

THE VOICE

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

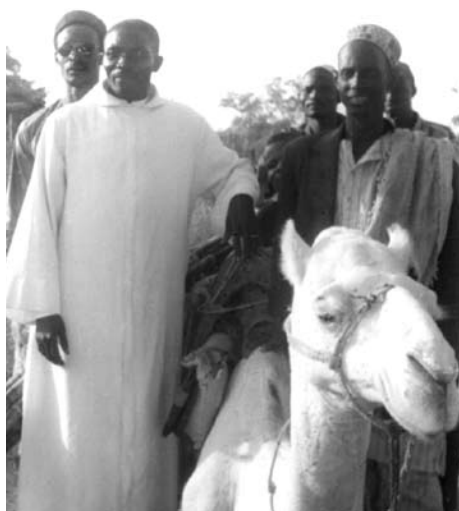
An Interview with Father Daniel

When Father Daniel first came to St. Thomas, I wondered, how he ended up here. What was his story? How did a young boy from Nigeria come to the United States, and what led him to the priesthood? So I asked.

Before coming to the United States Father Daniel was a missionary priest in the Vicariate Apostolic of Kontagora in northern Nigeria, the only priest serving over 50 villages in a program the Church calls Rural Evangelization. He traveled from village to village, teaching basic skills of reading and writing, and counseling the young, in addition to his pastoral duties. "The people living in the interior are largely neglected by the government," said Fr. Daniel, "but the Church is reaching out to them." "Once they are able to read and write," he continued, "they can qualify to attend a more formal school... They are a simple, loving people, but very poor."

Father made many friends, but it was the youth that touched him. "They do not have the education to deal with the effects of disease, especially AIDS. They think the sickness comes from spirits, or someone thinking bad of them," he observed. "I wanted to help them to understand their situation and to be able to deal with the stresses of poverty and the loss of family members, especially parents, due to AIDS." In seminary he took a psychology course. "But, it was very basic you see, I needed to know more if I was going to help the young people."

So it was quite natural when Fr. Daniel's bishop met with him to discuss his continuing education that Fr. Daniel asked to enter an advanced psychology program. The bishop agreed and Fr. Daniel was sent to America for more studies. Seton Hall seemed the perfect choice for the young priest as he had several priest friends who had studied there.



▲ Fr. Daniel and friend.

As a teenager in Nigeria soccer was the biggest thing in Fr. Daniel's life. "I was a very good player," he recalled. "Local promoters were already giving me money in the hopes of recruiting me. I lived for soccer." But a serious leg injury laid him up for the season. During his lengthy convalescence the stirrings of a priestly vocation emerged. Separated from friends, school, and especially soccer, his thoughts turned to the priesthood. When he announced to his family that he wanted to be a priest they were surprised, but supported him. However, when the local bishop told him he would have to repeat the school year if he came to the seminary, he abandoned the idea.

No more was said about his vocation. Fr. Daniel went back to playing soccer, but on a limited basis. His leg injury never seemed to heal. The pain was always there. During this time, he's not sure exactly where or how, the thought came to him; "That there is nothing in life for me if I can't be a priest." Not telling his family, he again went to see the bishop. Finally, when a letter arrived informing him that he was

accepted in the seminary, he at last told his family of his renewed interest in the priesthood. "My father was shocked. "Where did this come from?" he asked."

His mother warned him, "If you start, then be sure you must finish!" Her stern words kept him going during some of the rough patches he encountered at the seminary. "I didn't dare give up!" he said. All during this time the pain in his leg was a constant companion. "It was always there, and the doctors had no idea why. But you know, a strange thing happened. The day, the moment, I was ordained the pain left me." "Did it ever come back? I asked." "No, never," he replied.

— Pat Hamilton



▲ Fr. Daniel with Bishop Timothy Joseph Carrol.

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Preparing for the Sacrament of Baptism

Every child's Baptism is a truly special event for the families involved and for our parish family. Prior to the ceremony, the children's families meet with Sister Arleen for an information session to prepare for that joyful event.

After a review of the history of the sacrament, parents discuss some of the many changes that have occurred in their lives since becoming parents. Child or adult, change is always our teacher helping us grow into new phases of our lives. Parents are reminded that they are the child's first teachers and encouraged to bring their child to Mass right from day one.

The actual Baptism ceremony is then discussed step by step. Parents will announce their child's name, and respond that what they now ask of the Church is Baptism. The priest, the parents, and the godparents will then each trace the Sign of the Cross on the

child's forehead, marking the child with the symbol of our faith. A Catholic's life with Christ begins at the Baptismal font; and when the time comes for our funeral, we are once again brought to that same spot. Baptism represents our death to sin and is the first step in the process of growing in faith.

The waters of Baptism will wash over the child's forehead three times. Attend any Baptism and you know that this is where many of the babies will vocalize if they haven't already—and the adults will have a special joy in that moment. The godmother then has the honor of presenting the child with the gift of a new white garment—a bib embroidered on the front with the Greek symbol of Christ. These bibs are made with love by some of the women of our parish. The godfather has the honor of accepting the Baptismal candle for the child to receive

the light of Christ. The parents, godparents, and the parish community are reminded of their responsibility to keep the light of faith burning within themselves so the child will learn to do the same.

