

# THE VOICE

To Inform, Unify and Help Build the Parish Community at St. Thomas the Apostle

## The Deal of a Lifetime:

How One Man's Offer Led to Life as a Priest

When Rev. Philip Allen Sanders entered the Catholic Church and received his First Communion in May 1994, he was very aware of what God had done for him.

"God showed me what life was all about," he says. Out of gratitude and appreciation he made an offer to God that ultimately changed the course of his life. "Do with me whatever you wish," he prayed, "even if it means giving up my life as a scientist to become a priest." In the weeks leading up to his joining the Church, Fr. Sanders had been contemplating the possibility that God might be calling him to a religious vocation as well. But it wasn't until he had made his offer to God that the idea really began to take root. From that moment on, Fr. Sanders recalls, "...the desire to be a priest never left my mind...even when I would pray for it to go away."

Fr. Sanders currently serves as Parochial Vicar at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, but his life story begins in Red Lion, a small town in York County, Pennsylvania. There, as the youngest of three children, he and his sister and brother grew up as members of the United Church of Christ. "We weren't regular church-goers," he confesses, but they did attend church services on feast days.

As a young man, Fr. Sanders attended Pennsylvania State University, picking up undergraduate and graduate degrees in architectural engineering. Later, after working for a lighting consultant, he returned to Penn State as a research assistant, where he explored lighting systems—more specifically, how to eliminate glare from computer screens in the burgeoning industry of computer technology. Other contract work followed, including a period of time in the Building and Fire Research Lab at the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Washington, DC.

It was while working in Washington that



▲ Fr. Phillip standing next to the wooden Cross decorated for Easter.

Fr. Sanders' Catholic roommate introduced him to a priest who, as he puts it, "...had all the answers to my questions." Following his conversion to the Catholic faith and the offer he had made to God, he delayed following his vocation by continuing to work. He reasoned that if his desire to be a priest persisted after paying off his debts, he would enter the seminary. Five years later, after working at General Electric Lighting's training facility in Cleveland, Fr. Sanders entered Maria Mater Ecclesiae in Rome, a seminary where he was one of two Americans among 250 men living in residence.

Initially, Fr. Sanders' studies in Italy were daunting, providing for him what turned out to be an irony he now finds amusing. Back in high school, when he had an opportunity to take a foreign language, he opted to play in the band instead. As a seminarian in Rome, he soon discovered that all of his classes were going to be taught in Italian, along with a little bit of Greek, Latin, and Spanish. "I was virtually a deaf-mute that first year of study," he

laughs. But miraculously, when he started his second year the following Fall, he could both understand and speak Italian.

Although he studied philosophy and theology at the Regina Apostolorum University, it was while he attended the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family Studies program at the Lateran University that he soon found what would become his special area of interest—the sacrament of Marriage. "It was so incredibly beautiful," he says of his two years studying the subject. "Those years were very happy for me."

Part of Fr. Sanders' great love for the topic stems from his admiration and appreciation for Pope John Paul II's catechesis on marriage, *The Theology of the Body*. "It was truly an eye opener...because for the first time in the history of the Church and Christianity, our understanding of marriage grew by leaps and bounds." Fr. Sanders believes that Pope John Paul II "...was very clear on how marriage is an image of God's relationship with humanity, and therefore, why the defense of marriage is so important. If we lose that image...then we will have erased any concrete, visible reminder of God's love for humanity."

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## St. Thomas the Apostle Church



▲ St. Thomas under going final construction. The first mass said in the current church was February 21, 1960.

**W**e often take so much for granted when we enter our church that we do not see what is actually before us. Few of us recognize that we are the beneficiaries of the financial sacrifices of parishioners in 1955 who helped build our church. At that time, our predecessors, on one day, pledged the substantial amount of \$450,000. The reported cost of construction of the church was an additional \$10 million. A loan for the balance was obtained and paid off at a rate of approximately \$1.4 million a year from 1960 until 1967. We owe them appreciation and gratitude for their unselfish gift to God.

If we were to sum up the costs of 1955, and add that to the capital campaign of 2000, an accountant might say this amounts to over \$60 million in today's money. I would not be surprised if an architect said the costs to replicate our church are really over \$75 million.

Allow me to take you on a short journey and point out what you may not notice when you enter St. Thomas. I ask you to visualize this from the perspective of an architect who is trained to observe the smallest details.

When you enter the front door, your attention is immediately drawn to the altar and the towering cross of Jesus beyond it.

If it is a sunny morning, your eyes might notice a yellow aura outlining the cross. You might wonder if the architect planned this effect, inspired to capture the beams of the rising sun.

As you proceed down the aisle, notice the artisan work that produced the inlaid marble for the floor. According to parish records, this marble was imported from Italy. The aisle gleams as if you are walking on ice, reflecting the bright light streaming from the stained glass windows. Look up, and again your eyes are captured by the saints portrayed in those windows. Perhaps the architect had a message in the selection of saints he chose.

From the comfort of a pew, you find yourself kneeling before God in awe of this church He designed with the help of the architect. You might wonder how the structure rises and stands. Your gaze falls on the intricate and elaborate marble Corinthian columns. Looking further up you'll notice the arches, with their decorative grooves, connecting the columns. As your eyes rise higher you'll see long impressive arch supports stretching the width of the ceiling. Look carefully on each and notice the intricate indentations that adorn them. Beyond the arches, are the decorated panels that beautify and enhance the coffered ceiling.

Finally, the two rows of massive lights that are suspended from the ceiling can be adjusted to give the desired glow and inspire the mood for devotion.

We parishioners should be grateful to be the beneficiaries of our generous predecessors who made this church possible for us to enjoy. They made significant sacrifices for the glory of God, and for us. Could we, today, duplicate their generosity in building a similar church? The answer is probably no.

