

A builder

Msgr. Donovan opened door after door

When the Rev. Lawrence W. Donovan first came to Toms River in 1949, he probably had little idea of the building that he was to do. Father Donovan came to town as a 37-year-old priest with a dozen years' experience in pastoral work around the Roman Catholic Diocese of Trenton.

His new assignment was as pastor of St. Joseph's parish, then made up of about 400 families. Few in Toms River realized in those days the amount and rapid pace of growth that was about to pour down on the area. Toms River, indeed all of central Ocean County, was about to change, and St. Joseph's parish was to change with it.

Father Donovan, born in Massachusetts of Irish immigrant parents, brought with him a ready wit and well-developed sense of humor, as well as considerable organizational skills. For it was largely as a builder that he was to make his mark on his community.

He built an addition to the parish elementary school. He built a new convent for the nuns who taught in the school. He built a new rectory to house the priests on the parish staff. And in 1961, Father Donovan went to Trenton to seek the bishop's permission to build the first Catholic high school in Ocean County. St.

Joseph's High School took in its first freshman class the following year and held its first commencement in 1966.

It may seem easy to generate the required enthusiasm and support for all that building. Unless you've tried it. Honors came to St. Joseph's pastor; he enjoyed a unique position in the regard of his community. He was elevated to the rank of monsignor in 1978. But he was better known for never missing a home football or basketball game if he could help it. In 1983 the bishop of Trenton honored him by renaming the school Monsignor Donovan High School. Msgr. Donovan expressed surprise and humility.

When he died Wednesday night, St. Joseph's parish had grown from 400 to 6,000 families, making it one of the largest Roman Catholic parishes in the state.

His friends and all whom he touched or affected during his lifetime of service to his church and his community will miss him. And from time to time, many will think of him, turning up the corners of his mouth in a typically wry grin, finding a way to make an angel smile. His vision of Heaven surely included little solemnity. For Msgr. Lawrence W. Donovan, the characteristic emphasis would be on joy. May he find it in abundance.