

Father Edward Cronin
St. Alexander's Catholic Church, Palos Heights, Illinois

On June 11, 2000, Father Cronin was presiding at Mass on Pentecost Sunday when he was moved by what he describes as “a moment of the Holy Spirit.” He recalls listening to the reading from the Act of the Apostles, which described the varied and many groups being inspired by the Holy Spirit to come together and speak one language: the last group named was Arabs. Father Cronin remembers, “I heard it profoundly.” With all of the turmoil taking place in Palos Heights at the time, Father Cronin asked himself, “Why are we not working with the Arabs, a number of them Muslims?” He put aside the homily he had written and spoke directly to the congregation: “What are we doing to one other?”

He was proud of the way many of the parishioners responded that Sunday. “Most people came out of church kind of stunned, in one sense, like, ‘Wow, what *are* we doing?’ They got that question.” Others were more directly supportive, saying, “Thank God somebody said something, ‘cause this was looking bad.” Some, however, felt betrayed and suggested that Cronin stay out of what they thought was a political issue. A small number left the parish and, many years later, have not returned. “I was publicly shaming people that were in the press, knowing they said stupid things.” As he spoke with the congregation, Father Cronin emphasized the need for reconciliation: “That’s one of the deepest things that marks us as Christians. We’ve got to work in reconciliation.”

He told his parishioners: “First of all, we’re called to be healers, not to create wounds. And if I have a wound... about racism or prejudice or whatever, my business is to work on healing that; as a Christian, my business isn’t to inflict more wounds.” He asked his parishioners the question: “Who are we as Americans?” Father Cronin responded to critics who noted that in many countries, such as Somalia, Catholics were persecuted: “Where in the world can we show Somalia, and any other nation, where Christians can live alongside of Muslims and both have equal rights under a Constitution, than in America?” He continued, “We are supposed to know better, how do to this. So we gotta stand up and take the lead, and show them that we can build a mosque next to the church. And that we can co-exist. And we don’t have to tear one another apart.” He posed another question for his parishioners: “What is our responsibility not only as Christians but as Americans, living under the same Constitution?”

Father Cronin came to Palos Heights in 1997 to serve as the Pastor of St. Alexander’s Catholic Church, known locally as St. Al’s. It was his first Pastorate; before that time, he was on the faculty at Mundelein Seminary, doing spiritual formation development with students. As a relatively new priest in a large parish, he was busy with the day-to-day concerns of his own community; looking back, he wished he had responded sooner to the crisis that was brewing in his city. Before the controversy, there was no clergy group in Palos Heights, but Father Cronin was involved in a Chicago Metro community organization, United Power for Action and Justice. It was through this organization, Father Cronin recalls, that he had his first exposure to Chicago’s Muslim community.

Until the dispute over the mosque, however, he didn't realize that there were some 400 Muslim families living in Palos Heights.

In the spring of 2000 in Palos Heights, the controversy was "building and building, in the press, and in the city council." He recalls, "All these statements were being made, and some of them rather, very insensitive, and hurtful remarks." Father Cronin believes that his existing ties to an interfaith group informed his approach: "I'm thinking differently, probably than a lot of people here, because I'm already connected to an organization that is honoring Muslims. I've already been bridging relationships. Now, most people don't have the benefit of that." As the conflict worsened, with the tenor of the opposition becoming 'we don't want you here' and 'go back where you came from,' Father Cronin recalls feeling increasingly uncomfortable. He explains that as a leader, "I had a clear obligation to do something. A clear obligation. I felt very strong in that, and very anointed in that."

To show hospitality to the Muslim community, Father Cronin established a greeting book. The book was placed in the back of the church for parishioners to sign: "Welcome to Palos Heights, our prayers and support for you, as a religious community, as a fellow religious community." After just a few weeks, it was full of signatures from the people of St. Al's. Father Cronin was looking forward to hosting a celebration for the mosque: "We were going to try to have a big tent party, picnic tent party thing out here." He continues, "We were going to invite them here to let them know that we could live side by side. And worship side by side."

