1946-1994: The St. Louis Church in the Modern World

When Archbishop Joseph Elmer Ritter arrived in St. Louis on October, 8, 1946, it was a big story, but maybe not the biggest. The St. Louis Cardinals and Boston Red Sox were in the midst of the World Series. There was no game that day, but the new archbishop jokingly apologized for coming to the city at such a busy time. He must have brought good luck, however. Exactly one week after his arrival, Cardinal outfielder Enos "Country" Slaughter made his historic dash from first to home and sealed the World Championship for the Redbirds.

It was a good time for St. Louis. The city was at its all-time peak in population. In 1950, the census counted 856,796 inhabitants, making St. Louis the eighth-largest city in the United States. By the middle of the century, many ethnic groups had been in St. Louis for several generations. Most residents were ethnic Germans, Irish, English and Scots. Somewhat smaller groups came from Italy and Eastern Europe.

But one group that came to St. Louis in large numbers during the 20th century had not traveled across an ocean, at least not for many years. African Americans from the rural South were traveling north in great numbers, making up almost 17 percent of the city's population by 1950.

As more African Americans arrived, the specter of racism, always a problem for St. Louis, began to rear its ugly head again. And Catholics were not immune from this sinful behavior.

One of Ritter's first acts still marks his tenure as archbishop with its courage and decency. In 1946, his first year in St. Louis, he instructed all pastors in the archdiocese to end racial segregation in the parochial schools. The U.S. Supreme Court would not take the same action with the nation's public schools until 1954.

But the move was not without controversy. As the school year opened in the fall of 1947, Catholics who opposed the archbishop's edict appealed to the Church's apostolic delegate in Washington. They were sharply rebuffed. Next, they considered taking legal action in the civil courts, but the archbishop learned of their plans.

On Sunday, September 21, 1947, church pastors throughout the archdiocese read a letter from Ritter to their parish congregations informing the opponents of multi-racial schools that any civil lawsuits would result in automatic excommunication. The organized opposition quickly disbanded.

Ritter was widely praised, both for his decision and his resolve in enforcing it. He was recognized not only in St. Louis but throughout the United States. Ritter didn't consider himself a social crusader. Rather, he saw the decision as a simple matter of justice.

And racial justice remained a high priority throughout his tenure. In 1963, he organized the Archdiocesan Commission on Human Rights to help support preaching and action on civil rights issues. It was a source of great satisfaction to Ritter when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the national Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964, just a few days before the archbishop's 72nd birthday.

From the Home of the "Brickyard" to the Gateway to the West

Ritter was born on July 20, 1892, in New Albany, Indiana, just across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky. He was one of six children. He studied at St. Meinrad's Seminary in southern Indiana and was ordained a priest on May 30, 1917. Following ordination, he served the Diocese of Indianapolis for almost 16 years before he was consecrated as an auxiliary bishop of that diocese on March 28, 1933. He became the diocesan bishop on March 24, 1934, and when Indianapolis became an archdiocese in 1944, Ritter was named archbishop.

When he came to St. Louis just after World War II, the archdiocese, like the rest of the nation, was on the cusp of unprecedented growth. Although the city would shortly see its population decline, after the war there were problems finding enough space for returning GIs, so new homes and highways were built to accommodate growth in the suburbs.

That suburban growth meant that the archdiocese also had to grow to keep up. And beginning in 1950, Ritter established an average of three new parishes per year in St. Louis City and County. He expanded the system of archdiocesan high schools, to supplement the already extensive network of Catholic St. Louis high schools that were run by religious orders.

DeAndreis and Bishop DuBourg High schools were built on the north and south sides of the city. Mercy High School, St. Thomas Aquinas High School, Rosary High School and, later, John F. Kennedy High School were built in St. Louis County. In St. Charles County, Duchesne High School opened.

To support the construction, Ritter established an annual fund-raising drive in 1954. Called the Archdiocesan Expansion Fund, the drive became key to the mission of the archdiocese–and flush with the general prosperity of the times, the people responded generously.

