

Rev. John J. Hugo & Suburban Parish Life In Cold War Pittsburgh

by Charles T. Strauss, Ph.D.

In April 1969, Pope Paul VI announced that he was appointing Bishop John J. Wright to the position of Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy. The pope had recently named Bishop Wright a Cardinal and he was now sending him from Pittsburgh, where Wright had served for ten years, to become the highest-ranking American in the Roman Curia. In his final correspondence as Bishop of Pittsburgh, Wright conveyed his thanks and admiration to Fr. John J. Hugo, a diocesan priest whose friendship, counsel, and leadership on several fronts, the newly named Cardinal had counted on for many years:

Suffice it to say that I have, since first I came to Pittsburgh, rejoiced that I had the tested priestliness and scholarship of John Hugo behind me in the work of this beloved diocese. You have never ceased to be an inspiration to me. Perhaps this is the time to confide in you that I ordered for mailing to every priest of the diocese copies of your book on St. Augustine. I like to think that I thus provide an outward symbol of inward admiration for your work and dependence upon you. God keep you! ¹

Despite receiving this high praise, Fr. Hugo was no stranger to trials or tribulations. His theological and spiritual writing, and particularly the spiritual retreat for priests and laity that he directed in Pittsburgh and for Catholic Worker communities around the country beginning in the late 1930s, had earned Hugo a reputation for "spiritual rigorism" or "rigid perfectionism" in some circles. Pittsburgh bishops Hugh Boyle and John Dearden, Wright's immediate predecessors, did not permit Fr. Hugo to write on theological or spiritual matters or direct retreats while they led the diocese.²

Bishop Wright changed all of this for Hugo when he arrived in Pittsburgh from Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1959. Fr. Hugo had known great success as a suburban pastor at St. Germaine Parish in Bethel Park, where he cultivated a community spirit and an innovative liturgy that became famous around the diocese in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Wright lauded Hugo's liturgical innovations at St. Germaine's and he asked Hugo to help him to revive the diocese's street preaching operation in the Hill District, a ministry that Hugo had embraced first as a young priest. Bishop Wright named Hugo to the Diocesan Liturgy Commission and later as Director of the Diocesan Theological Commission. Wright encouraged Hugo to write, and specifically to focus on St. Augustine and the subject of sexual ethics around the time that Pope Paul VI released his encyclical letter, *Humanae Vitae*, which prohibited artificial birth control. Wright helped to fund the book's publishing and, as his April 1969 letter suggests, he sent a copy to every priest in the diocese.³

The relationship between Fr. John J. Hugo and Bishop John J. Wright in Pittsburgh provides some helpful insights into the diverse ways that Catholic Americans (or should it be American Catholics?) lived their faith and their citizenship from the 1940s through the 1980s.⁴ The life of Fr. Hugo, who combined deep faith, a powerful vision of Christian witness, and pastoral experience and pastoral

skills, offers a rich study of the joys, hopes, and struggles of Catholic life in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century. This story may also offer some guidance for Catholics in the twenty-first century. What follows is a brief biographical sketch of Fr. John J. Hugo and a few insights from his work as pastor of St. Germaine Parish and friendship with Bishop Wright.

John Hugo was born in McKeesport on April 20, 1911, the oldest of four children. He attended St. Vincent Preparatory School in Latrobe in 1924 and continued on at St. Vincent's for college and seminary. Hugo was ordained by Bishop Hugh Boyle (1873-1950) in 1936.

With a Masters degree in philosophy, Hugo was assigned to teach at Seton Hill College in Greensburg after ordination and then as chaplain at Mount Mercy College (now Carlow University). In September 1938, Hugo attended a retreat at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, having missed his diocese's annual retreat for priests. A French-Canadian Jesuit named Onesimus Lacouture, S.J. (1881-1951), led the retreat. Hugo returned the following September for another retreat led by Fr. Lacouture and evidently experienced a spiritual awakening of sorts:

For me, while I had delighted in the study of philosophy, moving into theology proved to be disappointing. Cut and dried, a bare bones of theses and truths, with the great thinkers of Christianity called upon only occasionally to provide brief supporting statements, it was uninspiring, and I tried vainly to take any real or absorbing interest in it... Dogmatic theology was reduced to a cold intellectual system, and moral theology was a science of minimums. I am not here blaming my teachers; they were merely following a system handed down to them. We were encouraged by spiritual directors to read devotional books, but these were regarded for the most part as quite extrinsic to theology. I never heard Saint Francis de Sales or Saint John of the Cross or Saint Teresa of Avila, all Doctors of the Church, quoted

¹ John J. Wright to John J. Hugo (April 19, 1969), John J. Hugo Personnel File, Archives of the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

² Several writers have taken up the life of Fr. John J. Hugo. Rosemary Hugo Fielding, Fr. Hugo's niece, has written extensively on her uncle, on his theological writing and his retreat, and on her own life. David Scott and Mike Aquilina edited a wonderful volume of Hugo's writings, which begins with a handy biography of his life and legacy. Dr. Jack Downey at La Salle University in Philadelphia and Dr. Benjamin Peters at the University of St. Joseph in West Hartford, CT have each completed dissertations and published articles on Fr. Hugo. Please be in touch with Prof. Strauss at strauss@msmary.edu for a complete bibliography.

