighborhood needed to be if it was to attract the right people. The response was a flood of letters to L&I, with copies to the parish, about how important the bells were to people. The local paper ran a few articles. The gentrification couple backed off. In time their whole plan was abandoned. - From *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*, Ascension Press, 2008

"South Philadelphia is a working class community made up of white ( a significant percentage of Italian background), Black, and newly settled Asian families. It is a relatively stable community – a collection of mini-neighborhoods the focus of which is an eight block radius from the parish. On one street it is common

to find two generations of one family occupying many of these houses. It is essentially a residential neighborhood, scattered with small, family owned stores. Broad Street and Passyunk Avenue are the central business areas. We are 20 blocks from City Hall. The community has many of the problems and concerns to be expected in an urban area i.e., inadequate housing, drugs, vandalism. For the most part, however, the neighborhood is stable, well-kept, and good to live I there is potential for increased membership. ... Saint Elisabeth's as a small congregation, most of whom live within walking distance of the church. Our members reflect the make-up of the neighborhood - black Italian, other white ethnic groups. In the past few years we have welcomed several Filipino and Laotian members, a reflection of a new Asian influx into the city.”  
 From Parish Profile 1981

### The Numbers

Growth into about 1930	over 400 members
An English and an Italian Mass on Sundays during much of the 30s – 40s (?)	
40's – 60s	Decline; rapid decline in the early 70s
In 1974	25 active members
1981 ASA	46. An average increase of about 10%/year since 1976
Baptized members	in 75 – 58      In 81 – 105
Communicants in Good Standing	in75 – 54      In 81 - 74

**No analysis on the above. Though take the above into account as you respond to the following situations.**

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## When Fr. Gallagher arrived

The bishop had put his name forward to become vicar. He also was asked to serve as a supply priest for the parish until a vicar was appointed. There had been an interview that seemed to go well.

After about six weeks of celebrating the Sunday Mass Robert hadn't heard anything about the appointment. He finally asked a few people at coffee hour. Their response was, "Oh yes, we decided you were our vicar a few weeks ago."

At coffee hour the following Sunday he asked, "Who's on the vestry?" Robert looked at Don and said, "Do you know who's on the vestry?" A few others added their voices. No one knew who was on the vestry.

*Your analysis – Make notes to use when we are in session.*

1. Given the data you have above, where do you think the parish was in the Parish Life Cycle? Why do you say that?
2. What are two or three immediate steps that might be taken?

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## The Easter Vigil

Easter 1976

- A. It was my first Easter with them. I wanted us to do the Easter Vigil. I don't know that I thought much about how to introduce it. I just put it the schedule. And as the congregation was about 25 on a normal Sunday – I assumed we didn't have enough people to pull off the Vigil and also have an Easter Day Eucharist.. So, 10:30 pm was to be the Easter celebration. (Oh, stop laughing!, I was young). A couple of weeks after the announcement the Ed, parish musician, came to me at coffee hour, took me off to the side and said, ""Father, people are upset about there not being an Easter morning Mass."

*Your analysis – Make notes to use when we are in session.*

1. What do you imagine were the feelings involved? Ed's, Brother Robert?
2. What do you think you would have done in the situation? Why? What would be your objective? What options do you see?

- B. The following Sunday at the coffee hour a small group approached me. I think the person speaking first was Rose C.

[About Rose: She was the matriarch. in her 80s, dressed in all black since her husband had died (years before). Rose already had two significant exchanges with me. I seemed to have "passed" both. One was about the street lights her niece, who was on City Council, arranged to put in front of the rectory. The second was when I had first arrived and tried to get people to have a few dinners in homes so we could get to know one another. In passing at a coffee hour, Rose leaned in and said, "It's okay Father, we'll get to know you." I backed off on the dinners. About two years later Rose invited me to come to dinner at her home. I forget who else was there. Probably the niece and another family member or two. It was a full, almost formal, Italian dinner. Shortly after that she began to tell me what she wanted in her funeral. She told me one thing each year, until I left the parish.]

So, the parishioners and I talked. They didn't know what an Easter Vigil was. They were used to an Easter Morning Mass, and they had developed family habits around that being part of Easter Sunday. There was no anger. Some confusion and a sense that I had made a mistake. And now that they were talking with me they assumed I'd reverse the decision.

*Your analysis* – *Make notes to use when we are in session.*

1. What do you imagine were the feelings and concerns involved? The parishioner's? Fr. Gallagher's?
2. What do you think you would have done in the situation? Why? What would be your objective? What options do you see?