The building continued. In 1956, Ritter dedicated the Cardinal Glennon Memorial Children's Hospital on South Grand. It was the only hospital in the United States that was operated by an archdiocese.

That same year, he added a sacristy in the New Cathedral, improved the lighting there and resumed the work of mosaic decoration on the ceiling of the church, with creative supervision from Paul and Arno Heuduck of the Ravenna Mosaic Company.

In 1956, the Vatican changed the geographic boundaries of the ecclesiastical province of St. Louis to match those of the State of Missouri. A new diocese, Springfield-Cape Girardeau, stretched across the southern quarter of the state, with the Kansas City-St. Joseph Diocese covering the western part of the state, the Jefferson City Diocese the central and north-central part, and the Archdiocese of St. Louis covering ten counties and the City of St. Louis in eastern Missouri.

Ritter worked to better organize and structure procedures within the newly-drawn archdiocese. Early in his tenure, he authorized and published an audit of financial operations. He delegated administrative powers to department heads such as the superintendent of schools and the director of Catholic Charities. He created an archdiocesan information bureau and in 1957, began to publish the weekly newspaper, the St. Louis Review.

He also reorganized several lay membership groups into the Council of Catholic Men, the Council of Catholic Women and the Council of Catholic Youth. Each group had very large memberships throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Ritter also gave strong support to the lay retreat movement in the archdiocese,

and he became a leading spokesman for liturgical renewal, which in St. Louis was associated with the pioneering work of Monsignor Martin B. Hellriegel.

The Missionary Archdiocese

One of Ritter's personal priorities was supporting the mission efforts of the Church. Even before he arrived in St. Louis, his first pastoral letter to the people of the archdiocese had asked for support for the missions. It was a plea that fell on good soil. St. Louis had played a major role in sending missionaries to the American West. The role was so big, in fact, that Cardinal Glennon had called St. Louis the "Rome of the West," recalling the historic role Rome had played in the evangelization of Europe during the Dark Ages.

But in 1956, Ritter's concern for the missions reached a new level. He sent three priests to work in Bolivia, one of the world's poorest nations. Later, the mission temporarily expanded to a part of Chile.

In these efforts, Ritter was again a step ahead of his time. In 1964, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church would call on the world's bishops to "come to the aid of the missions by every means in their power, supplying both harvest workers and also spiritual and material aids." Thanks to Ritter's leadership, St. Louis already was there.

In a way, the journey to the Second Vatican Council began on October 9, 1958, with the death of Pope Pius XII. He had been pope for 19 years, leading the Roman Catholic Church through World War II. He had proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption of Mary in 1950. And, he had started the process of liturgical renewal in the Church.

On October 28, 1958, the College of Cardinals elected 78-year-old Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli as the 260th successor of Peter. The former Patriarch of Venice took the name John XXIII, and because of his age, many thought he would be a "caretaker" pope–someone who merely held the office until the College of Cardinals could agree on a younger man. But the Holy Spirit can work in mysterious ways.

Barely three months after becoming pope, John XXIII made the startling announcement that he intended to hold a synod for the Diocese of Rome and later an ecumenical council for the universal church. He also planned to update the Church's Code of Canon Law.

The Roman Synod followed in 1960. The Second Vatican Council was held from 1962 to 1965. And the Revised Code of Canon Law was published in 1983. Some "caretaker."

While the ramifications of those decisions still reverberate in the Church today, another action of Pope John's had a more immediate impact in the Archdiocese of St. Louis. On January, 19, 1961, he created and proclaimed Joseph Elmer Ritter a Cardinal. It was a moment of immense civic and ecclesiastical satisfaction for St. Louis Catholics. The next day, a related development also swelled the chests of many in the archdiocese. John Fitzgerald Kennedy was inaugurated as the 35th President of the United States–the first Roman Catholic to hold that office.

