

## **Northeast Catholic High School**

I mentioned recently that I have reached my 95th birthday and the DMV was kind enough to renew my driver's license to last for the next five years – when I reach 100. One thing about living this long is: you finally begin to understand how things change.

Back in 1926 Cardinal Dougherty of Philadelphia (the son of a coal miner) inaugurated Northeast Catholic High for boys. I was born in 1928. By the time I entered high school in 1941, Northeast Catholic was only 15 years old (arriving at its own adolescence). But immersed as I was in the world of my own generation, I thought Northeast High had been and would be there forever – like the Catholic Church. Once it was underway the school's annual attendance reached as many as 4,726 students – all boys. It required the building of two more boys' high schools to accommodate the overflow in the 1950's. At its height it took students from 98 parishes and was run by 109 Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, 9 nuns, and 14 laypersons. In all matters of sport Northeast grew into a bulldozer. During WWII 183 of its graduates paid the supreme sacrifice for their country, a number that grew to 265 in subsequent wars.

Its dominance continued until the 1970's. It closed in 2009 with an enrollment of 551 – as had one of the schools designed to handle its past overflow. What happened? Did the Catholic population decline? Perhaps. But fundamentally it was urban mobility. Cardinal Dougherty and his planners apparently did not hear the putt-putting of combustion engines passing his rectory. Science and technology were working at a pace that was dislodging everything my generation took to be stationary – including the Church. Developers opened up the farmlands, the suburbs; there was White Flight, the decline of urban industry, jobs, working at home nowadays. Expansion, megalopolis, changed minds, the changed futures and the cultivated demands of new generations . . .

I've seen it all and am aware of the "eventful" nature of time and history, as I hadn't been when I was just starting out. And I am aware of the breakup such change creates: a longing for what was, an eagerness for tomorrow. But biblically, aren't we at a point in time similar to when Moses struck that rock in the desert, broke it open to allow fresh water to flow and revive lives; or as when the celebrant fractures the host as a sign that broken is open, that we are to break into a readiness to nourish more so than consume . . . Such a time requires that we reconsider a faith that takes things for granted and begin to think: what is it I really believe! The times they are a-changing.

As one writer puts it: *The grain must be ground, the wine pressed, the bread must be broken . . . Open is broken. There is no breakthrough without breakage. A struggle with an angel, which leaves us walking with a limp, a scar to remember.* What veils the Holy of Holies must be torn from top to bottom - to lead us into the presence of the Inescapable. As for me, it's definitely time for me to draw away from the stern of my life, contemplating Northeast Catholic sinking below that old horizon, and turn toward the prow that challenges me with discoveries (even re-discoveries) of mind and soul that I trust will be wonderful.

**Geoff Wood**