

Strozzapreti.

That's what I ordered for lunch. (Does anyone know what that is?)

On a recent visit to PA, I stopped in South Philly, to go to one of my favorite Italian restaurants. It was started 50 years ago by a young Italian couple shortly after they married.

Those of you who have ever been involved in a family business - you know how it becomes the center of your life. The long hours. The hard work. This little Italian restaurant did well on that corner in South Philly. The young couple had children. The children grew up working in the restaurant.

Eventually mom and dad passed away, and the oldest son (Domenic) continued to run the restaurant. His children grew up, but they did not want to work in the restaurant. They had too many soccer practices and lacrosse tournaments. They were busy with all of the things that were going on at their expensive school.

That third generation did not want to take over the family business – they wanted to go to college. Which they did. One studied anthropology. One studied poetry.

I knew all of this because when I was teaching in South Philly, I used to go to this restaurant as often as I could. I knew Domenic, the owner.

So, when I walked in recently, Domenic remembered me. He came over and said, “Father, we have just the pasta for you today. A special pasta, not usually on the menu – *strozzapreti al ragu*.” Now, I know a little Italian, so I tried to figure out what this meant. “Ragu” is a meat sauce. And “Strozzapreti?” *Strozza* means “strangle” and *preti* means ‘priest! This pasta is called “Strangle the priest!”

(There are two legends about why the pasta is called ‘strangle the priest.’ One legend says that an old Italian invented the pasta one day and served it to her local pastor. He liked it so much that he started eating it very quickly. He ate *so* quickly that he choked!

The other legend says that the Italian lady who invented the pasta was having an affair with her pastor (!!!). When her husband found out, *he* strangled the priest! I will let you decide which story is true.....)

After I ordered this special pasta, Domenic sat down and he said to me, “Father, I am closing the restaurant. My children have no idea how hard I have worked, how hard my parents worked, in order to build this business. They have no interest in knowing how this restaurant started, who

helped us build it, what it took to make it what it is. We gave our kids everything...and they have forgotten where they came from. They also have no direction for the future.”

Domenic’s experience is not uncommon. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, only 15 percent of all family businesses make it to the third generation. So often, the generations who build the business, who work tirelessly to create something, soon give way to a generation that takes it all for granted...and the business fails. They forget where they came from, who built it, what it took to make it.

In a slightly different way, the same thing can happen to a church and parish. Unless we constantly remember why we are here, how we got started, and who made it possible, we can soon become like the third generation in a family business....we have no idea how much hard work has gone before us...we don’t want to work that hard ourselves... and we can lose our direction and energy now, and in the future.

This week is a unique moment in the life of Saint Mary’s Parish. Because exactly 50 years ago, on May 26, 1962, Bishop John Russell of the Diocese of Richmond officially founded St Mary’s parish here in the west end of Richmond. Our parish is celebrating our 50th birthday, our 50th anniversary!

When St. Mary’s was founded, the western suburbs of Richmond were just starting to expand. Small developments were springing up along Patterson Avenue and Three Chopt Road. Saint. Bridget church had been founded about ten years before. All of this territory was part of St Bridget’s.

But it quickly became clear to the bishop that this area was going to grow. So he drew a line – along Parham Road. And he said: “All of you Catholics who live west of Parham Road – you need to build a new parish at Gayton Road.” There were no votes, no consultation, no polls. The bishop said – “start a new parish.” And our founding families did.

They bought houses across the street. Mass was celebrated first at Freeman High School, and then Pinchbeck School. Those first families got to work. The founding pastor, Fr. Rae, was a carpenter. He built the first altar with his own hands. The founding families set to work, raising money, clearing the land, hiring architects. These families were not wealthy – they had moved to this end of town to raise their children and work hard.

Some people didn’t want to leave St Bridget’s. Some didn’t like the pastor here. Some refused to listen to the bishop. Some things never change! But those founding families worked and worked and worked. They started from scratch. They created every committee. They made every plan. They had jobs during the day – they volunteered at the parish at night.

Two years later, the first building was blessed – what we now call the ‘parish hall,’ or school gym. And the founding families didn’t stop. Next, we needed to build a parish school. So they worked and worked. And they made it happen. The parish grew. By the 1980’s, we needed a bigger place for worship. The second church was built – what we now call ‘the commons.’ The parish kept growing. Our ministries kept expanding.

By the 1990’s, we needed new room in the school, and a bigger church. The middle school was added, and plans for this worship space were created. And five years ago, we dedicated our new church.

Now, I want you to look around this church today. Look at some of the folks who have some gray in their hair, and who may walk a little more slowly than they used to. Some of the faces you see are the face of people who have been here at St Mary’s SINCE THE BEGINNING. There are some people sitting next to you who, in their lifetime, have built not one, not two, but THREE churches on this property.

Many Catholics go through their whole lives and never have to work hard to build even one church. But at St Mary’s, there is a generation of people, our founding generation, who have worked harder than we can imagine, and sacrificed more than we can understand, and done more than we will ever fully comprehend, so that we can have what we have today – a vibrant parish, an excellent school, a growing youth ministry, generous outreach to the poor and needy, religious education for every age group, and gracious places for us to gather. Most importantly, we have this beautiful space in which to celebrate the sacraments of Christ’s love.

There are fewer and fewer members of that founding generation left. We are now the third generation of people who call ourselves members of St. Mary’s. And as we mark our 50th anniversary as a parish, one thing is clear – we are not going to be like the typical 3rd generation of folks in a family business. We are not going to take it all for granted, and lose our direction because we have grown comfortable and settled.

This 50th anniversary gives us a unique chance to thank God for all that has happened so far in the life of this parish, and to ask God to direct us as we move forward in faith. We are going to celebrate our anniversary in numerous ways over the next 16 months. We will have a series of concerts and musical events – Vienna Boys choir is coming to Saint Mary’s this December! We will have parish picnics, dinners, and social events. We will celebrate sacraments, and pray together.

But we must be sure to do one thing in the coming year – we must listen carefully to the stories that our founding members can still tell us – about the work that they did, the generous sacrifices

they made, and the faith that inspired them to build this parish into what it is today. Over the next year, we will do all that we can to tell the story of who built our parish, and how they did it, and how hard they worked to do it.

We will tell that story in many ways, not only to thank them for what they did, but to inspire us to be like them. When Jesus ascended into glory, he entrusted his mission to that first generation of disciples. And after he disappeared from their sight, they got to work. They proclaimed the good news. They taught the faith. They reached out to those in need. They built the church. And in every generation, from those first apostles until today, there have been people who are willing to get to work, make the sacrifices, and be so generous that the church is built up, and the Gospel is put into practice.

Our 50th anniversary will include lots of parties. We may even have some pasta along the way. But in the coming year, there may come a point when you want to *strozzapreti*, strangle your pastor! Why? Because I am convinced that God is not finished with us, and Christ is not going to let us rest our laurels and be satisfied with what *has* been. Christ has richly blessed this parish – which means that he has even greater work for us to do.

There are more children to be taught. We must teach them.

There are more poor to be fed. We must feed them.

There are more lonely and sick to be visited. We must visit them.

There are more injustices that need to be transformed. We must transform them.

There are more hurts to be healed, more lives to be changed, more prayers to be prayed. We must do it.

There are people who have not heard the Gospel yet. There are people who have heard it, and have not believed it. There are people who have been hurt by the church in one way or another. We must do the hard work, now, of becoming the church that Christ wants us to be, so that everyone may come to know and love Jesus Christ.

That is going to take work, and toil, and sacrifice. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it. After all, just look around...for 50 years, people at St Mary's have said, "I believe...so I will work." Now, it's our turn.