Helping Haiti

In the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti we find that the focus of our ministry has temporarily changed. Our previous plan was that Fr. Joe and five other ministry members would travel to Haiti on February 11, 2010 and sign the Twinning Covenant at Our Lady of Seven Sorrows. During that visit we had hoped to listen and learn, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, about our new sister parish. Our thoughts were that we would try to immerse ourselves into their culture and in doing so learn how we could best communicate and grow our relationship.

During the two previous immersion trips to Gran Boulage the groups only spent a few hours each visit. During that time their goal was to look for a “good fit” for our parish family here at Sacred Heart. They were looking for a parish that was run similarly to ours. This would mean two parishes, in very different parts of the world that would have comparable Catholic social structures, with similar hopes and dreams always lead by the same belief in Jesus Christ.

The devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010 changed everything. We were happy to hear that no lives were lost at Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, but the church, Fr. Tristant’s residence and the school sustained structural damage. Part of the money that was collected and matched by the Mustard Seed Fund will help to restore their buildings. That is the easy part. The more difficult challenge is how do we develop and continue a relationship with people that have limited communications? While we are looking to strengthen our relationship with Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, we are also looking to keep her people in the minds and hearts of our Sacred Heart parish family. Some of the ideas that our ministry came up with are as follows:

One of our parishioners, Christine Granja, is organizing a 5K run to be held in the spring of 2011. This will be a sanctioned run, so first we will need the approval of the Town of Southbury and the

Our Lady of Seven Sorrows prior to earthquake.

(Continued on page 2)
Helping Haiti
(Continued from cover)

Police Department. The event will be called “Hoof it for Haiti—Southbury.” This will be modeled after a run sponsored by St Elizabeth Seton in Rocky Hill. We are looking to make this an annual event for Sacred Heart. It will encourage town wide participation and will continue to raise awareness about Haiti. It will also give us an opportunity to continually be able to support a country that will take years to get back on her feet.

As Fr. Tristant can receive email, each of our committee members has an assigned day to drop him a note and keep him informed of our parish activities and to let him and his people know that they are constantly in our thoughts and prayers.

Our Lady of Seven Sorrows will continue to be included in the Prayers of the Faithful.

Facts concerning Haiti will be included in the bulletin to keep everyone here informed.

As you enter the Atrium please notice the bulletin board we have created for our sister parish. It will be updated as new events occur.

We would welcome any other suggestions on how else we might be able to grow our relationship during this challenging time. While we wait for the approval to make our next trip we ask that you continue to pray for healing and restoration of hope for our sister parish.

Peter & Catherine Hughes
Haiti Committee

Welcome New Parishioners

At the Easter Vigil Fr. Donnelly welcomed RCIA candidates, who completed the initiation program, into the Sacred Heart faith community. The candidates pictured with their sponsors and RCIA team members are: (from left) Fr. Joe, Alan Green, Amy Pontillo, Sue Weaving, Joanne Skinner, Rahna Peck, Lorraine Marcantonio, Richard Abbot, Elaine Wolf, Ola Fiala, Annette Needham, Courtney Fragola, Sylvia Krug, Justin Moore, Sr. Pat and Diane Greco. Ola Fiala was baptized and received her first Eucharist. Alan Green and Rahna Peck made a profession of their faith and were received into the Church. Lorraine Marcantonio, Justin Moore and Annette Needham were confirmed and received into the Church. The RCIA team of Diane Greco (Coordinator), Richard Abbot, Sue Palma and Sue Weaving prepared these candidates for entry into the Church.
“Why Haiti?” This was one of the most frequently asked questions during our three year parish discernment process that preceded our signing the covenant to twin with Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Parish in Gran Boulage last fall. The earthquake of January 12, 2010 made the needs of the Haitian people very apparent to all of us, but a true response to that question is based upon more than the recent acute needs of Haiti.

The best answer I found rests upon our awareness of what kind of relationship we are seeking with them. We intentionally refer to it as a “twinning” relationship rather than a sponsoring relationship or our parish’s adoption of their parish. Neither of these terms reflects a relationship of equals. However to refer to Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Parish as our twin means that our parishes are equals and that each will give and receive from the other.

Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Parish will receive financial assistance especially as it seeks to rebuild after the earthquake and it will benefit from learning from us about our life, our faith and our ministry here. But we also will benefit by the twinning relationship. We will learn about their life, faith and ministry, and we will gain insight into the plight of the third world, that portion of the human family who live in areas that suffer from poverty, and who lack the basic infrastructure that we in the first and second worlds take for granted. This makes their situation much different than that of the poor of Southbury, Waterbury or Danbury. Third world nations lack structures such as hospitals, schools, stable governments and the resources that serve the needs of their population. Because of this a twinning relationship with the people of Haiti can open us to a much more accurate awareness of the world and to an appreciation of our sisters and brothers with whom we share it.

We are as yet unsure of how this relationship will progress. The earthquake forced us to postpone the trip I had planned to make to Gran Boulage in mid-February with several other parishioners to formally sign the covenant with Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Parish at all of their Sunday Masses. You may recall that Fr. Jean Francois Tristant, the pastor, had signed the covenant at all of our Masses in early October. It is unclear when we will be able to reschedule that trip. For now our parish Haiti Committee is mapping out ways for our parish to keep them in our thoughts and prayers and to help our relationship with them to grow even if we cannot visit them right now.

And so you will notice that we have hung the twinning cross in our sanctuary behind the ambo (podium) and that we include Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Parish in our Prayer of the Faithful frequently. One section of the bulletin board outside the sacristy is devoted to our sister parish and will keep us all more aware of them and their needs.

For now we will work to deepen our conscious awareness of the people of Haiti through our prayer and conversations. Your extraordinarily generous response to the collection taken for them right after the earthquake indicates that this is working. Parishioners are also asking more and more about our sister parish: “How are they doing? Where exactly is Gran Boulage? Was there much damage?” People in the larger community are identifying us with advocacy for Haiti.

My hope is that our parish will grow in faith and insight because of our relationship with Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows Parish. Let us all keep this intention in our prayer.

Fr. Joe Donnelly
The Daughters of Wisdom in Haiti

The Daughters of Wisdom were founded in France in 1703 by St. Louis de Montfort and Blessed Marie Louise Trichet. Montfort’s dream was to have a small company of priests and sisters who would serve the poor in the world. “To be in the midst of the people,” was his vision for this community of sisters. In those days sisters were in convents. Their works of charity were done within the enclave of the community. But Montfort saw the trials and tribulations of 18th century France on the streets: the homeless, the hungry, the ill, the destitute. It was to the people of the street that Montfort sent his sisters.

Although Montfort never left France, his dream for himself, to be a missionary, found its fulfillment in his legacy. The Daughters of Wisdom and the Montfort Missionaries became that missionary presence in the world.

Four Daughters of Wisdom arrived in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in November 1875. Their main work was education and care of the sick. Over the years the number of sisters increased to 225, as DWs from other countries, e.g., Canada, Italy, Holland, England, Belgium and the United States joined in the missionary efforts. Soon native Haitian women were entering the community, and the Daughters of Wisdom of Haiti became a vibrant province.

The work of the sisters expanded to include pastoral care, a welfare center for indigent women, retreat work and centers of hospitality. Two places that the Daughters of Wisdom staffed were in the news this past January in connection with the earthquake. The Institut Montfort at Port-au-Prince, a school for the deaf and deaf-blind, was destroyed. No one was hurt because the students and teachers had been dismissed for the day. Our sisters at Carrefour were not so fortunate. This house had opened as a novitiate for the training and formation of women interested in the community in 1965. It was being used for retreats, conferences, and a place of convalescence, welcome and rest. This is where six of our sisters died in the rubble of the earthquake.

An article in the Wall Street Journal on January 23–24, 2010 by Michael M. Phillips focused on one of the sisters, Marie Claude. Marie was responsible for the hospitality and welcome at the house at Carrefour. She made up the guestrooms, always placing in the rooms fresh cut flowers from the garden. Just days before the earthquake, “she welcomed nearly 100 priests to the gathering, including Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot. Sister Marie was also a beekeeper and could be seen with net covering her face as she tended to the community’s beehives and harvested honey.” Sister Marie was an artist and “taught the impoverished local girls to draw and to make paper flowers so that they could earn a little money.” One of her sisters, Sister Immaculee, said, “She makes beautiful things from nothing.”