Through his interfaith involvements, he made contact with the leadership of Al Salam and invited them to St. Al's. "I wanted them to know that the Catholic Church, at least, was not supporting this kind of movement, whatever you want to call it, to stop this mosque." He recalls the private meeting with the imam: "I found him fearful; I still found him very polite, trying to understand." Father Cronin also helped to arrange a meeting with Al Salam's leadership at the Mayor's office. Individually and together, he and Mayor Koldenhoven tried to reach out to the Muslim community, and made trips to the mosque in Bridgeview. "Again, basically trying to say that the city was trying to be supportive of them. We knew that we had a problem here, that we had to work on, that things had been said that had had hurt people. It was just trying to keep clearing the air." Father Cronin notes that, "as much as Palos Heights got a bad rap on this, we did a lot more than any other community did... to try to reach out to these people, and to try to make them feel connected."

During the course of the conflict, Father Cronin developed a close relationship with Koldenhoven. "In some ways I think that too was God-sent." Noting that the mayor was from the Christian Reformed Church, he explained, "they are Calvinist, they haven't had the best relationship with Catholics." In Palos Heights, there had been some divisions between the Irish Catholics and the Dutch Reformed; however, the dispute over the mosque had helped to form new bridges. Father Cronin offers praise for Mayor Dean: "He was a unique person because he just had it in his soul; his nature was to reach out to people. He was just a down-to-earth guy who knew how to do that; he knew the basic

principles of discipleship they were very simple, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Cronin continues, “Now, did he have the political savvy to know how to maneuver this thing? No, none of us had it; we were all learning it as you go along.” Father Cronin appreciated the Mayor’s efforts to involve the pastors of Palos Heights, commending his “very proactive leadership role, to try to pull us together.”

Part of the dispute, Father Cronin recalls, was fueled by what he describes as a “fundamentalist Christian perspective that sees Islam really as almost an anti-Christ”; some of those with more mainstream Christian views considered a church becoming a mosque as a “desecration.” The press tended to cover some of the less tolerant voices, including a reference to Islam as a ‘false religion,’ while many of the positive actions of the pastors and the wider Christian community went largely unreported. At the height of the dispute, most of the town’s pastors came together at a large meeting and agreed to make a formal statement, which Father Cronin read at City Hall. He explains that the pastors had no intention to interfere with the work of City Council: “We understood that they had a right to look for recreation space and all that; no one was saying anything about that.” He continues, “‘Houston, we got a problem.’ We got a perception problem on our hands. And whatever we did, all of us combined, or individual aldermen, whatever we did that may have contributed to this hurt, and this pain right now, that we needed to apologize. We needed to work now to heal a wound.”

The wounds of the Irish Catholic community, Father Cronin feels, were far from healed. Just a few generations back, when their grandparents were recent immigrants looking for work, they faced “Irish Need Not Apply” signs in shop windows. “We knew well what it meant to be pushed out. Why in God’s name would we do this to someone else? Because we’re still wounded; we never got healed.” Some in the community made that connection, and were transformed. Cronin sees many similarities between the Muslim community of today and the Irish Catholic community of the past, including what he describes as a “ghetto mentality.” He explains, “We turn in ourselves, hold together, because we’ve been hurt. And we’re afraid now to venture out. Afraid to go back out, because you see how brutal it is out there. How people really are intolerant, no matter how American they are or not, no matter how much we call it a melting pot or not, it’s a hurtful world out there.” After the veto, the Al Salam Mosque Foundation walked away from their contract: “And so they went back into this cocoon, just like we all did, in our own neighborhood, and we’re going to stay hurt for a while, and mad, and everyone’s against us. We did the same thing.”

The prejudice expressed in the city of Palos Heights, Father Cronin notes, is far from exceptional, but he believes the roots run deeper. He explains, “Many of the people living here in this community have already been through one, if not two, if not three ‘leave your neighborhood’ situations. Leaving a neighborhood because it ‘turned black,’ leaving a neighborhood because it all ‘turned Hispanic,’ leaving a neighborhood for some kind of ethnic, racial issue. And so, that sense of them feeling forced to migrate is strong here. It’s strong in our people, more so than probably another community somewhere in the nation that hasn’t done that.” He continues, “There are people who have, in a sense, been

raised as immigrants, raised as middle class people, who now have made it a bit, and no one is going to take it away.”

