



REFLECTIONS

on the Life of

Monsignor Eugene A. Gilb



I have been a parishioner at Saint John Fisher (SJF) since 1983. Shortly after the death of Monsignor Gene Gilb, I was asked to write something about him. This brief narrative touches on only a few things this good and holy man did over the course of his life. I want to thank those who shared with me their insights and experiences regarding Monsignor Gilb. Thanks also goes to members of the Impact team, especially Carla Green, who assisted me. This tribute is available in PDF format on the SJF website, www.sjf.org.

—C. J. “Kit” Ruona

Monsignor Eugene A. Gilb was born Albert E. Gilb on May 23, 1930, to Albert C. and Bertha Grace Gilb, during the papacy of Pope Pius XI and while Bishop John J. Cantwell presided over the diocese of Los Angeles. (It would not be until 1936 that Los Angeles was designated an archdiocese.) The Gilb Family resided at 363 East 62nd Street in Los Angeles. Gene was the youngest of four sons and the family attended Saint Columbkille Church, where Gene was baptized on June 15, 1930. Monsignor Gilb felt that date was more significant than his birthday since the day he was baptized he was born into Christ.

While Gene was young the Gilbs moved to 220 East Gage Avenue, two blocks from Saint Columbkille’s. Albert was a butcher, which might explain Gene’s lifelong culinary attachment to meat, while Bertha worked at See’s Candy, and that may have accounted for his sweet tooth. The Gilb boys attended their parish school and after that Kenneth, Donald and Clifford walked the mile to Mount Carmel High School (MCHS) at 71th Street and Hoover, but Gene went in another direction. As a 14-year-old

he had decided that his life would be devoted to his Lord and he attended the high school department of Los Angeles College (LAC), which at that time was the minor seminary for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. LAC was located on Detroit Street at the corner of Third Street, 12 miles from young Gene’s home. Late in life he reminisced about how he hitch-hiked and took the trolley from his home to LAC for six years. During that period, it was four years of high school and two years of college at LAC before the seminarian spent six years at Saint John’s Seminary for his last two years of college and four years of theology.

However, there were a couple of detours along the way to ordination. Gene was athletic and a good baseball player as a teenager. Since LAC did not have any interscholastic teams Gene went to Mount Carmel in 1946-47, his junior year, to play left field for the Crusaders. He helped them win the Catholic League title, which included Loyola and Cathedral in Los Angeles, Saint Anthony in Long Beach and Saint Augustine in San Diego. The championship game was played on a Saturday and that night he attended the junior prom, double dating with



his brother Cliff. Cliff borrowed a car to drive them to the Hollywood Riviera Beach Club in Redondo Beach. Cliff married his date, Gene returned to the seminary and the Carmelites closed MCHS in 1976.

In 1954 the minor seminary moved to Mission Hills and became Our Lady Queen of Angels Seminary while LAC became Saint John Vianney High School. In 1966 Saint John Vianney became Daniel Murphy High School and Daniel Murphy closed in 2008.

While at LAC Gene was not only an altar server at his parish but at Saint Vibiana's Cathedral as well. He loved the richness of the Mass and other liturgical events and wanted to be a part of them as much as possible. This devotion was noted by at least one of the priests at Saint Vibiana's and possibly affected the course of Gene's clerical career.

Gene enrolled at Saint John's Seminary in Camarillo in 1950 and was scheduled to be ordained in 1956. However, he was one of four seminarians chosen to attend a Spanish seminary in Burgos, Spain. As Bishop Sylvester Ryan recalls, while it was not unusual for the archdiocese to send a few seminarians to Rome to study on occasion, this was an experiment, and one that did not work out well. The four were to study in Burgos for



Albert Gilb Family

two years; however, due to unforeseen circumstances all four left after one year. Gene lost that seminary year and at Saint John's dropped back to the class of 1957, which had 16 men. These men bonded and were friends throughout their lives. Three of them survive Monsignor Gilb: Bishop Ryan, the bishop emeritus of the Monterey Diocese; Monsignor Jerome Schmit, pastor emeritus at Sacred Heart Parish in Pomona; and Father Henry Johnson, retired in Covina.

