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Eastern Oklahoma Catholic

A "robber in a Roman collar"

Father Fulton's ministry **continues long past retirement**

feature story
Reaching young people for Christ

theology 101
From the kitchen of our ancestors

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A light for us all

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A "robber in a Ro

Father Fulton celebrates Mass at the kitchen table for his sister, Bernice.

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man collar”

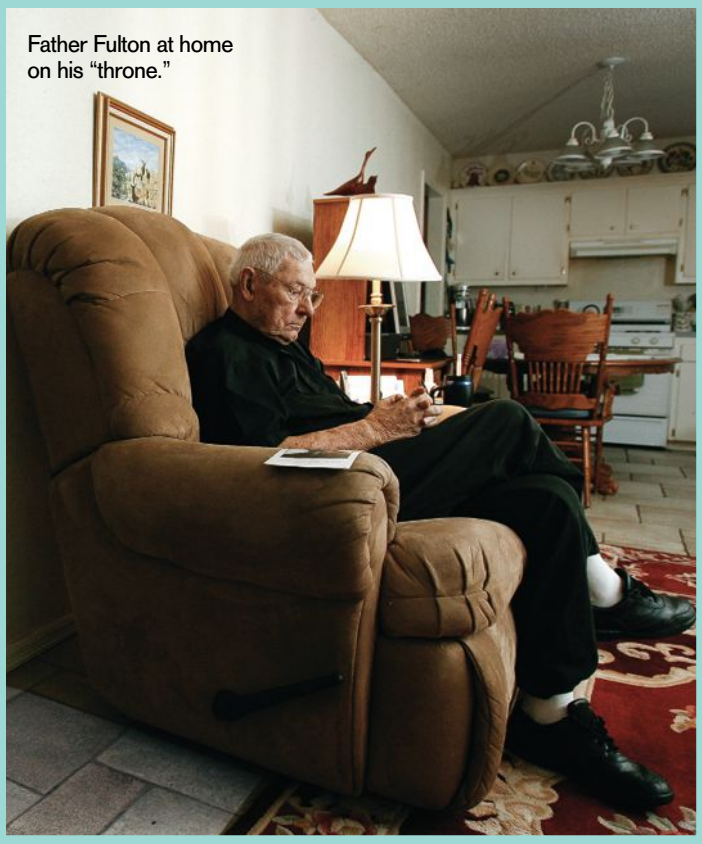
By Mason Beecroft | Photography by Dave Crenshaw

Father Fulton’s ministry continues long past his retirement

After 50 years of active pastoral ministry and another 10 years of ministry following his retirement in 2000, it is somewhat surprising to hear that Father Kenneth Fulton never seriously considered a vocation to the priesthood as a child. This is especially astonishing to the priests and parishioners who have known him over the decades and witnessed the extent of his pastoral care in the 61 years he has served the Church as a priest.

Born in Oklahoma City on Jan. 23, 1923, Father Fulton attended Catholic schools and grew up in a devout Catholic family with his sister, Bernice, and parents, Raymond and Lena. But it took the gentle encouragement of a high school teacher, Msgr. Sylvester Luecke, to open him up to the possibility that God was calling him to the priesthood.

“Monsignor encouraged me in school, gently and low-key,” he said. “Then, when I graduated and was working, he approached me and said, ‘When are you going to tell Msgr. Prater (the director of vocations) that you are going to enter the seminary?’”


Father Fulton at home on his "throne."

Father Fulton recalled with a chuckle that his response was not quite what Msgr. Luecke was expecting: "I'll tell him next week that I am not going." Still the vocation director must have presented some cogent arguments to the young man from Oklahoma City, because "When I went to see him," he continued. "I ended up signing the papers to attend the seminary."

Father Fulton entered Kenrick Seminary in St. Louis, Mo., and completed his theology there, prior to being ordained on May 27, 1950. After the ceremonies and festivities, he began a life-long commitment to Christ and his Church that has enriched the Church in Oklahoma for over six decades, beginning as an assistant pastor at Sacred Heart in Oklahoma City. In addition to his pastoral responsibilities at Sacred Heart, Father Fulton also taught religion at Mount St. Mary School, which had been an all-girl school until 1950.

With the addition of boys to the student body, Father Fulton believed that an athletic department was essential for the growth of the school. As such, he started an athletic program that included football, basketball and baseball. But since the school was not able to provide funding for the sports, Father Fulton went to public schools and begged donations of their old equipment. He also went to local businesses and raised money to finance the fledgling athletic program. As Father Fulton entered a local bank, one of the managers jokingly referred to him as "that robber in the Roman collar."

In honor of his devotion and legacy to the school, its students, and the athletic department, Mount St. Mary named its new football stadium "Father Kenneth Fulton Field" on Sept. 5, 2008.

From 1954-1960, Father Fulton served as a pastor of Our Lady of Victory in Purcell, an assignment that was followed by his first appointment to Tulsa, to serve as pastor of St. Jude's Parish, where he served for seven years.

In 1967, he was assigned the pastor of Ss. Peter & Paul in Tulsa, before going to St. Clement Parish in Bixby in 1972. In 1976, he served as pastor of the missions in what was still basically rural Collinsville and Owasso.

> "I loved working with the people. Marrying them, baptizing their children, and just being a pastor to the people."