When the dialogue group was forming, Father Cronin and a handful of parishioners from St. Al’s were among those who participated. After the initial impetus from the Justice Department, the format of the group evolved: “They started to host these teas, and then that led into classes where each of us was given an opportunity to actually teach our aspect of religion, our tradition.” Father Cronin presented on the Catholic faith. He remembers that the Muslim participants struggled with the doctrine of the Trinity. Conversely, “We were learning things about them that were actually not confusing us, but somehow exciting us. For example, their devoted treatment of Mary; the Angel Gabriel particularly; the order of angels. It’s interesting how both of our religions have happened through announcements of the same angel. This Gabriel was trying to announce some significant things; who knew it was going to end up this way?”

While Father Cronin did not attend the monthly meetings of the group, which were more focused on laypeople, he made a point to attend their public events. Father Cronin had planned to welcome the mosque to Palos Heights with a tent party at St. Al’s; instead, the dialogue group held a gathering at the church. He, and many of the dialogue group members, recall the barbecue as a high point for the group: “We had it out here in the back, on the lawn, meeting their kids.” It was a simple picnic, but also a potent symbol: they wanted to keep the doors open and show that the people of Palos Heights, young and old, could come together. ... We knew it wasn’t going on everywhere in the world.”

By the time the greeting book from St. Al’s was given to Al Salam Mosque Foundation, the \$200,000 offer had been accepted and vetoed; shortly thereafter a lawsuit was filed. “That just stopped everybody in their tracks.” When Mayor Dean was made a co-defendant in the trial, accused by Al Salam’s lawyers of conspiring with the city council, Father Cronin was surprised and disappointed. “There’d be nothing there to suspect that Mayor Koldenhoven was conspiring in any way with the Councilmen against the Muslims.” The divisions and differences, he recalls, were “real, clearly drawn.” Long before the mosque dispute, Father Cronin remembers, the political lines were drawn. Father Cronin understands that those who would make such an accusation must have been very hurt. But, he adds, “That is all Mayor Dean was trying to say really, to honor the contract. And nobody had a right to stick their nose in it, including the city council.”

Since the controversy, he has received invitations to the mosque, for Iftaar dinners and special events. “I try to get over there as much as I can. So, they don’t forget us.” He continues to participate in United Power for Action and Justice, and is trying to get more people from the parish involved. “They are very conservative politically, they are quiet, they don’t want to rustle the bushes too much. But I’m trying to get them into more public action with their faith.” It is a challenge for the community, he says, to understand: “Why should you, in Palos Heights, an affluent white Anglo person be concerned, actively and publicly, about immigrants getting driver’s licenses?” Through public action, he would hope that members of St. Al’s might come into contact with a more diverse group of people so that they would be “more inclusive and more understanding.”

Father Cronin emphasizes diversity and inclusion in his parish, celebrating an annual event that they call “Inclusion Sunday.” The day provides an opportunity for the community to think about issues like handicapped accessibility, as well as ‘who is my neighbor?’ By approaching the issue from the perspective of ‘neighbors’, Father Cronin notes, “you start getting into the inclusivity of the Gospel. So I would talk to our people like, ‘Gee. Why isn’t there a black family next door to me, or down the block? Why didn’t I know there was 400 Arabs living in Palos Heights? ... Why don’t I see more poor people? That kind of stuff I would ask people to think about. Are we really an inclusive church? Is our door really open to the stranger? Two pews in our church should always be empty for the stranger to walk in. And it should be open and inviting to sit there.”

Father Cronin doesn’t believe that Palos Heights has healed, because “we still haven’t had the opportunity to experiment or practice living and worshipping side by side with these people. So a lot of the controversy, the conflict, the wounds, so forth, I think has just been put on the sidelines. Now, the only thing that has maintained itself, of course, has been the dialogue going on at Trinity College, and whatever work we’re doing in United Power, has kept the doors and bridges clear.” After the height of the dispute, they did have healing services, prayers for the healing of the community, but Father Cronin feels “It’ll come up again, it’ll come up again. And not just with the Muslims.”