Sometime during his seminary years Gene's first and middle names became transposed. Once when questioned about this, he simply said, "I was always called Gene...I don't know how the official name change came about." And so, on May 3, 1957, Father Eugene A. Gilb was ordained by James Francis Cardinal McIntyre in Saint Vibiana's Cathedral, and Father Gilb said his first Mass at Saint Columbkille. His initial assignment was as associate pastor at Saint John of God in Norwalk. He served there until he was transferred to Saint Vibiana's as an associate pastor on July 20, 1962.

These were good, happy days serving the parishioners of these parishes and on his days off playing golf with his seminarian classmates, other priests and friends.

This all ended on January 15, 1964, when Father Gilb was appointed Cardinal McIntyre's priest-secretary succeeding Monsignor John Archie Rawden. Monsignor Gilb, years later, reflected that his selection came as a surprise and was not a position he sought, or wanted. However, he was counseled that it probably was not a good idea to reject the cardinal's request. Monsignor Gilb speculated that Monsignor Paul Stroup, an associate pastor at the cathedral in the 1940-50s, remembered him (Gilb) as a grammar schooler and throughout his seminary years as an active altar server who loved the rituals, reverence and liturgical rites of the church and recommended him. One of the many jobs of the priest-secretary is to know everything about the religious ceremonies the cardinal leads, or participates in, plus packing and bringing all the required vestments and accoutrements needed at these events.



Gene in 1947 at Mount Carmel High School

Monsignor Gilb moved into 100 Fremont Place in Hancock Park with the cardinal and vicar-general Monsignor Benjamin Hawkes, and his days of golfing and/or relaxing with family and friends were over. His new position had little down time and no room for mistakes. He was a valet, caretaker, secretary and anything else the cardinal wanted...and at any time the cardinal wanted it. Retired Bishop Joseph Sartoris recalls that it was a difficult assignment at a transitional time in the church. He pointed out that Vatican II was underway and Cardinal McIntyre was more conservative in his views than many priests, which caused some friction. However, Bishop Sartoris noted that despite this turmoil Monsignor Gilb was always loyal to his archbishop in carrying out his duties and deserved much credit for that. Monsignor Gilb felt that the years he served as priest-secretary caused a separation from some of his brother priests that was never fully mended. He regretted that.

However, being the cardinal's secretary did give this young priest a front row seat...so to speak...at one of the most important events in the Roman Catholic Church's history... Vatican II.

Beginning on October 11, 1962, Pope Saint John XXIII beckoned an estimated 2,860 bishops to Rome to participate in Vatican II. They would meet in four sessions over the course of four years in the nave of Saint Peter's Basilica. Most, if not all these bishops are now deceased. Bishop Raymond Hunthausen, the last American bishop to survive, died in 2018 at the age of 96. Father Gilb accompanied Cardinal McIntyre to the final two sessions, and since the cardinal did not bring a theologian, known as a peritus, with him Father Gilb had some of the privileges of that position. Father Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict

XVI, was also a peritus at Vatican II. These men were given passes and allowed on the floor of Saint Peter's, the aula, while the bishops discussed and formulated the historic changes in the church that were to come. At Vatican II Father Gilb became Monsignor Gilb, that is an honorary papal chamberlain, enabling him to carry papal papers between cardinals and other high-ranking Vatican officials. Cardinal McIntyre worked the entire time he attended the council so there was little time to relax. On December 12, 1965, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Vatican II concluded.