Vatican II

After three years of intensive preparation and prayer from the entire Roman Catholic Church, Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council on October 11, 1962. Attendees included 2,500 bishops and 17 observers from Orthodox and Protestant Churches. Prior to its start, Cardinal Ritter had been involved in the work of the council's Central Preparatory Commission. As the council did its work, he proved to be one of its most prominent American spokesmen.

The council began with Pope John making clear his desire that the council bring about pastoral reform in the Church. The Second Vatican Council is universally considered the most important religious event of the 20th century.

Pope John never saw its conclusion. He died on June 3, 1963 at the age of 81.

For the first time in history, the conclave to elect the pope's successor included an archbishop from St. Louis. Cardinal Ritter participated in the sessions, which, on June 21, 1963, elected 65-year-old Giovanni Battista Montini as the 261st pope.

The former Archbishop of Milan made his intentions clear in the choice of his name, Paul VI. Two of his predecessors with that name had been reformers in the Church during the turbulent 16th century. Pope Paul VI quickly announced his intention to continue the work of the council, and in the fall of 1963, the second session was convened on schedule.

At home, between sessions and after the conclusion of Vatican II, Ritter worked to explain the meaning of its documents and to put its decrees into effect. On March 19, 1964, he established the Archdiocesan Commission on Ecumenism. That summer, on August 24, he made history at the old Kiel Auditorium when he celebrated the world's first authorized Mass in English.

In 1966 and 1967 as the archdiocese struggled to bring the reforms of Vatican II into the local Church, Ritter organized a vast dialogue in St. Louis. It consisted of 2,600 parish study groups and was called Operation Renewal. The groups met to discuss the documents of the council and to make suggestions for putting them into effect.

But finishing that work would be left to Ritter's successor. On June 10, 1967, just one month short of his 75th birthday, Cardinal Joseph E. Ritter died following a heart attack.

The Times They Are a Changin'

When Ritter arrived in St. Louis, the Cardinals were playing the Red Sox in the World Series. The two teams met again in another World Series just four months after his death. But much was different this time around. The great 1946 team, led by Enos Slaughter, was made up entirely of white players. In 1967, African Americans Bob Gibson, Curt Flood and Lou Brock were the heroes.

A lot had changed elsewhere, too. The Nazis had been defeated, but Communism was the new enemy. Stockpiles of nuclear weapons created a world in which all could be destroyed at the push of a button. U.S. troops were involved in two more wars, first in Korea and then Vietnam. And by the time of Ritter's death, many had become disillusioned and were protesting against that war.

John F. Kennedy, the man who had been inaugurated president the day after Ritter was proclaimed a Cardinal, had been assassinated. Later, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., and Kennedy's brother Robert also fell victim to assassin's bullets. Those events, coupled with the anger over Vietnam led to several summers of demonstrations and riots in the late 1960s. Some commentators even spoke of a coming revolution in the United States.

At the beginning of the decade, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration had approved the first oral contraceptive, popularly called "the pill," and for the first time in history, it was possible to completely detach sex from pregnancy.

John Joseph Carberry arrived in St. Louis "smack dab in the middle" of those turbulent days. He was installed as the fifth Archbishop of St. Louis on March 25, 1968. Conservative by conviction and by temperament, he was, in many ways, just what St. Louis needed in that time of social and Church upheaval.

Brooklyn on the Mississippi

Carberry was born in Brooklyn, New York, on July 31, 1904, and he never lost the accent. He was ordained a priest on June 28, 1929, following studies at Cathedral College in Brooklyn and the North American College in Rome. He was ordained in Rome, but he returned to the Diocese of Brooklyn, where he did pastoral work, served the marriage tribunal and taught at the seminary for a number of years. In 1934, he earned a doctorate in canon law from the Catholic University of America.

He finally left Brooklyn in May of 1956, when he became the Coadjutor Bishop of Lafayette, Indiana. In November of 1957, he became bishop of that diocese. He was transferred to the Diocese of Columbus, Ohio, on January 16, 1965. Later, he was elected President of the Canon Law Society of America in May 1965.