The child's head will also be signed with Sacred Chrism—sealed with the Holy Spirit. Right now the parents and godparents speak for the child, but in a few years at Confirmation, the children will speak for themselves, accepting the fullness of the Holy Spirit into their lives while the bishop makes the same symbol on their forehead.

– Eileen Conte



Coffee And Conversation – Creating Community

It's no secret – if you want to bring people together, give them good food and drink. Nothing creates a community better or faster than having a group of people sit around a table with a bite to eat and something to sip.

Creating a community is essential to stewardship. Stewardship means recognizing that all we have has been given to us by God, but that recognition is only part of stewardship. To be good stewards, we must also express our gratitude for God's gifts of time, talent and treasure by sharing them with others. Sharing requires a community.

So there you have it. Simply put, if we at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish want to follow the stewardship way of life, we have to eat together!

Fortunately, our ministries give us the opportunity to do just that. Once a month, following the 9 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. Sunday Masses, one of our over 40 ministries takes a turn hosting "Coffee and Conversation." The members of the ministry brew some coffee, serve some snacks, and transform our Parish Center into a warm

and friendly coffeehouse, open to all, where we can spend a few minutes before or after Mass to welcome new families to the greatest parish around or to catch up with old friends.

Coffee and Conversation is also an opportunity for us to learn about our ministries in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. St. Thomas is more than a place to go for Mass. We provide so many other services inside and outside our parish. By learning about these ministries, we hope that all of us will:

1. **Take advantage of the programs and services.** While some ministries serve those with special needs, there are plenty of others to select from.
2. **Share our talents.** New blood is always good for a ministry. Joining one that we can be passionate about will rejuvenate us and the ministry.
3. **Pray for our ministries.** Asking God to bless these good people and their good work is a way any of us can help.

We hope that *Coffee and Conversation*, in addition to being a fun way to spend a



▲ A sample of the spread of food at the Coffee and Conversation.

few minutes after Mass, makes it easier for each of us to do these three things.

Coffee and Conversation generally occurs on the third Sunday of the month after the 9 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. masses; but sometimes the dates change. Watch for the announcements the week before in the Sunday bulletin, on the St. Thomas website (www.stchurchbloomfield.com) and at the end of Mass. It is always scheduled in conjunction with the Wellness Ministry's blood pressure screenings.

Let's be good stewards and meet for coffee!

– George Hayes

MINISTRY: The Alliance of the Two Hearts

As the old saying goes, the family that prays together, stays together, and nowhere is that adage so appropriately applied than in the ministry of the Alliance of the Two Hearts – an international spiritual movement devoted to the hearts of Jesus and Mary. Available to Catholics worldwide, its primary focus is to help strengthen and sanctify families through prayer, reparation, reconciliation, and reception of the Eucharist. It was inspired by the Holy Family of Nazareth (Jesus, Mary and Joseph) who lived in a spirit of covenant love—hence, the word alliance (covenant) in the organization's name.

The Alliance of the Two Hearts was established at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in 1996, when Gary and Teresa Ilustrisimo worked with the pastor to establish the movement as an official parish ministry. In its inception year at the parish, the group held its first all-night prayer vigil on June 19, 1996, the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. About 700 people attended the event, which continues to be held every first Friday in March.

The Alliance employs many traditional Catholic devotions and prayers to aid in its mission of sanctifying families. Participants are encouraged to pray the rosary, take part in First Friday and First Saturday services, attend holy hours of adoration, and pray the Stations of the Cross. Reception of the sacraments is also key. Participants in the Alliance are encouraged to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation on a regular basis and, if possible, attend daily Mass to receive the Eucharist.

For those who are open to home visitations, the ministry encourages a type of house-to-house evangelism known as the Enthronement Rite. Although strictly voluntary, this special ceremony offers families the opportunity to consecrate not only their lives but their homes to the hearts of Jesus and Mary. According to a prayer guide provided by the Two Hearts Media Organization in Dover, Delaware, the ministry is more than a devotion; it is a way of life that is truly Eucharistic-centered and Marian in spirituality. The Alliance offers a spiritual process by

which families can bring sanctity into their homes, their lives, and consequently, into the Church and society.

Gary and Teresa continue to be active in the Two Hearts ministry at St. Thomas. The couple firmly believes that true joy, peace, and love can be achieved when you are close to the Lord. “Do things because you love the Lord,” Teresa counsels; “never lose that focus.” And while it may be true that the family that prays together, stays together, Gary adds a more important point to consider. “Family is the core of this movement,” he says, “and if you pray together, you’re at peace.”

To find out more about The Alliance of the Two Hearts ministry at St. Thomas or to schedule an Enthronement Rite in your home, call Gary and Teresa at (973) 338-8011 or go online and visit the ministry's website at #.