On July 23, 1965, between the third and fourth sessions of Vatican II, Monsignor Gilb was on vacation in Carmel, California, playing golf with Father Juan Arzube, who later became a bishop. Taking Monsignor Gilb's place as priest-secretary while he was gone was Father John B. Thom, a 32-year-old priest who had recently returned from Catholic University and was temporarily assigned to the chancery. Dorothy M. Bressie, a 55-year-old nurse that newspaper accounts reported as being fired from her last job for "emotional instability", came to the chancery and asked to see the cardinal. Father Thom escorted her into a conference room, and minutes after entering Bressie shot Father Thom twice with a derringer, hitting him in the heart and the head. The young priest stumbled out of the room, collapsed and died. Monsignor Francis J. Weber, the archivist emeritus for the Los Angeles Archdiocese, then a young priest, was close by and gave Father Thom last rites. When Monsignor Gilb learned of this tragic event he was emotionally devastated and grieved for years, according to Bishop Ryan. Nevertheless, only a few days after this tragedy Monsignor Gilb served as the master of ceremony at the funeral Mass of Father Thom, which Cardinal



Cardinal McIntyre and Monsignor Gilb en route to Vatican II

McIntyre presided over. Bishop Ryan emphasized that Monsignor Gilb was a sensitive man who felt that he was the person who should have been there, and not Father Thom. Bressie was found not guilty by reason of insanity and released from a mental facility in 1968 after a sanity hearing.

On November 10, 1967, after almost four years as the cardinal's priest-secretary, Monsignor Gilb was re-assigned to become assistant director of the Catholic Youth Organization and went to Sacred Heart Parish in Lincoln Heights to live. On August 12, 1969, he was made an associate pastor at Sacred Heart and served in that capacity for almost a year.

On July 1, 1970, Monsignor Gilb, at the age of 40, was made the administrator and then pastor at Our Lady of Perpetual Help (OLPH) in Los Nietos, a heavily Hispanic community west of Whittier. He grew to love that parish and its parishioners and frequently talked about his days there. Under his guidance, amongst many

other things, the parish built a new church and instituted a Spanish Mass. It was at OLPH that he developed his taste for menudo. He judged all menudo thereafter as how it compared to the menudo prepared by the OLPH parishioners.

OLPH parishioners of that era recalled how through Monsignor Gilb's leadership Mass attendance increased, due in part to the ministries he created, which are active to this day. One of these was the Concilio de Damas (Council of Women), as well as similar organizations for men and seniors. He hosted big parties featuring the visiting bishop after confirmations and made sure there was a plaza outside the new church to promote socialization in the parish. He instituted the important

Hispanic Christmas celebration, the Posada, which continues to this day.

Another important practice he started at OLPH were classes for the sponsors of those receiving the Sacraments of Initiation, baptism, first communion and confirmation. Monsignor Gilb told one of these parishioners when she became engaged that if she was looking for a mere contract to go to Las Vegas, but that if she wanted a sacrament and a loving, lasting relationship he would help her to assure that happened. His wise counsel has stayed with her over the decades and has enriched her life and marriage.

Father Vincent Barrett, the second pastor of Saint John Fisher (SJF), died on April 8, 1985, and Cardinal Timothy

Manning appointed Monsignor Gilb the third pastor at SJF on July 9, 1985. He dutifully accepted this new challenge and drove those 31 miles to his new parish on the hill to begin a new chapter in his life.

On his arrival Monsignor Gilb was welcomed by Father Jarlath Cunnane and Father Kevin Kostelnik, the associate pastors assigned to the parish; Dan Finnegan, the chair of the parish council; and many of the parishioners he would now shepherd.

Things were happening in the vibrant SJF parish, and less than a year after the new pastor's arrival he orchestrated the parish's 25th anniversary celebration. On May 4, 1986, Archbishop Roger Mahony celebrated the parish's silver anniversary Mass on the football field of Rolling Hills High School before 4,000 parishioners and friends.

Earlier in 1986 Monsignor Gilb had announced plans for a parish activity center (Barrett Hall), which was opened in December 1987.