Then, in January 1968, just a few months before his arrival in St. Louis, he received the "Pastor of Pastors" Award from the Ohio Council of Churches in recognition of his ecumenical work. He was created and proclaimed a Cardinal by Pope Paul VI a year after his arrival in St. Louis, on April 28, 1969.

In 1974, he was elected to a term as vice-president of the U.S. Bishops' Conference. And in 1971, 1974 and 1977, he attended the ordinary assemblies of the World Synod of Bishops.

Carberry was not known for daring initiatives, but he did give cautious approval to popular movements such as Marriage Encounter and the Charismatic Renewal. He also spoke frequently on the subject of Marian devotion. But in spite of his conservative nature, it was hard not to find controversy in the early years of his tenure, not because of his actions or policies but because of what was happening in the world around him.

On January 22, 1973, the United States Supreme Court handed down the decisions Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton, effectively legalizing abortion in all 50 states. Subsequent decisions by the Court made the issue the most polarizing in American politics.

Carberry recognized its importance and moved early and decisively. In February 1973, he issued a pastoral letter on the rights of the unborn, and a month later, he established an Archdiocesan Pro-Life Committee, the first in the nation.

Another first occurred on January 29, 1977, when Carberry ordained the first permanent deacons in the archdiocese. The diaconate has continued to be a thriving ministry since that time, with more than 200 in active service within 20 years.

In addition to the upheaval in the Church and the world, Carberry's principal difficulty was migration from the city. Although he opened six new parishes during his tenure, he also was forced to consolidate several older parishes in the city, as Catholics followed the rest of the population into St. Louis County and neighboring counties. The City of St. Louis was losing inhabitants at an alarming rate. The 1970 census showed a population of 622,236, the 18th largest in the United States. By 1980, the population had declined to 453,085, 26th largest in the nation. Then, in 1990, it fell to 396,685, 34th place.

Carberry was the second Cardinal Archbishop of St. Louis to help elect a pope. On August 6, 1978, Pope Paul VI died at the age of 80. Twenty days later, Carberry and fellow cardinals elected Albino Luciani, who had been Patriarch of Venice. The 65-year-old Luciani became the 262nd successor of Peter and honored his two predecessors by taking the name John Paul I.

But his tenure lasted only 33 days. He died September 28, 1978, and Carberry returned to Rome, where the College of Cardinals then elected 58-year-old Karol Jozef Wojtyla, the Archbishop of Krakow. As 263rd pope, he took the name John Paul II. He was the first non-Italian elected to the papacy in 456 years, and it quickly became obvious that the Holy Spirit had big plans for him.

Back in St. Louis the following summer, Cardinal John J. Carberry submitted his resignation to the new Pope. He had just turned 75 and was obliged to offer his resignation in accordance with Canon Law. He lived in retirement in suburban St. Louis County until his death on June 17, 1998, at the age of 93.

Archbishop John L. May

Carberry's successor, John Lawrence May, was installed as the sixth Archbishop of St. Louis on March 26, 1980. He was born in Evanston, Illinois, the son of Peter and Catherine May. After studies at St. Mary of Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Illinois, he was ordained a priest on May 3, 1947.

He worked for several years as an assistant pastor and a hospital chaplain before becoming General Secretary and President of the Catholic Extension Society, a fund-raising group for rural missions within the United States. He also taught at St. Gregory's High School and at Loyola University and served on Chicago's archdiocesan marriage tribunal.

Then, on August 24, 1967, he was ordained Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago. Only two years later, on December 10, 1969, he became Archbishop of Mobile, Alabama.

Like his predecessor, May was also a national leader, serving from 1983 until 1989 as vice president and then as president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. At home in St. Louis, he strongly supported the revival of the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council and the formation of deanery and parish councils.

He was a strong advocate of dialogue between Christians of all denominations, desegregation of public schools and improved race relations. As archbishop, he ordained the first African American Auxiliary Bishop of St. Louis, J. Terry Steib, S.V.D., a native of Vacherie, Louisiana and a former provincial of the Divine Word Missionaries.