³ See John J. Hugo, *St. Augustine on Nature, Sex & Marriage* (Chicago: Scepter, 1969).

⁴ I wish to thank the following individuals for their assistance in my research on Fr. John J. Hugo and Bishop John Wright: Mary Beth Green, Fr. John Bayer, Helen Demay, Robert Hirsch, and Urban and Eileen Karl of St. Germaine Parish; Fr. James Garvey who wrote a history of St. Anne's Parish; Fr. Joseph Scheib of the Pittsburgh Diocesan Tribunal; theologian Dr. Germain Grisez; historians Dr. Timothy Kelly, Dr. Kenneth Heineman, and Dr. Steve Rosswurm; the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth; archivists at the Diocese of Pittsburgh Archives, St. Vincent College and Seminary Archives, the Monsignor Charles Owen Rice Papers at the University of Pittsburgh Archives, the John J. Wright Papers at Duquesne University Archives, and the Westinghouse Archives at the Heinz History Center.

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seriously in a seminary course; the great Fathers were but dim and distant memories, to be revived only by private study.... Only after making Father Lacouture's retreat did I become, not merely interested, but excited, as one should be about theology.⁵

By the summer after that first year at Mount Mercy, Hugo and his friend Fr. Louis Farina, another Pittsburgh priest who had made the same retreats, were leading their own Lacouture-inspired retreat at St. Anthony's Orphanage in Oakmont, Pennsylvania.

In July 1941, Dorothy Day, who according to one historian is "the most important, interesting, and influential figure in the history of American Catholicism" attended her first Hugo-retreat.⁶ Dorothy loved the retreats and wanted volunteers in her Catholic Worker houses of hospilities and farms to attend them. "I am completely sold on this retreat business," Dorothy explained. "I think it will cure all ills, settle all problems, bind up all wounds, strengthen us, enlighten us, and in other words make us happy."⁷ Dorothy would rely on Fr. Hugo for spiritual direction and practical advice throughout her long life.

Not everyone, then or now, was happy about Hugo's influence on Dorothy Day, the Catholic Worker, or seminarians and young priests who attended the retreats in Pittsburgh. To "live the retreat," according to one Catholic Worker, meant that one had to "give up every natural affection and delight and pleasure as something alien and hostile to the love of God. One was to seek the will of God in all that one did, loved, and thought."⁸ The same Catholic Worker remembered Hugo's time at Mount Mercy: "The girls as far as I could learn, did not like the idea of being told that it was wrong to use lipstick, to go dancing and to go to the movies."⁹ Hugo's retreat caused "controversy" in colleges, seminaries, and monasteries, as well as within leading Catholic theological journals, which motivated Bishop Boyle to forbid it in 1942.¹⁰ Hugo would not direct another retreat for almost seventeen years. This may also explain why Hugo was transferred several times as a young priest when he had a string of curate and parochial vicar jobs: St. Mary's, Kittanning; St. Alphonsus, McDonald; All Souls, Masontown; St. Paul's, Butler; Corpus Christi, East Liberty.

The timeline now turns to a happier period of Hugo's life — his tenure as pastor at St. Germaine Parish. Bishop "Iron John" Dearden established St. Germaine Parish in Bethel Park Borough in 1957. For the first two years, parishioners assembled for Mass at Flower Garden Hall in nearby South Park. According to the program for the parish's consecration ceremony, St. Germaine's "was born of the marriage of two post-war phenomena: the flight from the city to the suburbs and the population explosion."¹¹ Aside from

a few farmhouses, the oldest houses in the parish had been built no more than eight years earlier.¹²

Dearden got the parish of six hundred fifty families up and running with precision speed — purchasing the property in May 1957 and establishing the parish officially a month later. The first project was a parish school; a church hall would function as school cafeteria, gym, and, separated by an aluminum curtain, a liturgical space. A proper church building could follow after the parish paid down some of its substantial debt. This approach for church building in suburban Pittsburgh was known as a "Dearden special." Over his eight years in Pittsburgh, Dearden built a five-story diocesan office building in downtown Pittsburgh, thirty-two parishes, twenty-eight churches, fifty-three school buildings, and eighty school additions.¹³