In 1988 Monsignor Gilb was elevated to Prelate of Holiness by Saint Pope John Paul II. This is a higher rank of monsignor and was given to only 43 priests in the archdiocese that year for their dedicated and outstanding service to the church.

Monsignor Gilb always gave his support to the parish youth and their education. He was a frequent visitor at the parish school, and the Monsignor Eugene A. Gilb Tuition Fund continues to this day at Saint John Fisher School. The Religious Education Department within the parish thrived. In 1988 a two-year pilot plan of the Confirmation Catechumenate was instituted in the parish and later adopted throughout the archdiocese. In 1992 the children's Liturgy of the Word became a part of the Sunday 9:00 A.M. Mass, while the teen Mass was inaugurated at the Sunday 5:00 P.M. Mass. Grant Hungerford, the



Monsignor Gilb introducing his mother to Saint Pope John Paul II

SJF music director and only remaining staff member hired by Monsignor Gilb, recalled how Monsignor supported the music ministry and the parish youth. A lasting memory of Hungerford's is how Monsignor Gilb accompanied 45 SJF teenagers to World Youth Day in Denver, Colorado.

In early 1994 Monsignor Gilb realized that the church, originally built in 1962 as the parish auditorium, was in dire need of renovations. The lighting required improvement, the carpet was badly worn, the roof was leaking, the heating/air conditioning unit was in bad shape, the sound system had to be upgraded and the entire building required painting.

Liturgically he wanted to adapt as many Vatican II recommendations as possible. He reversed the location of the altar putting it closer to the choir; removed the tabernacle from the altar, placing it in the new chapel of adoration; and built the north transept that featured the beautiful stained-glass windows of Isabel Helen Piczek, depicting the seven Sacraments.

He decided to do all the construction and improvements at one time with as little disruption to parish life as possible, instructing the contractor to begin work immediately after Easter Sunday and have everything complete by Christmas. During the construction, Mass was held in Barrett Hall. Due to Monsignor Gilb's constant attention and communication with the contractor the work was completed by Christmas as planned. At the dedication Mass of the newly renovated church, celebrated by Cardinal Mahony, Otis Wright, representing the pastoral council, concluded his remarks by saying, "This splendid church is our monument to our heavenly Father. However, the fact of its existence will always be a monument to Monsignor Gilb."

Monsignor Gilb was asked late in his life to reflect on Vatican II and what he felt were the most important changes in the church as a result of it. He said that there were many, from liturgy to church architecture, and that various books had been written regarding all of them. However, he opined that one of the most profound was that the congregation went from being observers of the Mass to being participants. Prior to Vatican II parishioners were "pay & pray" Catholics, simply watching the priest conduct Mass in Latin. After the council they became participants throughout the celebration, including cantors, readers of the Word, bringing the gifts to the altar, distributing the Body and Blood of Christ to the congregation and much more. And that the Mass is said in the vernacular of the community helps this universal involvement.

He pointed out the number of ministries at SJF, almost 80, whereas prior to Vatican II there were only a few,

such as the Sodality, Altar Society and Saint Vincent DePaul. This increase in ministries fosters unity in parish prayer life, as well as generates more social interaction amongst parishioners.

On July 1, 1999, Monsignor Gilb retired his pastorate at SJF and was replaced by Monsignor David A. Sork. At that time Father Michael C. Rocha was the associate pastor and Gayle Plecha chair of the pastoral council.

In the summer of 1997 Monsignor Gilb was vacationing at Lake Arrowhead and happened to be at the baptism of one of Steve and Pam Geraghty's children. They knew Monsignor from SJF and asked him if he would like to stay at an apartment they had on the lake near their house. He accepted the invitation. Over the next 20 years he frequently escaped to that apartment, and a strong bond developed between Monsignor and the Geraghty Family, with them being critical to his care late in his life.

