

Rt. Rev. Msgr. Matthew J. Fletcher 1888-1964

Fr. Fletcher was born in 1888 in Dromineer, County Tipperary, Ireland, the son of Joshua Fletcher and the former Mary Toohey. He was the ninth in a family of five



Father (left rear) and Seminary classmates

boys and five girls. He was educated in the National schools of Ireland and received his minor seminary training at Mount St. Joseph College, Rosecrave and took his philosophical and theological studies at All Hallows College and

National University in Dublin. After completing his studies he was ordained at All Hallows College, June 21, 1914, by Bishop O'Dwyer of Australia, for the Diocese of Fargo, where he arrived September 21 of the same year.



Father in his college days



Bishop O'Reilly

He served as assistant to Monsignor J. A. Lemieux at St. Michael's Church, Grand Forks, until June 1915, when he was appointed Pastor of St. Mary's Church of Sheldon, North Dakota, with the attached mission of Leonard, where he remained for a little over two years. On December 20, 1917, His Excellency, Most Reverend James J. O'Reilly, Bishop of the Fargo Diocese, appointed Reverend M. J. Fletcher pastor of St. Mary's Church of Grand Forks after its first pastor, Reverend M. J. O'Driscoll, had left to join the armies of World War I as one of the first Knights of Columbus chaplains.

Upon seeing St. Mary's for the first time Msgr. Fletcher said, "It was a sorry sight that met my eyes when first I saw St. Mary's. The church was frozen. The superstructure was finished and the walls had been plastered, but that was all. There was amber color temporary glass for the windows, and many of the panes had been broken. The bell tower was not enclosed and the sparrows were using it for their home. A choir of sparrows greeted my entrance. I was ready to take the next train back to Sheldon. It was indeed a challenge to a 'Greenhorn' from Ireland and I wondered if I could meet it. In fact, I believe if I knew then as much as I found out later about the financial state of this little parish, I'd have followed my first impulse and fled. But I didn't know and had promised the Bishop I'd stay for a year and stay I did!" (Axtman 3-4)

Msgr. Fletcher was only 29 and had been ordained three and one-half years when he assumed this heavy responsibility. Bishop O'Reilly gave the reason for his choice when he preached the sermon at the Masses the first Sunday after Msgr. Fletcher's appointment when he said, "I have given you my very best."

During his tenure as St. Mary's, Msgr. Fletcher supervised the completion of the church and the school, finished in 1929. He said, "The growth of the parish was steady from the start of the school. It was the school that brought many people to live within the confines of the parish, and as the years went by we grew and prospered until we not only had a debt-free parish, plus a fully equipped and beautifully furnished church, school and rectory, a house for a janitor and a playground for the school children –

but over \$80,000 in the treasury as well, when I resigned on January 1, 1955, because of ill health.” (Axtman 16)

Msgr. Fletcher was not only a man of loyalty, determination and drive but also one who had a variety of knowledge in many areas. It is noted that many times he did the janitorial and maintenance work on St. Mary’s himself including taking care of the steam boiler, fixing and refurbishing the basement and church floors and remodeling the “shack” that was to become a rectory. His business sense was keen as evidenced by the clearing of St. Mary’s debt while under his guidance. It was said of several business men of Grand Forks who served as trustees that, “Father Fletcher is a financial wizard and if he was in the business world he’d be a millionaire – it wouldn’t matter what business venture he chose, he’d be a success in anything.” They said Father had a wonderful business sense and a razor sharp mind that could make quick decisions that were always right – plus foresight, as well as insight into everything that made a businessman a success.” (Axtman 27)

“Father was also mechanically inclined and was always curious about the inner workings of anything of a mechanical nature and kept such things in good repair in church, school, and rectory. In the days before



Father's first car

car engines became complicated, Father’s first project upon the purchase of a new care was to don a pair of coveralls, and proceed to take the engine apart and put it back together, getting himself well smudged with grease in the process. He had a very good purpose for doing this work. He couldn’t afford to pay mechanics’ bills in those days of hard times and by taking the car apart



Father's second car

when it was new, he was able to tell exactly what was wrong and repair it himself if trouble developed.” (Axtman 26)

He was also a man of the arts, enjoying music and granting the use of the Sanctuary to Professor Nelson and the music department of the University and Wesley College for use in putting on Handel’s Messiah and other high class programs since there was no high school or other auditorium at that time. Many dances were held in the church basement under the watchful eye of Fr. Fletcher. No smoking or drinking was allowed and a good time was had by all during these weekly affairs until a few years later when the Archbishop of St. Paul forbade dancing as a source of revenue for churches and schools and even forbid them to be held on church property as the events were being abused in some communities in near the Twin Cities. Fr. Fletcher also enjoyed participating as technical support during plays held at St. Mary’s. Many long hours of rehearsal were put into these operettas but also a certain amount of pleasure as he enjoyed running the lights and curtains for performances.