Now the painful work of rebuilding lives, and schools and welcome centers continues.

We weep with the people of Haiti, and even as our hearts break, we hope that in the breaking of our hearts, compassion and prayer, resources and personnel, will continue to flow lovingly into the lives and the land of Haiti.

Sister Pat
Haitian-American Saint

Archbishop Timothy Dolan from New York was in Rome when the recent earthquake devastated Haiti. He was quick to suggest to the Haitian people to ask Haitian born Pierre Toussaint’s intercession. He also noted Venerable Toussaint is entombed in the crypt at St. Patrick’s beneath the Cathedral’s great altar along with Bishops and Archbishops, a fitting honor for this good man.

In “the little black book” we received for Lenten reading, you will see a brief biography about him. He was born in 1766 in Haiti, a slave owned by Jean Berard who taught the young man to read and write. When the slave revolts broke out in 1787, the Berards brought him to New York City. Shortly after their arrival, Mr. Berard died, and Pierre became the main support for the household. He studied hairdressing and soon became very talented.

In 1807 Mrs. Berard gave Pierre his freedom. Hairdressing in colonial America was a complex and often lengthy process almost like an art. In 18th century New York City there were many people who could afford this service and paid well.

Pierre was a generous man and assisted people of all colors and beliefs to survive in difficult times. He purchased freedom for slaves, established schools, and provided for orphans. He was proud of his Haitian and African heritage and always helped others not as fortunate as himself. He helped establish the Sisters of Providence, a religious order of black women that was based in Baltimore. He founded the first Catholic school in New York for African-Americans and the only orphanage, St. Vincent de Paul on Canal Street.

Pierre and his wife were childless, but they helped so many orphans and continued to work and assist people of all races with financial as well as spiritual direction. This kind man died in 1853 and was buried in the Old St. Patrick’s Cemetery. Over the years many African-American Catholics began to pray near his grave and ask his intercession. In 1940, John Cardinal O’Connor had his body exhumed and reinterred beneath the altar at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. That same year his cause for canonization was introduced by Cardinal O’Connor. Pierre was declared Venerable by Pope John Paul II. Many Catholics pray that he will be declared blessed and eventually receive sainthood.

Dina Carella

St. Joseph Medal Recipients

On March 7, at St. Joseph Cathedral in Hartford, Archbishop Mansell awarded Dick and Eileen Locher the St. Joseph Medal of Appreciation. This medal is the highest award given for lay service by the Archdiocese of Hartford. Eileen and Dick have been active parishioners at Sacred Heart for over 20 years. Eileen is a reader and Eucharistic Minister both at our liturgy and in service to the homebound. She and Dick coordinate the greeters at Mass and the Extend-A-Hand Ministries, which offers receptions after the funerals of parishioners. They work hand-in-hand as they have throughout their 60 plus years of marriage, and are a great example of Christian life and ministry in our parish. Congratulations Dick and Eileen on this well deserved medal!
Since 1884, Sacred Heart has been an exciting church full of opportunities to learn, worship and share. Today, 126 years later, Sacred Heart is still standing—stronger, bigger, and giving more than ever. Our church is very unique, with its many opportunities to get involved, promote Catholic causes, and to serve those in need. In the spring of 2009 The ROCK (Raising Our Catholic Kids), a new youth group, was formed, providing teenagers a great way to get more involved in the church through community service and fun social activities. Already through its service opportunities, it has donated to several local causes.

Founded by a group of parents and teens, Sacred Heart’s ROCK group has made a standing impression at Sacred Heart in under a year, and has interested many teens. The ROCK has over a 100 diverse adolescents, kids from different schools, ages, and backgrounds coming together to serve a greater purpose in many community service projects. The ROCK is open to any teen from grades 7 through 12, regardless of their denomination. Though it is held at Sacred Heart, teens can bring friends from other churches or backgrounds to join in, give back, and have fun. In addition, joining the ROCK is a great opportunity for teens to gain leadership and guide others. The ROCK is run by a teen core committee, who work on ideas, and later present them to the entire ROCK group at the monthly meetings. Adults are always present for meetings and activities, but the power rests in the members’ hands. Finally, our group doesn’t involve just church and prayer. It serves as an enjoyable gathering of friends for both community service, and exciting social activities. The ROCK has found unity within its many activities and meetings, and with every activity more and more teens are inspired to become a part.