If a similar crisis began to unfold in Palos Heights today, Father Cronin notes, “I’d be more proactive now. I know better.” His first step would be to find out who the leader of the new community was, and have a one-on-one relational meeting. “‘Who are you? Who am I? What’s important to you? What’s important to me?’ Just building that kind of relationship right away. I’d have our lay leadership do the same thing, for the parish. I would let them know immediately that this parish’s leadership, at least, is open to meet and discuss with them whatever needs to be discussed to help them feel accepted, connected. That they do have reasonable, sane people here that aren’t going to blow them off, or push them aside, and actually will help support them as a fellow neighbor.”

He believes that the mosque controversy did make an impact on the lay leadership of St. Alexander’s, and enabled them to respond to a dispute in the Archdiocese of Chicago. Father Cronin explains that St. Sabina, an African American parish, was to join the South Side Catholic Sports Conference, which is predominantly white. He continues, “That South Side mentality got stirred up about whether they should be allowed in.” This controversy spread through the Chicago suburbs, as many parents expressed concerns for their children’s safety. But, Father Cronin remembers, every member of the St. Al’s athletic board stood up at the conference and said: “We’re in. We’re playing. We’re not afraid of that. We know how to take care of safety issues. We welcome St. Sabina’s.” Father Cronin was proud of their unequivocal response: “They knew better.”

Although the City of Palos Heights won the court case filed by Al Salam, Father Cronin notes, “Nobody won, nobody won.” He explains that those who tried to keep the Muslims out weren’t very effective: “They are staying here anyway, they went down to Orland Park. They are right here anyway. And if it isn’t the Muslims...it’s going to be another

group. You can't keep making yourself this isolated, insular community that's somehow not going to connect to the world." He didn't feel that the Muslims had a valid case; indeed, he was surprised that they filed a lawsuit given the complex circumstances. Further, he notes, "We did so many things, it was like, 'How could you not have felt welcome?' I didn't get that. But I understand, though, they got hurt, and they went inward. And then they couldn't think. They just couldn't see that someone else was out there even trying to reach out to them."

When the dispute unfolded, Father Cronin was a relatively new Pastor in a large parish with complex problems of its own. He notes, "Now I know, to respond as fast as possible to both the political end and the religious end, in gathering the support of religious leaders around you in the community. And just to get people talking; I would do much faster. I would tell people now, if you've got community organizations already formed, the better off you're going to be. If you've got a clergy conference formed already, the better off you're going to be. You've got relationships already established." In Palos Heights, they didn't have any form of interfaith or ecumenical organization, which made it much more challenging to respond to the crisis. "So build the relationships now. That's all it takes, one-on-one with religious leaders, even if you don't have a clergy caucus or conference, you know the leaders in your community, so when something does happen, you already have the network going."

Father Cronin also emphasizes the importance of follow-up. "So you get through the crisis, and the tragedy. The real problem is though, in any community or in anyone's life, it is not the tragedy itself ... it's where is the forum to talk about what happened? Where is the forum to discuss my hurt, or discuss this issue?" While the dialogue group made some impact, Father Cronin notes, "Here's this major issue and we did this minimal thing. Minimal, still effective, but we really needed to do much more." Finally, he adds, "I think, in the end, here in Palos, our greatest hurt was that the mosque didn't come here. So we're still waiting for an opportunity to learn tolerance. It just isn't here yet for us."

Father Cronin is disappointed that the mosque was not established in Palos Heights. He explains, "I think it could've been a wonderful, we could have shown America, we could've shown the world, that we can live together. We had an opportunity on our doorstep. And we could have done that." While the press emphasized intolerance, and "Palos Hates," Father Cronin believes that the voices of reconciliation were not always heard. "I think that it hasn't been said enough how much Palos Heights, in particular I want to say St. Alexander's Parish, was opening up its arms and doing what it could do to welcome these people to come here, and to show the world, the nation, whomever, that this could be the case. We trusted that, we believed that. We really did. We had a lot of people signing that book in the back of church; it was not empty."