Rev. John J. Hugo

In 1959, Dearden moved on to Detroit and Bishop John J. Wright was named the eighth bishop of Pittsburgh.¹⁴ On June 15, 1959, Bishop John J. Wright consecrated the new St. Germaine Parish, his first church structure as bishop, a job he began three months earlier. The dynamic parish community that emerged under the pastoral care of Fr. John Hugo was perfectly in line with Wright's convictions for lay participation and liturgical innovation.¹⁵ According to a parish history, Wright "had special plans for St. Germaine." The bishop envisioned the parish leading the Pittsburgh Diocese into "the new wave of liturgical reform of the future."¹⁶

Hugo prepared his congregation for active participation in the consecration Mass on that June evening with the help of a professionally trained musical director from Duquesne University. Parishioners sang the Gregorian Chant Mass XVI and the entire liturgy was printed, in English, in the consecration program. St. Germaine was the first parish in Pittsburgh to have a fully participatory liturgy, four years before Vatican II and eleven years before liturgical reforms were made mandatory. It was one of the first choirs in the diocese to include women singers and the first parish in the diocese to have Mass with the priest facing the people in the latter part of 1959.¹⁷

Fr. Hugo chose Psalm 126 — "Until the Lord Build, they labor in Vain that Build it" — as the St. Germaine parish motto, which was taken seriously by parishioners who in addition to participating fully in the Mass, physically constructed the building. Shortly after

⁵ John J. Hugo, *Your Ways Are Not My Ways: The Radical Christianity of the Gospel*, Vol. 1 (Encounter with Silence, 1986), 100.

⁶ David J. O'Brien, "The Pilgrimage of Dorothy Day," *Commonweal* 107 (1980), 71.

⁷ Robert Ellsberg, *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day* (New York: Image, 2012), 125.

⁸ Stanley Vishnewski, *Wings of Dawn* (New York: Catholic Worker, 1984), 214.

⁹ *Id.*, 209.

¹⁰ *Id.*, 211.

¹¹ *St. Germaine Parish Consecration Program* (June 15, 1959).

¹² *St. Germaine Parish: People Involved, 25th Parish Anniversary Book* (June 13, 1982).

¹³ *Id.*; *The Catholic Market* (September-October 1965); Interview of the author with Mike Aquilina (May 2013).

¹⁴ There is not yet a scholarly biography of John J. Wright. However, there are several collected volumes of his writings. For an excellent account of Wright's tenure in Worcester, Massachusetts, see David J. O'Brien, "When it All Came Together: Bishop John J. Wright and the Diocese of Worcester, 1950-1959," *Catholic Historical Review* 85: 2 (1999).

¹⁵ Hugo, *Your Ways Are Not My Ways: The Radical Christianity of the Gospel*, op. cit., 33.

¹⁶ *St. Germaine Parish: People Involved, 25th Parish Anniversary Book*.

¹⁷ *Id.*; *St. Germaine Consecration Program*.

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the first Mass back in 1957, fifty new parishioners took up hooks and axes and helped clear the way for a topological survey of the property. Eventually, one parishioner's business did the contracting, another the wiring. "It was an adventure . . . a happy time!" Hugo explained, "we were a young parish . . . not older people . . . our needs were very great . . . and all we had were woods."¹⁸

Parishioners were keenly aware of Hugo's abhorrence of luxury and many of the routine activities — such as church bingo fundraisers and Christmas trees (he preferred a Jesse Tree) — of many suburban Catholic parishes. Having prohibited church fundraising, Hugo encouraged tithing. He gave one hundred medals of St. Germaine of Pibrac to parishioners who had perfect Mass attendance records during the rough winter months of the parish's first year. Hugo emphasized the Eucharist as the center of the parish and encouraged parishioners to organize "agape meals" in their homes, which he would attend. Parishioners called him Noah. Many seemed to be devoted to a pastor who, as one parishioner remembered, "treated them like adults."¹⁹

Wright was attracted to Hugo's intellect and spiritual conviction and the bishop permitted Hugo to start giving the retreat again. In the Summers of 1964, 1965, and 1966, Hugo gave the annual Catholic Worker Retreat at Tivoli Farm in New York.²⁰ In 1967, Wright ultimately assented to a request by Hugo to leave St. Germaine's to focus more on writing. When Hugo's replacement arrived in the parish office, he found a brief note from Father Hugo. It read: 'I leave you my treasure — the community spirit I tried to develop.'²¹ Hugo had two more brief parish assignments, first at St. John's in Coyleville where he finished his book on Augustine and then at St. Anne's Parish in Castle Shannon.