— Angelique B. Sharps

One Last Look At The 2008 Advent Season

At the beginning of each Advent season, specially decorated trees appear in the transepts of St. Thomas Church. Parishioners are encouraged to select from the assortment of paper “ornaments,” each labeled with various gift needs, that adorn them. But, the work to prepare for this special St. Thomas holiday tradition actually starts months earlier.

The Christmas season begins during the summer for MaryAnn Carini, who has organized St. Thomas' Advent Giving Trees through the Rosary Confraternity for the past ten years. It's during those summer months, when the holiday season seems distant, that MaryAnn starts the process by calling the numerous recipient organizations to determine what their special needs will be for the year.

In addition to several nursing homes, social services and homeless organizations, as well as hospitals, St. Thomas also helps



▲ Sorting Advent Giving Tree gifts.

provide holiday cheer for the needy in other parishes in the greater Essex County area. In all, more than a dozen recipient groups benefit from the generosity of St. Thomas parishioners. MaryAnn contacts all

of them, and from her outreach creates a Christmas wish list that includes everything from toys, clothing and layette items for the young to outerwear, toiletries, and gift cards for adults and seniors.

Once that list is ready, MaryAnn coordinates with Tracey Rennie and the summer CCD students to make the labeled and cutout paper decorations. The ornaments are carefully checked to make sure all the needs are covered, and then they're carefully stored until just before Thanksgiving when the trees are prepared for the first Sunday of Advent. CCD students and members of the Rosary Confraternity help decorate the trees.

This past holiday season STA parishioners placed more than 2,000 gifts under the trees. A volunteer group of 70 individuals, ranging in age from 7 to 70 and including many of the parish's youth, gathered on a Sunday afternoon to prepare the gifts,

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packaging them up in large plastic bags and grouping them appropriately for each recipient organization to pick up. This year the volunteers filled almost 200 bags with gifts.

Although each year parishioners are asked not to wrap their donations, MaryAnn noted that many folks place carefully wrapped gifts under the trees. Unfortunately, she mentioned, “As pretty as some of these look, they must all be unwrapped for sorting and bagging” - making that process take longer and wasting the beautiful wrappings. The organizations prefer to get the items unwrapped so that they can appropriately distribute the gifts to the ultimate recipients.

For MaryAnn, perhaps the best reward for her hard work comes when she and husband Tom personally deliver gifts to children at St. Michael’s and Newark Beth Israel Hospitals. Tom enjoys playing Santa for these special hospital visits, and both appreciate seeing first hand the joy that the generous parishioners of St. Thomas the Apostle bring to these youngsters.

As much as MaryAnn Carini has enjoyed coordinating the St. Thomas Advent Giving Trees, she is hoping someone else will offer to chair this rewarding program for next year. If anyone is interested they should contact Sr. Arleen Crimmins at 973.338.9190.

– Renée Miscione

A Cross for All Seasons

The cross is the most powerful and recognizable symbol of the Christian faith, so it is not surprising that as Catholics, making the sign of the cross is not only a profound gesture of faith, but one that is most identifiably Catholic.

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the sign of the cross is a manual act tracing two lines intersecting at right angles that symbolically indicate the figure of Christ’s cross. Catholics (and some orthodox Christians like the Greek Orthodox) cross themselves as an act of faith—testifying to the belief that Christ truly lived and died for us as Scripture teaches.

Making the sign of the cross can be either devotional or liturgical in nature. As a devotional act, Catholics are taught to cross themselves when they begin and conclude their prayers. As a liturgical action, a priest commences Mass making the sign of the cross, leading all congregants to do the same. The sign is also used at various points throughout the Mass—like when a priest or deacon traces a cross upon the book of the Gospels and then upon his own forehead, lips, and breast before he reads the Scripture passage. The cross is also traced upon the forehead of an infant during Baptism, upon foreheads on Ash Wednesday, and upon the five sense organs of a person receiving the Sacrament of the Sick. Bishops and priests make a cross in the air during blessings. This type of crossing occurs often during Mass and when administering the sacraments or conducting rituals.

Over the centuries the act of tracing the cross with the hand or thumb has always



▲ The Living Stations of the Cross at Saint Thomas.

been accompanied by words. Examples of such phrasings are: “The sign of Christ,” “The seal of the living God,” and more currently, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” to cite a few. In addition, the Church acknowledges the effects of grace and power whenever the holy sign of the cross is used. From the earliest of times, the Church has employed the action in all exorcisms against spirits of darkness and uses it in every form of blessing and consecration.

While the symbol of the cross is often most visible during the season of Lent, it is the signing of the cross that is the most enduring and common practice in our lives as Catholics. As St. Cyril of Jerusalem once said, “Let the cross, as our seal, be boldly made with our fingers upon our brow and on all occasions over the bread we eat, over the cups we drink, in our comings and in our goings . . .” The sign of the cross is a cross for all seasons, and that is because, as St. Augustine once professed, “We have the mark of the cross upon our souls.”

– Angeliqne B. Sharps

THE VOICE

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