

Mason City-Holy Family
Oral History - 1987

I'm speaking to Michael Lawrence Mason age 80, who was a long-time member of Holy Family Catholic Church in Mason City, and first of all we want to mention that Mr. Mason is an attorney and former judge in Cerro Gordo County. And I was on the Supreme Court, ok, thank you judge. Let me start out by asking you to give us some of your recollections of the early days. Your early days here in the parish of Holy Family in Mason City. Well, Fr. Murphy was the pastor in those days. I can't remember, oh, who some of the assistants were until, oh, after along in the '30's and then I remember. One of the assistants, oh between '25 and '29, later became bishop in Omaha, I believe, but I can't tell you his name, I can't think of it right this minute. I, uh, you caught me here unaware, as far as what you were going to ask me. I don't know if Fr. Murphy was a grand man, he used calendars instead of a watch. How did he use the calendar? Well, for starting Mass or ending it, either one. He'd never paid much attention to when he started Mass. Whenever he got around to it. No, he'd take and heard all the confessions on Sunday morning, he'd let everyone go to confession on Sunday morning. He'd hold up the Mass until he got finished with them, but he was a good man, a real good man. What was life like in Mason City at this time Judge Mason, and what were the parishioners like? Well, Charlie Brady was a member of the parish, he ran a drug store, oh where the Mutual Federal is now used to be there, uh Frank Handlin who was the Interstate Power, People's Gas and Electric in those days was a member of the parish. Doctor O'Brien was a member of the parish. Tom McDermott, who lived across the street, a single man, was a member of the parish, and he was an attorney here in Mason City, had been for years, he was a graduate from Notre Dame. Let's see.... Were people at that time, Judge Mason, involved in the church activities. Well, I don't remember so much about the church activities in those days, remember I'm in high school at this time in the '20's there. I'm still in high school, I graduated from Notre Dame in '29 and then I graduated from Minnesota in '31, law school, and then I came back to Mason City, see I was gone there for about 6 years except for the summer when I'd come back here.... Do you recall it as a pleasant time in your life, your high school days? Oh sure, you see they didn't have Holy Family school in those days, and by the way in those days there was a chapel out on Lehigh Road, which would be to you, 25th Street, NW, but there was a chapel out there and one of the assistants at Holy Family would go there to say Mass on Sundays, and maybe more than that, I don't remember. So that was a ministry of the church....? Well they took care of it; it was up to the priest at Holy Family to serve the chapel out there, I guess. When you were in school in those days, Judge Mason, do you recall that, and maybe I'm not sure when it took place, but we have a fairly large Hispanic population in Mason City and they're members of our church, when did we see those people coming into the parish, were you around then? No, that's where the chapel was out on Lehigh Rd, a lot of those folks, the men worked at Lehigh Cement, or Northwestern Cement, and they had the chapel out there at that time. OK, so that's really how they came about? So far as I know. I don't recall any movement of those people to draw attention, of course I wasn't thinking about those days I suppose. No. What was the Holy Family high school around when you were...? I think it was built around '26 or '27, but I finished public high school and went to Notre Dame in '25. So that came along after you were.... Well I was in high school, well I graduated in '25 and I think I was at Notre Dame when the Holy Family school was built, and at first, as you know, it was not only a grade school, but it was a high school also. Right, right. Now, let me ask you this, Judge Mason, it was a time.... we have a beautiful church facility now, when did that building go under

construction, were you around at that time? Yes, you mean the present building? Yes, I was. Was that a struggle to get that built? Well, it was not only a struggle to get that built, but there was quite a struggle about where it was going to be. And the parish got a little divided about that and there was some trouble over that and Father Murphy had been here for years, and he was getting along in years and he wanted to build it downtown and the Arch decided it was going to be built up where the school is now, well over where the church, he decided it would be built up there rather than downtown and that caused some trouble in the parish, bad feeling. Why did the Archdiocese want it in that part of town? I don't know, they wanted to keep the church property together, was one store I heard. I see. And there were others that thought that if Fr. Murphy wanted the parish downtown, they should have had it downtown, it caused some bad feeling. Well, it finally did end up on North Adam Street in Mason City, how old were you at the time that it... Well, I was born 1906 and church was built in oh, about '50 something, wasn't it? Ok, so you were already an adult. I was married and had 5 children. What was it like to have a brand-new church? Oh, it was a beautiful thing. See, Fr. Murphy was sent, he was relieved of this parish in Holy Family and sent to Corrawith, I don't know if that's in Hancock County or not. It's a little northwest of us, no, southwest of us, and Msgr. Breen, who had been the dean of this one at Loras was sent here as a parish priest, as a pastor. You asked me some other men, now I'm beginning to think about who were some of the others. There was a fella name Ryan, Jim Ryan was on the board at that time when the new church was build and a fella named Leo Smith, of course the Smiths were family that lived out on a farm in Lion Creek Township, and they had their children brought into the school, they brought them into school as I recall. He was on the board, one of the members on the board, I'll think of some others probably as I go along. It was a big moment in the history of the parish to have this brand-new church. Oh, sure it was beautiful. We had an old stucco church....a little one-story place, but it served a purpose in those days, it wasn't very big, and this was quite a thing to get a church the size of what we've got now. With all the stone masonry, and the beautiful sacristy, and altar and everything. Let me ask you one last question, Judge Mason, about the time, and this was in my lifetime, because I can recall it, when the church changed from saying Masses in Latin, to a great deal of English. What was that like for you and the people at the time that that took place? You wouldn't want to get me excommunicated, would you? No, I wouldn't. I didn't like it. You liked the Latin? Yes, I do, still do today, no I didn't like it. It was a difficult time then for someone like you? Yeah, it was, and I think one of the main things was when they turned around, when the priest faced the congregation saying Mass rather than you no... right... to his back, looking at his back.... right.... those things were a little hard to take. So, that was a difficult time? Yes, it was for some of us, yeah, no question about it. And you know I think it was a difficult time for some of the priests, things went through a change about that time. God, when I was a kid you got ready to go to communion and you didn't, the host didn't touch your teeth, and now they pick it up and put it in their own mouth. That's quite a change? Oh, you betcha, and the idea of daily communicants, I think increased, I guess, during that time, you'd see people go maybe once a month or something like that. We had Holy Days that they actually put in the bulletin, you know, to actually let you know when they were. Right. And there were more holy days then than I guess there are now. Well the church is still a vital community, do you still remain friendly with many of your fellow parishioners, is it something that is still an important part of your life? Oh yes, certainly. You get in the habit of going to one Mass you know, you get to know everybody that goes to that Mass and then all at once you begin to wonder what happened to them, you find out a lot of them changed and went to another Mass. Uh, huh. Now, I was at Holy Family in those days I always

felt Msgr. Murphy might have done it on purpose, because he had the Masses on the hour and he always had people, in good weather, stand outside and they'd be lined up from the front of the church up to the corner there, east, waiting to get in, because the other Mass wasn't over, he'd always hold them a little bit see? I think there was a method to his madness, he wanted to get a new church. Well, Judge Mason, thank you very much for your time and your comments, I think we find them very enlightening about the history of the Holy Family parish. Well, I hope I haven't turned you on a bad street, but no, I think those were difficult times and still are for some of the changes, and when you talk about the Mass being in Latin, I still like it that way. Ok, thank you very much Judge. You're entirely welcome.