

Passed on: Vocation and the family business

Sunday's Coming Premium

July 13, 2004

The photo of the new priest among his people is an old one. "First Solemn High Mass," it reads in white handprint in the top right corner, "of Rev. Thomas P. Lynch," and on the next line, "St. John's Church, Jackson, Mich., June 10, 1934." It is a panoramic, 17"x 7" black-and-white glossy.

Up on the steps in the middle background at the arching doorway of the church stands the celebrant, flanked by deacon and subdeacon, vested in albs and chasubles, with two cassocked and surpliced men off to the right who must have been the altar servers on the day. They are surrounded by a crescent of family and well-wishers, five dozen or more, the front row seated on folding chairs in the foreground, all posed, looking at the photographer with that same grin folks get on their faces when they say, "Cheese!"

Thomas P. Lynch is two months shy of his 30th birthday. Though he survived the Spanish flu in 1918, he's been sickly and susceptible ever since. He has been to seminary in Detroit, but because he was croupy and tubercular, his archbishop sent him to Denver and then Santa Fe to finish his training in those high, dry western climates. He has come home at long last, fully fledged, anointed and ordained, to say a solemn high mass for his people—the family and neighbors of his childhood. He will die in two years of influenza and pneumonia, ten days short of his 32nd birthday.

In front of him, smack in the middle of this assemblage, seated at the right hand of my grandfather, is my father, the priest's only nephew. It is the second Sunday in June, the middle of the Great Depression and my father is ten years old, the only young boy in the frame, dressed in saddle shoes, knee britches, white shirt and tie, looking for all the world like his grandson, my eldest boy, when he was ten.

Father Lynch will be stationed in Taos, New Mexico, at Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe. He will marry and bury and baptize and teach young Apache and Hispanic children how to play baseball and avoid the deadly sins. After two years his

health will turn and he'll be taken to Santa Fe where, after three days in St. Vincent's Sanatorium, he will die on July 31, 1936. His body will be sent home in a box by train to Jackson, Michigan, where the people in this photo will follow him back into this church for the funeral mass and out to St. John's Cemetery where he'll be buried next to his father and mother.

When his brother, my grandfather, E. J. Lynch, goes to the funeral home to organize the local obsequies, he takes my father, now 12 years old, along for the ride. While the men talk, the boy wanders through the old house until he makes it to the basement where he sees his uncle, the dead priest, being dressed in his liturgical vestments by two men in shirtsleeves, black slacks and gray-striped ties. They lift the priest's body into a casket, place his biretta in the corner of the casket lid and turn to find the young boy, standing in the doorway, watching.

It is to this moment in the first week of August 1936, standing in the basement of Desnoyer Funeral Home in Jackson, Michigan, that my father will always trace his decision to become a funeral director.

"I knew right away," he would always recount it, "that was the thing I was meant to do."

Why, I've often wondered, did he not decide to be a priest? But speaking for my brothers and my sisters, we're pleased he chose the course in life he did.

In the next ten years my father will play right tackle for the St. Francis de Sales High School, learn to drive a car, fall in love with the red-headed Rosemary O'Hara, enlist in the Marine Corps and spend four years in the South Pacific shooting a light machine gun at Japanese foot soldiers. He will return, a skinny and malarial hero, to Detroit, wed Rosemary, enroll in mortuary school at Wayne State University and go to work for a local funeral home. He promises his new bride that someday, just wait and see, they'll have a funeral home of their own, a house in the suburbs, "and maybe a couple of junior partners!" Within two months she is pregnant with the first of nine children.

Two generations later, their grandsons and granddaughters are graduating from mortuary school and joining the family firm of funeral directors that operates five mortuaries in the suburbs of Detroit, serving more than a thousand families a year. They trace their calling to their parents. Their parents trace their calling to their father, who traced his calling to the priest in this photo, who died young and was

sent home to Michigan and prepared for burial. Such are the oddities of chance and happenstance. Or such are the workings of the will of God.

Lately I've been thinking about vocations—the calling we were always told to listen for—that would tell us what God had in mind for us. I wonder if the young priest heard it, or my father, or if, out of the ordinary silence, they discerned by faith just what it was God wanted them to do. In this, I think we are fellow pilgrims, we sometimes doubting Thomases who wonder still, but live our lives by faith.

“All things work together toward some good” is what St. Paul has to say about such things. “God works in strange ways,” my mother said.