

Msgr. J. John Busco:

A 70-year love for 'serving the people'

By Lou Baldwin

SPECIAL TO THE CS&T

The year 1940 was certainly a banner one for St. Charles Borromeo Seminary. Fifty-two graduates were ordained to the priesthood; the majority of them at the hands of Cardinal Dennis Dougherty at the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul on May 18.

"There were 42 of us ordained for Philadelphia in my class," recalls Msgr. J. John Busco, now 95. "I'm the only one left of the 42."

The son of immigrants, he was one of only five seminarians among the roughly 500 at St. Charles who were of Italian heritage, he said. It's a good thing too, because priests who could speak Italian were desperately needed, and his entire active ministry would be in that apostolate.

His parents, Vincenzo and Michelina (Manziona) Busco, were from the Province of Bari, but they never met in Italy. His father came to America at age 16 and at first went to Chicago, then worked building railroads in North and South Dakota and Montana. He eventually came east and it was in Easton, which

was then part of the Philadelphia Archdiocese, he met Michelina, who had emigrated with her family at age 8.

They settled in Easton, but Msgr. Busco was actually born in Newfield, N.J. His mother, he explains, in spite of her own pregnancy, was visiting to help her sister who was also about to give birth to a child. He came into the world weighing an incredible 15 pounds, and although there is no birth certificate because the midwife did not report the birth, the date was July 24, 1914.

Less than a month later, when his Dad took him for baptism, the priest thought he was much older due to his size. He must have been a good baby though because afterward the pastor predicted, "He's going to become a priest."

At baptism he was given the name Giacomo, which Msgr. Busco explained, "is Italian for James."

But when he was enrolled at Packer Grade School in Easton, the teacher didn't realize that and marked him down as John, which he has answered to ever since. That's why he is now J. John Busco.

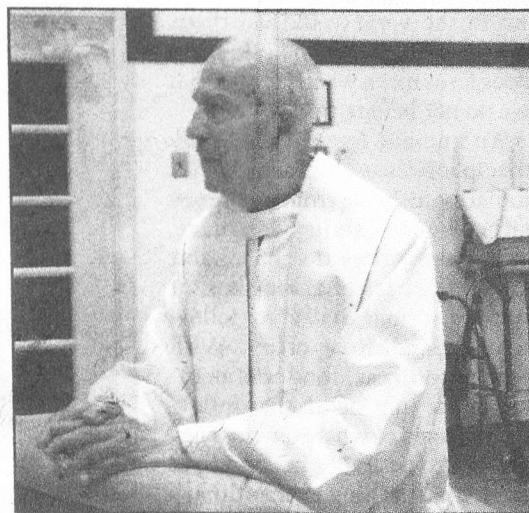
At his local parish his father

would take him and his brother to early Mass, and their mother would take his two sisters to a later Mass. The boys would often find themselves at church twice however, acting as altar servers.

He began to think about the priesthood at an early age, and in those days many young men completed their high school years in the seminary. He applied to St. Charles but was not immediately accepted due to the large number of ap-

plicants. At 17, he entered St. Charles Seminary in Catonsville, Md., but kept his application in at Overbrook, and after two years was accepted.

"I skipped the fourth year at Overbrook so I only had to pay for one year," he said. "But of course it was the Depression. Tuition was very cheap but a lot of people were out of work."



(Sarah Webb)

Msgr. J. John Busco prays before daily 11 a.m. Mass in the chapel at Villa St. Joseph in Darby, where he resides, May 7.

Back then most newly ordained priests were sent to what is now the Allentown Diocese, but probably because of the real need for Italian priests in Philadelphia, Father Busco's first assignment was as assistant pastor at Our Lady of Pompeii, an Italian national parish on Erie Avenue. After three years, he was sent to Our Lady of Mount

Carmel Parish, Bridgeport.

"I really enjoyed that my pastor was the pastor I served as an altar boy in Easton," he said.

But after only two years he was reassigned to St. Mary of the Eternal Parish at 22nd and Clearfield Streets.

He was there but a short time when the pastor resigned and returned to Italy. Consequently, at the young age of 31, he was given the pastorship.

St. Mary was a large and growing parish but heavily in debt and falling more so at the rate of \$1,000 a week. Collections did not cover expenses partly, Msgr. Busco said, because immigrant families were used to the system in Italy, where priests' salaries were paid by the government and parishioners had little to pay for. He worked hard to explain the American system to the people and collections did increase.

"We raised the collection by \$200,000 a year," he said.

He also turned to imaginative fundraisers. For example, the parish had a hugely popular dance. Earlier at Our Lady of Pompeii, he had con-

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Local

Monsignor reflects on service in Italian parishes

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to know Gaetano "Pop" Sciolla, who owned one of the largest supper clubs in Philadelphia.

He appealed to Sciolla, who prevailed upon some of the top acts appearing at his club to go over to St. Mary gratis for a little show between performances at Sciolla's.

"He gave me Tony Bennett four times. He gave me Teresa Brewer, Al Martino and the Four Aces," Msgr. Busco said. "We had 1,200 kids at our Friday night dance and we also had an Irish dance on Sunday night."

In time the Italian population began to migrate away from St. Mary, and in 1967 Father Busco was reas-

signed as pastor of St. Donato Parish where he stayed until 1981 when, by then a monsignor, he received his final assignment as pastor of Holy Saviour, Norristown. After his retirement at age 75, at the invitation of his friend, Msgr. Arthur Centrella, he remained at Holy Saviour, assisting among the people he knew so well. He retired to Villa St. Joseph, Darby, in 2004.

Among other highlights of a distinguished career, Msgr. Busco helped found a credit union, served for 25 years on the national board of the American Committee on Italian Immigration, which promoted more equitable immigration quotas for Italians, and also served on various

archdiocesan boards.

Over the long years he has seen the closing of many of the Italian national parishes he once knew.

The reason is absorption into mainstream America. "Practically half of our marriages at St. Mary were to non-Italians," he said.

This process had begun years earlier in his own family. "My grandmother had nine children; eight married non-Italians," he said. "My dad was the only one who didn't. We had Irish, English, Hungarian and Dutch in the family."

Nevertheless, in his parishes he promoted Italian culture, giving almost free Italian lessons to whoever wanted them. "I charged three Hail

Marys a lesson," he said. "We said one at the beginning of the lesson and another at the end, so I was sure to collect at least two."

Although Msgr. Busco has a solid record as an outstanding administrator, his dedication to shepherding his people may well be his real legacy.

"The most important part of my priesthood was that I loved serving the people," he said. "I made it a point in my parishes that a priest be available at all times. I didn't say they had to be in the rectory, but they had beepers. No matter what hospital the people went to, even if they had a chaplain there, or how far, I thought we should visit."

"We worked house to house following the people, convalidating marriages, making sure they got their sacraments. We got a lot of people back to the Church. At St. Mary our school enrollment went up to 1,000 kids, and I knew every child. The sisters were a great help. I had Franciscans at St. Mary, the Cabrini nuns at St. Donato and the I.H.M.s at Holy Saviour. We were very fortunate."

And his service continues. "I still get calls from people asking me for advice or coming to me for confession," Msgr. Busco said.

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