The first two years after he retired, he spent a great deal of time



Gene Gilb assists Archbishop James Francis Cardinal McIntyre celebrating Mass at Saint John's Seminary.



Monsignor Gilb (right) and Mike McCarthy (left) with a fellow flying enthusiast at Zamperini Field

at the Lake Arrowhead apartment entertaining guests, sailing on the lake and ministering to the pastoral needs of those in the community who sought it. The Geraghtys fondly recalled how when he would say an outdoor Mass on the edge of the lake, people walking past would stop to listen to Monsignor's homilies. He also traveled throughout California and beyond, almost always driving, during those two years.

He took pride in knowing the highways and lesser known roads throughout California. Monsignor could tell you about Saint Patrick's Day in Murphy's, the Christmas Parade of Lights in Sutter Creek or when to visit any of the California Missions and the best route to reach them, since he had been there and had done that. He advised his friends that if they were near Lockeford, California, to stop at the butcher shop there since they made the best sausage in the state.

Once he returned to live in the rectory on a regular basis, he continued to be a beloved figure on the SJF campus and throughout the community. He

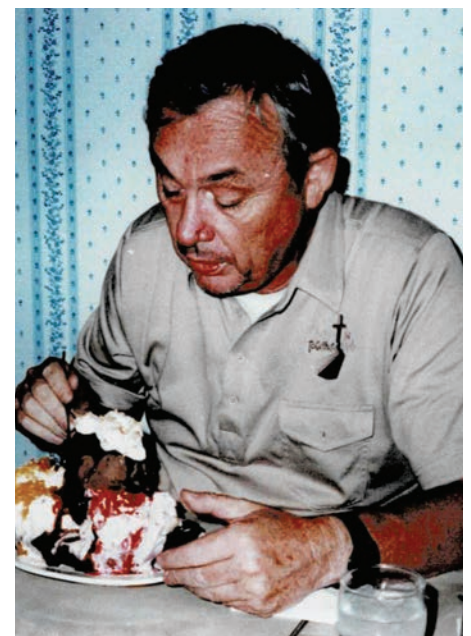
frequently said Mass at the church, or at the neighboring Daughters of Mary and Joseph Chapel for the Sisters, whose friendship he treasured. After some of those weekday Masses he would invite everyone in attendance to join him for breakfast at Bristol Farms, the Hot n' Tot or another one of his favorite spots. He would visit the parish school and spend time in several classrooms. The younger children sat around him to ask questions and he took great pleasure in that.

He was often seen throughout the community socializing with his legion of friends or simply having a quiet meal at one of his favorite restaurants. Giorgio Borrelli, the owner of Giorgio's, recalled how Monsignor was the only person who received valet parking at his restaurant. When it became difficult for him to walk Monsignor would leave his car in front of the restaurant and Giorgio then parked it for him. A SJF parishioner in the food industry knowing Monsignor's fondness for meat provided Monsignor with boxes of different cuts, but since he had no

place to store it Giorgio kept it in his freezer. Giorgio then prepared it for Monsignor along with the rest of his order, which always included dessert. Giorgio's was frequented by many SJF parishioners who always came by to speak with Monsignor Gilb whenever he was there.

Monsignor Gilb's three brothers had 15 children between them and numerous grandchildren. Monsignor baptized and married many of them, and when able traveled with his family. He often reminisced about growing up with his brothers and parents in Los Angeles.

