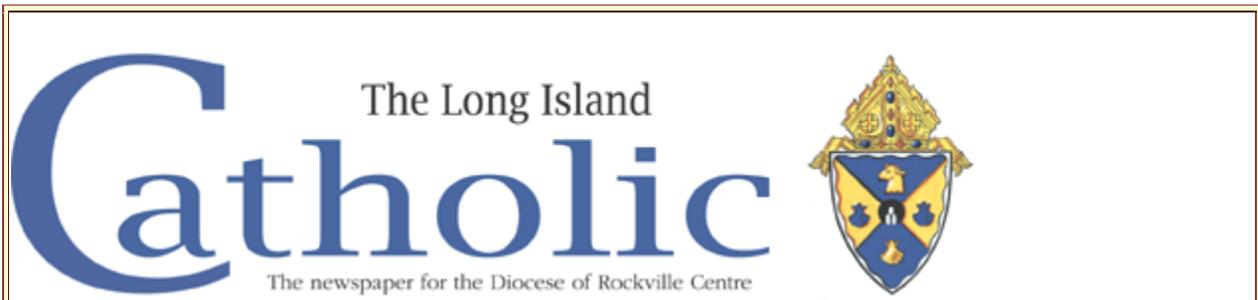


Rev James Hannon

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Father Hannon recalls interest in priesthood started early

Westbury — When Father James Hannon was in first grade, his teacher asked the students in his class what they wanted to be when they grew up.

“I want to be a priest,” Father Hannon replied. His teacher told him to say a Hail Mary every night **“that God would make you a priest.”**

“For many years I did that,” said Father Hannon. Fifty years ago, those prayers were answered when he was ordained a priest. Next month, he celebrates his 50th anniversary at two different parishes — St. Anne’s in Brent-wood, where he served the longest, and St. Brigid’s here, where he is now in residence.

“The main celebration will be in Brentwood on June 3 at the 5 p.m. Mass,” Father Hannon said, with an informal reception afterward. “They also wanted to have something here at St. Brigid’s June 10 at the 11:30 a.m. Mass. I may also offer a Mass at some of the other parishes that I served.”

The son of Irish immigrants, he grew up in the parish of St. Thomas Aquinas, Brooklyn. His father was a New York City police officer and his mother a homemaker.

Brooklyn stickball player

He continued praying about his vocation but also found time for stickball. One priest who influenced him was Msgr. Thomas Campbell, a young priest who directed the altar servers and often played stickball with the boys.

“He was like me, a Brooklyn stickball player,” Father Hannon said. “There was a dignity about him, too, and he was a very good preacher. I wanted to be like him.”

Father Hannon attended Cathedral Preparatory High School, where he especially enjoyed studying foreign languages. He admired the priests who taught him, particularly Msgr. Eugene Molloy, an English teacher. “He was very wise. A lot of that wisdom came from reading poetry,” Father Hannon said.

Father Hannon continued on to Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington. “It was a crucial time. The fellows I was closest to left.” He thought about his vocation, eventually deciding that he was drawn to the priesthood for the right reason.

Though he had been preparing for the Diocese of Brooklyn, shortly before his ordination the Vatican announced the creation of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, separating Nassau and Suffolk counties from the Diocese of Brooklyn. He and his classmates were ordained June 1, 1957 for two different dioceses.

Because his father had moved to Islip Terrace, he came to the new diocese. Father Hannon’s first assignment was St. Joseph’s Church in Kings Park.

“It was a very good parish for a new priest. There was a Catholic school that you could visit and we were across the street from the public high school. I went to sporting events and school plays,” Father Hannon said.

After five years, he was assigned to a new parish, Holy Name Church in Woodbury. “It was different. There was a potato field there, no church, and no place for the priests.

“They told me at first, ‘Go on vacation.’” When he came back, “they told me, ‘Go on retreat.’” After his retreat, he was assigned to live in the rectory at St. Edward the Confessor Church in Syosset. Later, the parish bought a house for the priests

to live. "We had weekday Mass in the basement."

Sunday Mass was at the Syosset Theater on Jericho Turnpike until the church was built. "It was lonely at times, so you had to adapt, do home visits and discussion groups."

After a year he became chaplain at Meadowbrook (now Nassau University) Hospital. "I loved the ministry. You couldn't have something more important than taking care of the sick and the dying. Often, those who were dying were very inspiring."

"I often played ball with the doctors. I got to understand the great pressure many are under," Father Hannon said. The physical demands of chaplaincy, however, wore on him. "In those days, there were no Eucharistic ministers, so you had to go up and down steps trying to beat the breakfast trays to the patients."

Interest in Spanish

From 1966 to 1968 he was associate pastor at St. Ignatius Martyr Church, Long Beach. "It was a good experience, too. I met a variety of people. I started a Spanish Mass." He'd taken graduate courses in Spanish, Italian, and French.

He was transferred to the Sisters of St. Joseph motherhouse in Brentwood in 1968, where he was one of several chaplains. "Some of the sisters were beautiful souls," and he liked spending time with the students at the Academy of St. Joseph. After three years, he became associate pastor of St. Matthew's in Dix Hills for eight years.

In 1979, Father Hannon began one of his longer assignments, associate pastor of St. Jude's Church in Mastic Beach, until 1990. "It was different. It was a lower-income parish and you had a number of poor parishioners. You try to work with people." He also enjoyed offering Masses in Spanish and Italian.

From there, he went to Sacred Heart Church in Cutchogue for five years. "It was also different. It was like a New England town. It was also the first time I got to know a lot of Polish people. I learned to appreciate their culture," Father Hannon said.

There was also a need for Spanish ministry, including to some of the migrant workers on the farms. "Sometimes I said Mass at the farms." He liked visiting North Fork Catholic School, now Our Lady of Mercy Regional School on the parish grounds.

His last assignment was St. Anne's, Brentwood, where he remained until his retirement last year. "I was very happy there. We had a good staff of priests, deacons, and lay people, with Father Gerry Twomey and Father Tom St. Pierre as the co-pastors."

“It was a wonderful community, mostly Hispanics, but there was a strong Haitian presence,” Father Hannon said. With his interest in languages, he vacationed in countries that some of his parishioners were from, such as El Salvador, Haiti, Chile, and Argentina.

“They also had a soup kitchen, and I liked to spend time talking with the people,” he noted. “One older man once told me that he never talked to a priest like that before.”

As he looks back on his 50 years, Father Hannon feels satisfaction and gratitude. “I feel that being a priest was what I could do to best serve God and help people.

“Every assignment, every parish I went to, I learned something and met different kinds of people,” Father Hannon said. “And everywhere you go, people need a priest.”