

This priest rode around South Philadelphia blessing people from the back of a pickup truck

by [Anna Orso](#), Updated: May 13, 2020



COURTESY ST. NICHOLAS OF TOLENTINE PARISH

Brian Donnelly has gone to St. Nick's parish on South Ninth Street since he was an altar boy there in the 1980s. So when the Rev. Nicholas Martorano asked Donnelly to drive him around the neighborhood so he could bless parishioners who haven't been able to attend Mass for weeks, Donnelly figured, "Why not?"

So, he borrowed a neighbor's red Toyota Tacoma pickup truck and, after the parish had advertised the procession on Facebook for a few days in advance, loaded Martorano into the bed on Tuesday evening and drove him around South Philly.

"I don't think any of us realized the turnout we were going to have," he said.

Over two hours, hundreds watched Martorano ride by. They emerged from their houses, some crying or prayerfully folding their hands and others snapping cell-phone videos, to receive a blessing and see the priest in what's known in the Catholic Church as a Procession of the Blessed Sacrament.



Typically, such a procession happens inside a church. But Philadelphia's Catholic churches, like other houses of worship around the world, [haven't held services since March](#), as part of limitations on large gatherings to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

So church leaders like Martorano, who has been the pastor at St. Nicholas of Tolentine Parish since 1984 and is also the pastor at Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary parish, have had to get creative.

"They're lacking something that's essential in their lives as Catholic Christians, and they're yearning for that," Martorano said. "So we wanted to give an opportunity to receive at least a blessing."

Donnelly started driving about 6 p.m. Tuesday, starting at St. Nicholas, snaking through residential streets and across the East Passyunk Avenue corridor, stopping in front of Annunciation church, and ending back at St. Nick's, as it is known locally, about 7:45. Another parishioner drove in front of them with hymns blaring out of speakers.



The Rev. Nicholas Martorano, longtime pastor at St. Nicholas of Tolentine in South Philadelphia.

Martorano wore a white vestment and held a monstrance, in which a consecrated Communion host is carried. He stood the whole time.

“I’m like, ‘Watch out for bumps and construction,’” said Donnelly, a funeral home director. “He had to be freezing, and he did not complain once.”

Martorano said it was a little blustery, but he was fine. “The sun was shining,” he said.

At one point, Donnelly said, he stopped so Martorano could spend a moment with a 97-year-old woman, surrounded by her family, who wanted to receive a blessing. At another point, a parishioner emerged from her home with cupcakes in tow. She gave them to Donnelly to share with the priest.

Tuesday was also Martorano’s 70th birthday, and parishioners knew it. Some held signs to celebrate and yelled “Happy birthday!” as he rode by.

But if it were up to Martorano, no one would mention that. It’s the procession and its connection to God [during a pandemic that](#) he wants neighbors to remember.

“It was probably one of the most important things we could have done during this pandemic,” he said. “It really brought some hope and increased faith to the people.”



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[Anna Orso](#) | [@anna_orso](#) | aorso@inquirer.com