In its first few months, The ROCK has had fun and games nights, with outdoor sports, indoor games, pizza, movies, and of course ping-pong. From these initial activities a core group of grade leaders was formed, which meets before each monthly meeting to plan for future meetings and events. As the ROCK gained members and stability, more community service and fun activities were started. For example, the ROCK participated in the annual Tour de Tribury bike-a-thon. ROCK members made t-shirts and participated as a unified team and raised over $500 for the Southbury Fuel Bank. The ROCK also participated in a walkathon for St. Vincent DePaul. Over 40 people from the ROCK walked on a cold rainy day in Waterbury and raised over $1000 for St. Vincent DePaul. It was a great eye opener for all who participated. In December, the ROCK hosted its first huge event, “Breakfast with Santa.” Everyone was willing to help by dressing up in elf hats, waiting on tables, taking pictures, and reading stories to the guests. We raised over $1250 for the Southbury Needy Fund which helped them tremendously during the holiday season. The ROCK also hosted a holiday party with lights, a DJ, and a room full of friends who danced the night away. The money raised went toward providing calling cards for soldiers.

Though the ROCK is such a strong and wonderful group now, it can only get better as we welcome new members. If you are in grades 7-12, and are interested in joining, keep your ears and eyes open for new activities. From there, you can sign a permission slip, pay a small fee depending on the activity, and you can enjoy the ROCK as long as you please. In addition, bring friends interested and willing, regardless of their denomination. The ROCK has a very bright future, and with many exciting service projects ahead, we hope to welcome more members, and have an amazing year!

Caroline Crocco

Note: The ROCK group now has a link on our parish web page: sacredheartchurch.info/ministry/therock.html
Our Tour de Tribury riders (on bike) Matthew Villano, (standing, left to right) Brook Williams, Daria Krizan, Joe Leonard, Stephen Consiglio, Billy Leonard, Will Grant, Delaney Yale, and Caitlin Villano.

Braving the rain as they support St. Vincent de Paul (front row, left to right) Erin Gibbons, Jack Paz, Jack Villano, Matthew Villano, Julianna Palumbo, Chris Greco, Evan McCrory, Madison Paz, and Morgan McMinn, (back row) Cooper Mooney, Joe Leonard, and Kathleen Mooney.

Santa and his multitude of helpers served up pancakes, stories, and a lot of fun for our parish’s little ones and their families.

Seder Supper

In April, members of the ROCK group gathered in the church hall for a Seder Supper. The Seder is a reenactment of an age-old Jewish tradition that brings together friends to celebrate the Passover. There was food, friends, and faith sharing.
Faces of Faith

Every once in a while I receive a promotional e-mail, headed “Texas, it’s like a whole other country.” That set me to thinking, yes, another state, another way of doing things, a cultural diversity right here at home.

Then, I began to think a bit closer to home about diversity and homogeneity. Looking around me at the faces in our church, we reflect our little part of the country, of the world, but we show very little diversity. When I see a face that shows a different background from my own, I tend to rejoice, and wonder about their path to this place even as I reflect on my own. When I worship in foreign settings, although I am the stranger, I share with fellow congregants our universal faith.

Some of our members at Sacred Heart reflect generations of faith, others come to this faith new. I’m somewhere part way between those two. My Irish forebears brought their faith with them from Ireland in about 1830, and settled in southern Illinois. There they contributed to the building of St. Edward’s Church in Chillicothe, and many other civic pursuits. From them I happily inherit my own faith. My mother’s family was primarily of English origin, and settled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of what is now western Virginia. Hardy farmers and merchants, they set their mark on the little town of Floyd, Virginia. My mother inherited her beliefs from a pretty diverse stream of Christianity; Primitive (or Hardshell) Baptist, Methodist, Dunkard and Presbyterian. If there was a Catholic lurking among the lot they kept a very low profile. She grew up mainly Presbyterian until she met my father in Chicago, took instruction at the Cenacle, and became a Catholic.