In 1976, Dorothy Day made her final retreat with Fr. Hugo. She described it as leaving her "refreshed and strengthened."²² In 1981, Hugo delivered the homily at a Memorial Mass for Dorothy Day at Marquette University, which he entitled "Driven by Love." Hugo was then working as a chaplain to the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in Bellevue, PA. He was also completing a two-volume work on the retreat and his own life entitled, *Your Ways Are Not My Ways: The Radical Christianity of the Gospel*.

Fr. Hugo died in a car accident on October 1, 1985. His funeral was held at Assumption Church in Bellevue and he was buried at the cemetery of the Holy Family Sisters.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, John J. Hugo and John J. Wright were developing a "theology of the laity" or a "theology of culture and work" for Pittsburgh Catholics who were living in new suburban parishes like St. Germaine's and working in new

professional jobs. Pittsburgh's Catholics were constructing new kinds of parishes beyond "the Old Neighborhood" of the city and Catholic professionals — working for corporations headquartered in Pittsburgh such as U.S. Steel, ALCOA, and Westinghouse — were struggling to bring their Catholic faith to bear on their high-tech careers. Quite a few of Fr. Hugo's St. Germaine parishioners worked at Bettis Atomic Power Laboratory (an operation of Westinghouse, the U.S. Department of Energy, and the U.S. Navy), which was just over seven miles from St. Germaine's.²³ Bishop Wright, along with Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, Thomas E. Murray, Jr., a wealthy Catholic on the Atomic Energy Commission, and Jacques Maritain, a French Catholic philosopher, all expressed their belief in the compatibility of experimentation with atomic power, along with space exploration, and Catholic teaching. Fr. Hugo seemed to have little to say about these scientific vocations specifically — although further research is required — but it is fair to speculate that he may have shared Wright's belief in a Catholic "theology for the laity" that would have embraced a sacramental vision of American culture, social relations, and technology. The Catholic Church, according to Wright, needed human flourishing in politics, in the arts, and in science.

Hugo, spurred on by Bishop Wright, labored to combat the "watering down of Catholic identity" that he believed marked Catholic life after World War II — when Catholics submitted themselves only to "minimal middle-class standards of behavior." The editors of a collected volume of Hugo's writings have suggested that Hugo described this "bland creed 'pious naturalism' or, more severely, 'paganism,' a betrayal of Christ and His savior message." However, it seems that Hugo did this through passionate, careful retreat direction as well as emphatic parish preaching and pastoral care. He translated the principles and spiritual practices of a "radical" retreat, with its "universal call to holiness," to his suburban parishioners. He wanted them to flourish — and to become saints.

The Jesuit sociologist John Thomas worried in the 1950s that American suburbanization might shatter the "time- and space-ignoring solidarity" of the Catholic milieu. Hugo and Wright did not share this fear even as they worried about the "watering down of Catholic identity." They were not interested in preserving the Catholic milieu; rather, they were attempting to craft a modern, practical theology for Catholics living in new places, working in new careers, and practicing their faith with revived intensity.



Mount St. Mary's Professor Charles T. Strauss delivering the Lambing Lecture at St. Paul Seminary on April 13, 2014.

Courtesy: Kathleen M. Wasly

¹⁸ Fr. Hugo, around 1982, recalling the first days of the parish, in *St. Germaine Parish: People Involved, 25th Parish Anniversary Book*.

¹⁹ Interview of the author with Helen Demay; KDKA Interview with Fr. John Hugo in David Scott and Mike Aquilina, *Weapons of the Spirit: Selected Writings of Father John Hugo* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997), 99-104.

²⁰ The retreat, called "Encounter with Silence," is still being given by Fr. John-Mary Tompkins at St. Emma's Monastery and Guest House in Greensburg, PA. See <http://www.fatherjohnhugo.com/Encounter-With-Silence.html> for further details.

²¹ *St. Germaine Parish: People Involved, 25th Parish Anniversary Book*.

²² Dorothy Day, "On Pilgrimage," *The Catholic Worker* (September 1976), 2.

²³ Prof. Strauss is now completing an academic article on Catholics and atomic energy in the 1970s and 1980s.

This text is an abridged version of a lecture that Professor Strauss delivered for The Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on April 13, 2014 at St. Paul Seminary, Pittsburgh. If you would like to know more about Fr. Hugo or you have stories or anecdotes to share, please contact Professor Strauss at strauss@msmary.edu or visit his webpage at www.charlest Strauss.com.