

JUBILEE at THE CITY OF ST. JUDE

Remembering Father Harold Purcell: March Milestones

March--when we celebrate St. Joseph, one of Father Purcell's patrons, and St. Patrick, beloved saint of his ancestral homeland--was the month of great decisions for our founder.

- 1897: March 14--Vestition Day for young Thomas Joseph Purcell: he was clothed in the Habit of the Passionist Order; given the name "Harold of the Sorrowful Virgin"; and officially admitted into the Passionist novitiate.
- 1898: March 15--Profession Day for Confrater Harold of the Sorrowful Virgin: he pronounced his temporary vows for three years, promising poverty, chastity, and obedience, as well as the fourth vow unique to Passionists: to promote in the hearts of the faithful devotion to the Passion of Jesus.
- 1909: Father Purcell preached a mission in the tiny parish of St. Bridget in Scammon, Kansas; he so impressed one young man that twenty-five years later, when he announced in THE SIGN his plan to come to work in the South, the gentleman sent a donation for St. Jude and reminded him of that early mission in the Middle West.
- 1911: In his first foray into the deep South, Father preached missions in Patterson, Louisiana, and then in New Orleans. A year later, in March, he preached in parishes in Arkansas.
- 1921: March of this year witnessed one of the most important milestones in Father Purcell's personal life and ministry. His religious superior assigned him the task of establishing a magazine for the Passionist Province in the East. Having already distinguished himself as a missionary throughout the East, the Middle West, and the Far West, Father Purcell, now at the proverbial 'prime of life,' began a new ministry, a great challenge to his talents and dedication--the founding of THE SIGN.
- 1929: Forward-looking in his attitude toward the laity, Father Purcell recommended the work of the Catholic Evidence Guild in European countries in one of his editorials and chided the American Church for "her apparent lack of anything for her laymen to do."
- 1934: With his good friend, Msgr. John J. Hickey, Father Purcell went to visit Bishop Thomas Joseph Toolen in his New York hotel room. With his usual enthusiasm, Father Purcell talked about his dream of a "City of St. Jude" in the South. Several days later, he received from Bishop Toolen a note inviting him to come to the Diocese of Mobile to establish his City. On March 12, in the thirty-sixth year of his profession as a Passionist, he wrote to his religious superior what was probably the most crucial letter of his life: he requested permission to establish in the Diocese of Mobile the city of his dream. Probably not even he guessed how radically this letter would change his life.
- 1935: The new venture in Montgomery experienced two severe blows: Young Joe Bennett received the word that he could not continue to work, that he would have to return to New York for indefinite hospitalization. To make matters worse, the unattended house on Hull Street was burglarized. But God had The City in mind: that very month, a recently ordained priest in Detroit, Michigan, asked to join the work in Montgomery. This Father Roberge proved an invaluable assistant to Father Purcell from 1935 to 1941.
- 1936: Continuing his marathon of fund-raising engagements in the East, Father Purcell wrote Father Roberge on March 28th that he would be speaking "coram episcopo," before the bishop---and he had lost his voice!
- 1943: It was a blessed month when Father Joseph Jacobi, C.R., arrived at The City of St. Jude to assist Father Purcell, particularly by taking charge of the parish. Known and loved as the "walking priest," Father Jacobi endeared himself to people throughout Montgomery. Father Purcell was deeply pleased with Father Jacobi's ministry. Downplaying his own role in establishing St. Jude, he sometimes said: "I built the buildings; Father Jacobi created the parish."
- 1948: March 26: Bishop Toolen dedicated the new St. Jude Educational Institute, which had opened the previous Fall; the first class was preparing for graduation in May.
- 1951: The splendid structure, St. Jude Hospital, was nearly completed; Father Purcell expected to open it for patients in June or July.
- 1952: On March 30th, the Nursing Home and Church at Marbury were dedicated--the last of Father Purcell's facilities to be dedicated. His co-workers were the Vincentian Sisters of Charity--still ministering generously both at Marbury and at St. Jude. Still, Father was not ready to rest on his laurels; he was already planning a national hospital for handicapped and retarded children. He did not shrink even from leaving his beloved City of St. Jude if a site for this hospital could be found elsewhere. Still less did he give any thought to his failing health--though he was, in fact, only a little more than six months from his appointment with death. As always, he attended only to his dreams.