

Msgr. Joseph L. Mathis, 85; founded Allentown parish in 1927



Msgr. Joseph L. Mathis, 85, founder and pastor emeritus of Our Lady Help of Christians Catholic Church, Allentown, died Monday in Sacred Heart Hospital. He resided at the Villa for Retired Priests, adjoining Holy Family Manor, Bethlehem.

Known for his ever-present cigars and determination to build a parish, Msgr. Mathis founded the 128th parish of the Allentown diocese in 1927, when it was still part of the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

At that time, the church was in a two-room schoolhouse in the Rittersville section of Allentown, and had only 27 families in the parish. There now are about 670 families in the parish.

Msgr. Mathis served as "janitor, grass cutter, sometime-carpenter and school bus driver" during the first years of the newly formed church and school, a history of the parish notes.

In 1964, a new church was dedicated, and in 1977, Msgr. Mathis was named pastor emeritus there.

Born in Philadelphia, he was a son of the late Joseph and Elizabeth (Denk) Mathis.

Msgr. Mathis attended Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia and was ordained a priest of the Philadelphia Archdiocese in 1922 by the late Dennis Cardinal Dougherty.

Msgr. Mathis was an assistant pastor at Sacred Heart Church, Allentown; St. Alphonsus Church, Philadelphia, and Annunciation BVM, Catasauqua, for the next five years.

He was chosen by Cardinal Dougherty in 1927 to be the founding pastor of Our Lady Help of Christians Church, where he remained until his death.

In 1975, Pope Paul VI named him a monsignor.

The monsignor celebrated the 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood in 1972 with a celebration at the Northampton Community Center.

In 1977, the Golden Jubilee of the founding of the parish was celebrated.

Msgr. Mathis also was chaplain to patients at Allentown State Hospital until 1975.

He is survived by two sisters, Sister Alphonse, SCC, of Danville, Montour County, and Sister Annunciata, SCC, of Camp Hill, Cumberland County.

A scripture service will be at 7:30 p.m. today in Our Lady Help of Christians Church, with a Mass of Christian Burial at 11 a.m. tomorrow in the church. Allentown Bishop Joseph McShea will be the principal celebrant.

Calling hours will be after the scripture service until the Mass of Christian Burial in the church. Burial will take place in Most Holy Redeemer Cemetery, Philadelphia.

The William J. O'Donnell Funeral Home, 908 Hanover Ave., Allentown, is in charge of arrangements.