The longest pastorate of his ministry was at St. Patrick Parish in Sand Springs, a community he served for 15 years, and from where he retired in 2000. (Father Fulton still claims the proud title of pastor emeritus of St. Patrick Parish.)

Deacon Bob Garrett served with Father Fulton during his tenure at St. Patrick: "Father was very compassionate and understanding. Any time you had a problem he was open to listening to you and helping you. He also was very generous with his own money. Whenever somebody came to the rectory, he would help. He even made an arrangement with the local Texaco station so that if somebody needed gas, they could get five dollars on his account. You couldn't ask for a better priest."

It was in this final assignment that Father Fulton began to show the first symptoms of Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a disease that causes the immune system to attack the peripheral nervous system, and which would ultimately severely limit his mobility. As his legs began to fail, the people of St. Patrick's constructed a wheelchair ramp for him into the sanctuary and designed a special altar that would allow Father to continue to say Mass from a seated position. He remembers telling the people during a homily, "I know you feel sorry for me being in a wheelchair, but I feel sorry for you because I can preach longer sitting down than standing up."

After his retirement from St. Patrick's Parish, Father Fulton helped out at St. Thomas More for 10 years, saying one Mass a weekend for as long as he could; but the debilitating effects of the Guillain-Barré Syndrome have made it impossible for Father to walk at all. "I can stand just enough to transfer from a chair to my wheelchair," he sighed.

Father Fulton now lives with his sister, Bernice, who helps

Father Fulton celebrated his first Mass in 1950.

care for him. "I am very happy for my sister helping me. I don't know what I would do without her," he admitted with a smile.

In addition to the physical assistance provided by his sister, Father Fulton relies on what he receives from the Diocesan Priest Retirement Fund to cover living expenses. He feels very fortunate to have the support of both the Priest Retirement Fund and his sister.

But even with such stable support, retirement has not been easy.

"It has been a difficult adjustment to retirement. It is depressing to want to do something good for the Church and I can only sit here on my throne," he said, referring to his recliner, where he spends most of the day.

"I loved working with the people," he said. "Marrying them, baptizing their children and just being a pastor to the people. I like working with young people," he continued. "I took a lot of time with young couples, preparing them to get married and to be a good Christian couple, remembering that marriage is forever and for keeps."

At this point, Father is able to do little more than to offer Mass at the kitchen table, continuing to offer the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of the world. At Christmas, he sends out hundreds of cards to former parishioners, promising to remember them in his prayers. And his labor of more than sixty years of priestly ministry in the sacramental life of the Church endures in the lives of the baptized who were under his pastoral care.

Kenneth Fulton at age 21, just before leaving for the seminary.

Father Paul Eichhoff witnessed the impact of Father Fulton's ministry. His first assignment out of the seminary in 1971 was to serve as Father Fulton's associate at Ss. Peter & Paul in Tulsa. He was glad to have him as a mentor for those first years of his priestly ministry, since the older priest's pastoral example was instrumental in forming his own ministry.

"He had a great love for the people," Father Eichhoff said. "He spent time with them. He visited them in their homes. He bowled, golfed and spent time with them. He led fundraisers and was good at five Masses every weekend. He was always there with the people. As a young priest, his love for the priesthood and the Church was apparent."

Father Fulton not only loved spending time with his parishioners, but also enjoyed hours relaxing with his fellow priests. On Mondays, Father Fulton would get together with a group of priests to golf, eat dinner, enjoy a drink and then play cards. Father Eichhoff said it was great camaraderie and a wonderful example of priests coming together for mutual support. Because of his work in the parish and his friendship with other priests, Father Eichhoff said that Father Fulton was a real "priest's priest."

Father Bill Swift, a colleague and close friend of Father Fulton, said, "All the priests loved him. When it came time for the Tulsa Region to elect a dean, Father Fulton easily won the election. All the priests trusted him."

"Father Fulton was a very fine priest wherever he was," Father Swift said. "He was always going to give himself for the people, whatever he had."

Retired priests have touched thousands of lives

The Diocesan Priest Retirement Fund was established at the same time as the Diocese of Tulsa in 1973 to supplement retirement income for priests who have devoted a lifetime of service to the Church. Father Fulton is just one of 16 priests who receive monthly checks.

Beginning in 1941, these priests have touched the lives of thousands of faithful, serving a total of 596 years of priestly ministry in 75 different parishes across Oklahoma and the Diocese of Tulsa. While on sabbatical or special assignment, they have ministered in four states, as well as Canada, Nigeria, Vietnam and England. They have served in many capacities, including parish priest, Diocesan Development Fund director, Newman Center chaplain, Priest Retirement Board member, Presbyteral Council member, Marriage Tribunal judge, Knights of Columbus chaplain, Boy Scout director, diocesan historian and military chaplain.

Following is a list of retired priests currently supported by the Priest Retirement Fund.

Father Lawrence Courtright
Father Paul Donovan
Father Patrick Eastman
Father Kenneth Fulton
Father Hoang Viet Le
Father John Lundberg
Father James McGlinchey
Father Thomas Melton
Father Martin Morgan
Father Daniel Perlinski
Father Edward Richard
Father William Skeehan
Father Charles Swett
Father William Swift
Father John Wade
Father James White