May also continued the improvement of the financial management of the archdiocese that had begun under his predecessors. He named the archdiocese's first chief financial officer, who was a layperson, and he appointed the first woman superintendent of Catholic Schools. He started a self-insurance program in the archdiocese and improved the retirement program for lay employees.

Throughout the 1980s, he led calls for increasing aid to the poor and homeless. An expansion of Catholic Charities' programs to assist those in need continued during his administration, and he also was instrumental in initiating a pro-life program designed to directly assist women with crisis pregnancies.

On September, 28, 1986, May dedicated the renovated sanctuary of the New Cathedral and blessed the new bells and the newly completed mosaics in the church. With the additions, the Cathedral officially contained the largest collection of mosaic art of any building in the world. His legacy includes the completion of the Cathedral, construction of which had begun almost 80 years earlier.

Seminary Consolidation

Because there were fewer seminarians in the 1980s, May was forced to consolidate the archdiocesan seminary system. The consolidation program, called New Start, began in August 1987. One of the two high school seminaries built by Cardinal Ritter was closed. (The other would close four years later.)

The freestanding undergraduate program at Cardinal Glennon College, also instituted under Ritter, was made into a collaborative-model college seminary, with students living at the seminary campus while taking classes at Saint Louis University. Meanwhile, Kenrick Seminary moved from its building on Laclede Station Road to the Glennon campus a mile away. The new combined entity became known as Kenrick-Glennon Seminary.

The New Start program focused attention on the growing personnel shortage in the priesthood, a problem not just in St. Louis but throughout the Western World. Recruitment efforts had not been able to offset the effects of a surrounding culture that many consider materialistic and individualistic. Some also blame the smaller size of families for fewer priests and religious.

The culture has continued to change at a dizzying pace. Since man walked on the moon in July of 1969, one of the most obvious spin-offs of the space program has been the rapid development of computers. By the early 1990s, the appearance of the Internet had

created a new standard for high-speed global communications links available to any personal computer that was connected. A true revolution in the economy and the culture was underway.

A political revolution of sorts also was underway. On January 20, 1981, Ronald W. Reagan was inaugurated as 40th president of the United States. The Republican president's election was helped by a

crossover vote of "Reagan Democrats," a largely Catholic constituency who felt alienated by the Democratic Party.

Just before his re-election in 1984, Reagan took center stage among Catholics by appointing the first United States Ambassador to the Holy See in Rome. In that diplomatic recognition of the Vatican, the president was simply acknowledging what had become obvious. During the late 20th century, Pope John Paul II had proved to be a dominant presence on the world stage.

Immediately after his papacy began, John Paul II embarked on a vigorous program of teaching and pastoral visits all over the world. His visit to Poland in 1979 is widely credited with loosening the hold of that nation's Communist government. A visit to the United States that same year–the first of many such visits–was a compelling media event. News commentators marveled at the Pope's combination of stern moral teaching and charismatic stage presence, but no one could miss that he truly was moving the massive gatherings of his hearers.

On November 9, 1989, the government of East Germany opened all border crossing points with the West. The gesture assured the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the most hated symbol of Communist oppression in Eastern Europe. And as the 20th century entered its last decade, a completely new situation confronted the planet: a world without the balance of terror that had so long characterized the Cold War. A much-anticipated peace dividend was now the subject of conversation, and religious leaders were striving to give that conversation moral direction.

Archbishop May did not live to see that dividend paid. In July 1992, he began to show symptoms of what was soon diagnosed as a brain tumor. On November 22, 1992, an archdiocesan celebration of the silver jubilee of his ordination as bishop turned into a bittersweet and affectionate goodbye, with more than 10,000 of his loving flock present at the St. Louis Arena. On December 9 of that year, he resigned as archbishop for health reasons. On March 24, 1994, a week after his successor's installation, May died peacefully at a St. Louis nursing home.