Fifty years ago this month, more than 10,000 people gathered in St. Louis, Missouri, for the Twenty-Fifth North American Liturgical Week, sponsored by The Liturgical Conference. That event was a celebration of the newly approved Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC), but it was also a challenge to the participants to study that document carefully, to see it in the context of the Second Vatican Council’s intent to focus on the liturgy as an avenue into the Council’s goals: “to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions that are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of humanity into the household of the Church” (SC, 1).

At our recent Convention in St. Louis, we made note of the fiftieth anniversary of that National Liturgical Week and of its careful celebration of the Constitution. Our gathering as the National Association of Pastoral Musicians was also flavored by a different fiftieth anniversary celebration that was actually part of that long-ago Liturgical Week—the anniversary of ordination of a priest whose pioneering work still enriches and challenges us in the continuing task of liturgical renewal.

Participants in the gathering at Kiel Auditorium in 1964 were celebrating the culmination of a century-long promotion of liturgical renewal, but they were also being cautioned to move forward prudently in implementing both the details and the larger intent of Sacrosanctum Concilium. One example of what that might mean, particularly for the priests and seminarians who were there, was the dedicated work of a man who was being lauded on the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination to the presbyterate. He was praised not only for his dedication to liturgical renewal but especially for his loving work with the communities that he had served and especially for his prudence in pastoral ministry. In a special tribute to Rt. Rev. Msgr. Martin B. Hellriegel (1890–1981), Father Thomas J. Carroll described what that prudent pastoral ministry looked like. (Father Carroll, 1909–1971, presbyter of the Archdiocese of Boston, was a past president of The Liturgical Conference.) What he said on that occasion is worthy of reflection today, as we continue the work of centering the Church’s life on its liturgy. What follows is an edited version of Father Carroll’s remarks, taken from The Challenge of the Council: Person, Parish, World (Washington, DC: The Liturgical Conference, Inc., 1964), 273–278.
The task I have been given is impossible. There is not a priest here, not a member of the assembly of God’s people here, who could not give—and truly give—portions of a tribute. There are thousands around the country and the world who would love to; but who could really give the tribute that Monsignor Hellriegel deserves?

I heard descriptions of him when he was at the Motherhouse of the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood in O’Fallon, Missouri, and I looked for the day when, as a young priest, I could visit him and meet him in the parish. I saw—and his history has shown it—I saw a man of prudence. Prudence. It may seem a strange virtue to apply to him. It will seem strange to those of you who think of prudence as meaning caution. To you it will seem a shocking word to use of a man who was so much in the forefront. Perhaps you would rather have me say the “man of charity,” the “man of fortitude,” or some other designation. But I see in him even more the man of the integrating virtue, the man of the normative, formative virtue, the man of the active virtue of prudence.

When Father Hellriegel was chaplain at O’Fallon, there were a great many who would say, “It’s an excellent job. He can do it very well in a convent. But wait until he gets in a parish.” He got that parish in 1940, and the skeptics knew “it couldn’t be done.” Then he began to do it. And he did it with the active virtue of prudence: prudence that unifies, prudence that pushes one forward in the things that are of God. The prudent Father Hellriegel moved on. Though he said nothing that was directed in criticism at other priests or other parishes, the very existence of Holy Cross under Martin Hellriegel stood as a symbol to some and a threat to others. Some apparently took it as a personal indictment, but with prudence he went on his way.

In those days there were not a few priests ready to say that Martin Hellriegel “is trying to be more Roman than Rome.” Few of us expected to see the day when, through a series of popes and through the great Second Council of the Vatican, Rome would become more Roman than Martin Hellriegel.

He was zealous for the liturgy in days when such zeal was suspect. He remains zealous for the liturgy when one of the great figures of the Second Vatican Council has made it clear that zeal for the liturgy is now a necessary part of the priesthood. That towering figure of the Second Council has said that no priest could ignore the Constitution on the Liturgy; if he did, it would be to his own peril—not peril of the Church but peril of the soul.

In those days before the Council, there were people who said, “Everybody knows that Martin Hellriegel is a wonderful priest. And, you know, people are beginning to realize that the liturgy is important.” But those were also the days when people...
said that the liturgy was a “nice hobby for priests.”

In humility today, with the humility that marks him, Martin Hellriegel says that if he had to do it all again, he might do some things with more patience or in another way. Looking at the situation in retrospect, I say—and I firmly believe—that the very espousal of the fullness of the liturgical apostolate was enough in itself to arouse criticism if not, at times, antagonism and bitterness.

For the liturgy is the very basis of the full aggiornamento, the whole Johannine-Pauline reform. It is no wonder that it pierced the very hearts of truly good priests who did not understand. We should not have recrimination but recognize that often it was the very goodness of these priests and their loyalty to the Church as they knew it which kept them from understanding. It is no wonder that it threatened them.

To many, indeed, it seemed to threaten the very Church itself. But I have been to Holy Cross Parish many times. I can say that nowhere have I seen such dedication to the Eucharist and the other sacraments, to Holy Mass, to frequent confession, to the fullness of the sacramental meaning of penance, as at Holy Cross Parish. Nor have I seen anywhere more true devotion to the Mother of God. I know of few men who have brought more vocations to the priesthood, the sisterhood, to monastic life; few, indeed, who give more loving attention to the parish school. And where the so-called popular devotions have waned in other parts of the country, at Holy Cross they have become popular. Before ecumenism was even known as a word, Father Martin Hellriegel had established cordial relationships with the separated brethren, meeting them with the greatest respect and love.

In this country the liturgical apostolate is rightly known for its intimate connection with the apostolate for social justice. Back as far as 1926, Father Hellriegel saw the social encyclicals and the liturgical apostolate as closely tied together.

Martin Hellriegel has spoken for God, and he has spoken for God’s Holy Church. Years ago he voiced the hope that he could so live that when he died two words might be written on his tombstone: Dilexit Ecclesiam (He loved the Church). I will say not only that he did love the Church, he has loved the Church, he does love the Church.