In 1922, Msgr. Fletcher made a month-long trip to Ireland to visit his mother but that was the only vacation to speak of after the time of his ordination in 1914. This work ethic began to take a toll of Fr.'s health and in 1932 he was ordered to take an extended vacation. He was gone for 6 weeks and his parishioners anxiously awaited his return. Although he enjoyed traveling and seeing the topography of the country while visiting with local towns-people he also thoroughly enjoyed golf. A dear friend, Father Ramsbottom, took a few days off to come for a visit with the specific intent to introduce his friend to a game which Fr. Fletcher took to like a duck to water.



Ready for a game of golf in the days when knickers were in style

The morning of January 24, 1964 saw the passing of Msrg. Fletcher and struck a tragic note for much of Grand Forks as he had become of staple of the community for nearly 50 years. He would have celebrated his fiftieth anniversary in the priesthood in June of that year and a quiet party was being planned for the occasion. A rosary was said for Msrg. Fletcher on a bitter cold and blustery night with five inches of snow when all was said and done. It is hard to estimate the number who attended despite the weather but it is said that the church was filled to capacity many times over including the aisles and choir loft with friends and former parishioners who came to pay their respects between 4:00 pm and 8:00 pm. His funeral, officiated by Bishop Dworschak with the assistance of Msgr. Boyle, the morning of January 27th was the same story with many who were not able to enter the church at all.

“Someone once asked Father why he didn’t write the history of St. Mary’s as he was the only one who really knew its complete history. His reply was “We’re too busy making history to write about it!” Yet the last year of his retirement he had started one – saying it was true he was the only one who could write of it as he was here at the start of St. Mary’s as assistant in St. Michael’s and it was he who was with St. Mary’s so long and knew it from the start.” (Axtman 119) This history was never completed by Msgr. Fletcher and he felt the real facts were never told and in many cases were not known and so could not be written down but maybe while writing some of St. Mary’s history his views may have changed. Indeed, writing a history of Msgr. Fletcher is in some way to write the history of St. Mary’s although to write of him he would have said, “Oh, Boulderdash, you’ll be dipping your bucket into an empty well if you try to make me interesting to anyone.”

“From 1888 to 1964 [Fr. Fletcher] saw the technological advancement from the time of the pony and trap and bicycle of Ireland to the space ship of America. Along the way were the gasoline engines, street cars, automobiles, busses, planes, jets, radio, television, electronics and the satellites and space ships, to say nothing of the preparation of man to land on the moon. He adjusted to some of the most profound developments man has yet faced and he progressed from oil lamps to electricity; from the gramophone to television; from icebox to freezers; from the heat of the peat of Ireland to stove, wood, coal, natural gas and oil of America; from pasteboard fans to electric fans and air conditioning; from high shoes to loafers; from handwriting to typewriter [to computer]; from vicious blade to an electric razor; from stairs to elevator and escalator; and from change box to cash register. No wonder he used to say, “It’s a

small world today. One can travel around it, see around it and talk around it. I'd better go soon – we don't know what's coming next." (Axtman 120)



Father Fletcher's Investiture as Monsignor, September, 1941



Father's Investiture, September, 1941

L to R - Bishop Peschges, Father Garland, Father Mikalofsky, Father McHugh, Father Ramsbottom, Father, Bishop Muench and Father P. J. Ryan. Peter Grady in background as one of the Knights of Columbus honor guards.



Father's Silver Jubilee Mass

*Quotes, excerpts and pictures taken from *Saint Mary's and Saint Timothy's and Their Ecumenical Pioneer Pastor Rt. Rev. Msgr. M.J. Fletcher*, Marion (Hart) Axtman, 1964, print