Monsignor was a man of great depth with many interests. He learned to fly when he was 29 years old and while at SJF often flew with parishioner retired General Mike McCarthy, a World War II fighter pilot, in his Cessna 172. Monsignor also flew to various events around the country with his good friend Tom Villardi in Tom's Hawker 700 two engine jet, which Monsignor was also capable of flying. Monsignor had a good golf game and was proud he had played over 250 courses in California. He was an excellent sailor, having sailed to Santa Catalina Island



Monsignor Gilb enjoying dessert

several times. His nephew Jeff Gilb recounted how his uncle Gene took him and other family members to Catalina on sailing excursions and how much fun they were. Monsignor loved trains and took trips on them and built an extraordinary model train set at Arrowhead. Monsignor's love of gadgets was well known, from his Monsignor Mobile to the latest navigational equipment in his car. Some of his favorite reading was the Sharper Image Catalog

These secular interests, however, paled when compared to his love of the Church and the priesthood. Perhaps his greatest charism was his ability to preach the word of God. Catholics and non-Catholics alike, have commented on how meaningful and evangelizing Monsignor Gilb's sermons were, frequently drawing them back to church to hear more. He put this gift

on display before a packed SJF church at the Mass celebrating the 60th anniversary of his ordination. In his compelling homily that day he urged his flock to listen to and heed what is said in Psalm 23. He certainly lived his life guided by the beautiful words of that Old Testament text.

The Roman Catholic Church had eight papacies during his life and Monsignor was honored and proud to have personally met Pope Pius XII, Pope Paul VI and Saint Pope John Paul II.

As unique as Monsignor Gilb was in many ways, he at the same time was very much like his brother priests. Like them he baptized us; heard our confessions; consecrated bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ for our spiritual nourishment; married us; gave us wise counsel; and finally blessed and buried us. These are

things that these men do daily. Things we need and hunger for.

Monsignor Gilb's health deteriorated later in his life and in August 2014, after living in the SJF rectory for 29 years he moved to Nazareth House in West Los Angeles. He stayed there for 11 months and then relocated to the Little Sisters of the Poor Jeanne Jugan Residence in San Pedro.

Monsignor Gilb had returned to the South Bay. He was now close to his parish, his friends, his favorite restaurants and old haunts. The Little Sisters and their staff loved and cared for him, while the other residents became friends that he enjoyed visiting and dining with. Many SJF parishioners, friends and family visited him and generously shared with him various items and services. He was happy and felt blessed, but various aches and pains began to become chronic in the latter years of his life. Eventually on certain days his back pain was so severe he would be unable to move without assistance.

On January 4, 2019, Monsignor was told that his dear friend of 34 years Mary Stankey had passed away the day before. He struggled to sit up in his bed, his eyes reddened, and a tear ran down his cheek. The bearer of the news clumsily tried to find something appropriate to say, finally stating, "It's tough Monsignor, but you know the deal." He slowly lifted his head and softly said, "Yes. I know the deal. But that doesn't mean I can't be sad. I am losing all my friends."

Early the morning of May 25, 2019, after being visited by family and friends for the last time, and in the company of the Little Sisters, Monsignor Eugene A. Gilb returned to the Lord he so faithfully served. Now he too, as Psalm 23 reads, "...dwells in the house of the Lord for years to come." 142 days after Mary's passing, Monsignor joined her



Monsignor Gilb's foursome at a charity golf event



Epilogue

At 1:00 P.M. on August 3, 2019, Monsignor Sork conducted the Rite of Committal, and Monsignor Gilb's remains were placed in the SJF columbarium. On this sundrenched, breezy afternoon 60 men and women came to touch Monsignor's urn and silently utter their final goodbyes. It is so appropriate he resides for eternity in front of the fountain he had placed at the entrance of the old church when it was remodeled and later moved to its present location. He really liked that fountain.

and all the friends and family he so dearly missed.

On May 30, 2019, Monsignor Gilb was once again prostrated on an altar. This time it was at SJF before Archbishop Jose Gomez who was presiding over Monsignor's funeral Mass. The last time he laid prostrate like this was 62 years and 27 days before at Saint Vibiana's Cathedral when Cardinal McIntyre ordained him. Cardinal Mahony, five bishops, and 11 priests were on the altar as the congregation bid farewell to this fine man. In some of his final words of the service Archbishop Gomez capsulated the thoughts of many when he said, "We all now have an intercessor in Heaven".



Amen