As you are leaving, look for the tablets on the rear walls. These hold the names of those unselfish and God-loving people who made all this possible. Remember to say a short prayer of thanksgiving for them. These are, in fact, the same people who contributed to build the rectory, convent, and school where approximately 400 students receive daily education and another 350 attend weekly CCD classes.

Our 5.5 acres of land play host to the glory of God. We are so blessed.

— Tom King



▲ Monsignor Magnier breaking ground for the current Church in September 1956.



▲ Jack Kearney, Father Doyle, and Monsignor Magnier having a little fun at the ground breaking.

# Ministry of Spiritual Direction In The Spirit of Pentecost

**Luke 11:5-13**

“...Suppose one of you has a friend to whom he goes at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived at my house from a journey and I have nothing to offer him,’ and he says in reply from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked and my children and I are already in bed. I cannot get up to give you anything.’ I tell you if he does not get up to give him the loaves because of their friendship, he will get up to give him whatever he needs because of his persistence.”

“And I tell you, ask and you shall receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

**Reflection**

In spite of the determined borrower, it was no wonder the friend did not want to rise and open the door. His family slept on mats around a charcoal stove and, it being the custom to bring the livestock into the house at night, to get up would create total mayhem in his house.

Although we need to be diligent and passionate about our prayer, the lesson of this parable says much more to us than simply being persistent in prayer. It is certainly not that we must batter at God’s door until we at last compel or coerce God to answer.

It says, if an unwilling householder can, in the end, be coerced by a friend’s shameless persistence into giving him what he needs, how much more will God, who is a loving Father, supply all his children’s needs? “If you,” he says, “who are evil, know that you are bound to supply your children’s needs, how much more will God?”

The challenge of the Gospel and the grace to be prayed for here is confidence in the love, mercy, and mystery of God, as well as the faith to receive, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the joy and abundant life God promises to us in the midst of any sickness, loneliness, money woes, grieving, or other hardships that often interrupt our lives.

Through God’s tremendous love we are given a gift so precious that it cost Jesus his life...the Gift of the Helper, the Advocate, the Breath of God, the Promise of New Life, forgiveness, transformation, healing, wholeness, freedom, the peace that passes all understanding, the Holy Spirit. Wow!

Together let us give glory and praise to God by celebrating the Gift and Feast of Pentecost; our hearts on fire with gratitude and joy! And don’t forget to wear red!

In the Joy of Our Risen Lord.

— Anna Graziano

## Irish Night of Fun

On February 23rd the Holy Name Society once again held its annual Irish Night. There was plenty of corned beef and cabbage, good cheer and wonderful entertainment.

The Irish Step dancers from the Peter Smith School were terrific. Everyone enjoyed bagpiper Scott Sim and sang along with balladeer Mike Albert, who was helped in his song efforts by Fr. Peter!

Hope to see you on February 28 for Irish Night 2009!

— Pat Hamilton



▲ Bagpiper Scott Sim.



▲ Fr. Peter leads the singing.



▲ Deacon Tom enjoys the entertainment.



## The Deal of a Lifetime

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Fr. Sanders was ordained a priest on May 28, 2005, at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Newark, NJ. Since being at St. Thomas, he has found the people here to be very friendly and welcoming. In addition to his sacramental and liturgical duties, he assists with the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, adult education, visiting the sick, and marriage preparation. He also coordinates the Respect Life Committee.

Fr. Sanders says he ultimately wants to help people to become saints. He enjoys meeting people where they are in their spiritual lives and helping them to respond to God's grace. "I want to help them to see challenges in their lives as being providential—to help them to find the spiritual lining in the cloud."

While Fr. Sanders welcomes his parish duties, he understands the nomadic aspect of priestly life and is prepared for whatever may come his way. When the archbishop reassigns him, he'll be happy to serve wherever he is sent. "A priest is a priest because he surrenders to be God's servant," he says, "not my will be done, but His."

— Angelique Butler Sharps



▲ School Principal Joan Ferraer and Fr. Peter Funesti at the Yankee Stadium Papal Mass.

## First Reconciliation

If you can remember your own First Reconciliation, or First Confession as you may have called it then, you might remember how you felt at that time. Even now, as adults, many of us approach this opportunity to examine our consciences and souls, and, most importantly, seek God's forgiveness with perhaps some bit of nervous anticipation.

For the 114 young children of our St. Thomas the Apostle Parish who celebrated the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the very first time this January, it was an exciting and joyous experience. This first celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation celebrates God's mercy, forgiveness and love as each child prepares for First Holy Communion. Their parents and teachers, along with our parish priests, spent much time during the preceding weeks preparing them for this special day.

Were they a little nervous? In their classes they learned much about God's boundless love and forgiveness. As Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (MT 19:14). As one child stated, "I wasn't nervous because I knew Jesus was with me."

It's a serious experience for the children, and their teachers and parents worked very hard to help them understand that Reconciliation is about our relationship with God, and that, as Catholics, we should never hesitate to seek his forgiveness. Even at their young ages, the children understand that. When asked what the sacrament meant to them, another child responded, "It means



that I am promising God that I will try and make good choices."

While the self-examination of a Confession can be a bit daunting for many as we search deep within ourselves to identify and find ways to put to words our own struggles and failings with choices we make, you can only imagine how children view this process in the context of their young lives. As one child commented, "I was happy when I was done because I was there a long time - I guess I had a lot of sins!" Another was happy afterwards because "I felt refreshed and clean."

After their celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the children began preparing to receive their First Holy Communion. These took place during regular Masses held over several Sundays in April. Any of us who were fortunate to attend one of the Masses with the First Communicants couldn't help but share the children's enthusiasm, and perhaps we walked away with a little joy down in our hearts too!

— Renée Miscione

## THE VOICE

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