

Bethpage St. Patrick' Day Parade Mass

St. Martin of Tours, 2019



Years ago, I was assigned for eighteen years to our administration offices in Brooklyn, not too far from the Verrazano Bridge. For several years, along with my family and friends, we made a festive day out of St. Patrick's, March 17th. After all, I bear the name of the great saint and of my own dear father so I am happy to celebrate well St. Patrick's Day in New York. Even the natives of Ireland will tell

you that New York has better parade and joyous celebration than does even Dublin. Only the Bethpage St. Patrick's Day is greater. Our routine was to attend the morning Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral, find a nice place for an Irish breakfast, watch the parade for a couple of hours and then find where County Clare was lining up to march and join them in the parade. After the march with Clare, we'd return for a corned beef dinner prepared by mother. Full disclosure: I feel about cabbage as the late George Bush did about broccoli.

I noticed that the Cardinal of New York had a challenge in coming up with a theme for each St. Patrick's Day homily since it was pretty much the same congregation attending each year. I remember one homily that the Cardinal Egan gave on Alfred Smith. Since this is the 8th time that I am speaking at this annual Mass that kicks off the festivities in Bethpage for our parade, I am starting to run out of ideas. Some would say that already happened many years ago. I could probably give the same talk as last year and not a soul, other than Eaman Fitzgerald, would notice. He is quite attune to the failures of his pastor in terms of his sports teams. As our town and parish honors our Grand Marshall. Bill Scharen, our outstanding Irishman and dedicated parishioner of our parish. I think of another Irish Catholic, Al Smith.

I must confess, I do not remember much of what the Cardinal said about Al Smith, so I read up on him. I do recall my mother often spoke of the fierce anti-Catholic prejudice that Governor Smith faced when he became the first Catholic to run for President of the United States in 1928. She would say thank God he was not elected or they'd blame the Great Depression that followed in 1929 on the Catholics.

Alfred Smith was the son of a first generation Irish American woman and of a father who was a veteran of the American Civil War. Smith's grandparents on his father's side were Italian and German. So, in a land of immigrants, Al Smith fit the profile of being from the melting pot of three ethnic groups. Al grew up on the lower East side of New York as the Brooklyn Bridge was being completed. His family were working class people. Smith attended a parochial Catholic school, and was an altar boy, but he had to leave school after the eighth grade when his father died; he then got a job at the Fulton Fish Market. Smith married Catherine Dunn and had five children. Smith built his political career built on his working-class beginnings and Irish roots, identifying himself with immigrants and campaigning as a man of the people. Although indebted to the Tammany Hall political machine he remained untarnished by corruption and worked for the passage of progressive legislation. Over time, he was elected Governor of New York four times. Governor Smith became known nationally as a progressive who sought to make government more efficient and more effective in meeting social needs, the right of women in the work force, and campaigned against lynching and racial violence. When Franklin Roosevelt nominated him at the 1924 Democratic convention for President, he called the Smith: *the Happy Warrior of the political battlefield*. In 1928, he became the first Catholic to run for president; anti-Catholics were to say that he would build a tunnel to the Vatican. There was fierce prejudice against him because of being his Catholic, from a family of immigrants, and against prohibition. **I am proud to meet those three criteria.**

Although he was a friend of Roosevelt, Smith did not agree with some of Roosevelt's programs and their relationship suffered. As Al Smith got older, he became more conservative and the life-long Democrat voted for some Republicans. So whether you are a Democrat or Republican, you cannot fault me

for being too political in this homily. He died at the age of 70 and is buried at Calvary Cemetery in Queens, the same cemetery where my own beloved parents now rest.

The highest praise my father could give a man was to call him *Decent*. Al Smith was a decent man; a politician who never had any scandal in his personal or political life. His politics were about helping the working man while at the same time understanding businesses run correctly were good for the people. His Catholic faith, which is lived and practiced faithfully, influenced and shaped his values. He lived his faith. Although we do not face the overt bigotry as Catholics that Al Smith did, I believe much of the media still has a strong bias against the Catholic Church, mainly because of our commitment to of family values and the protection of all human life from conception to natural life. Smith fought for the poor and vulnerable. As Catholics, we follow Jesus in seeking to care for those who have no voice, be it a ninth month old baby in the womb of his/her mother or a desperate man or women fleeing his/her own country to find work here in America to provide for his or her family. Alfred Smith, mostly forgotten by history, is a man of politics and faith that we can Catholics can both admire and imitate