How does a diverse background affect the way we hear, think, and accept messages about our faith? I can recall questioning some of the more extreme statements of my childhood companions, and yes, even teachers, who seemed to reject other traditions and paths to God as somehow doomed. As I studied the actual teachings of the Church, I found they had too frequently been distorted and misrepresented.

My personal experience has tended to make me open-minded, to observe rather than judge, to listen before I speak, and to appreciate that not everyone shares the same opinion. That “whole other country,” approach is appealing. I might decide that another’s opinion or choice is not my own, but it doesn’t make me want to impose mine and force everyone into lockstep with my beliefs.

When I visit family, it is an ecumenical experience. Yes, I find immense comfort amidst my Catholic kin, for we share so much in common. But as I visit my Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist and other relatives I share their heritage and love their company. I am equally at home. Were I to have only a single perspective of culture, custom, food, I think I would be poorer. It doesn’t mean I want to change my choices, but I want to appreciate what others have chosen, and why.

True, most of our faces here show a European origin, but diversity can be found beneath the exterior surface as well.

Colleen A. Kelly

Attention Youth
GIFT Participants

From the Heart is looking for youth writers. G.I.F.T. participants would be most welcome, as well as any young adults who have something to say in regard to faith and life at Sacred Heart.

Please contact Katherine Pavone at 264-6599 if you can help us.
“He followed me home, Dad.”

Sam Good hadn’t heard his son, David, use that phrase since he was a child. This time, the follower was not a puppy or a kitten, but a tall, very thin black man wearing a torn t-shirt, filthy sweat pants, and sneakers that were rotting through at the toes.

“I don’t think he can talk,” David said. “I think he followed me because he is hungry. His name is Renfrew. It's written on a card he showed me.”

“OK, Renfrew,” Sam said, “you like grilled cheese sandwiches? Yes? Good, ’cause that’s about all we have right now. My wife is out grocery shopping and won’t be home for hours.” “I hope she won’t,” Sam thought as he walked toward the house. “She’ll go ballistic if she sees what’s going on around here!”

In the kitchen, Sam surveyed what he had—four slices of cheese and a half loaf of bread, the Good family equivalent of five loaves and three fish—to feed a multitude!

But things began to turn up: a half pound of cheese slices hiding in the back of the refrigerator, in a cabinet I found a full loaf of bread, a jar of black olives, a jar of salsa, a big bag of chips, and a package of Oreos with Double Stuff!

“As the Lord our God would have us do.”

“Thank you, Lord,” Sam said. “You’ve done it again!”

As he made the sandwiches, Sam contemplated his next challenge. At breakfast, his wife had said she wanted a “word with him” after supper. He knew the word was about the time he spent away from home on “social justice” projects: the rallies in support of the poor and oppressed, his membership in various action groups and his weekly appearance behind the chow line at the local soup kitchen.

Maybe he should just tell her he believed a man must live in a way that honors and serves his God, the human race, and himself before he can provide proper guidance and support to his family.

Sam added a pitcher of lemonade to the already heavily laden tray and carried everything outside.

He was gratified to see the widening of David and Renfrew’s eyes when they saw the extent of the feast. After Sam said a brief grace, the two fell upon the food like a pair of famished wolves and ate without interruption until Renfrew finished the last Oreo.

Sam gave them about a half hour before he said, “Renfrew, would you like a shower and some clean clothes?”

Renfrew nodded eagerly.

On a table outside the bathroom, Sam placed a pair of almost-new sneakers, big for David, but probably just right for Renfrew, a pair of jeans, underwear and socks, and the perfect finishing touch, a sweatshirt bearing the letters “WWJD.”

The phone rang in his office and Sam went in to answer it. It was a friend who had just been made Chairman of the Social Concerns Committee at church and wanted advice. They talked and then made arrangements for a meeting. Sam looked up and saw that Renfrew had entered the room. He was holding Sam’s rosary beads up to the light and smiling. It was the pair that folks from church had brought back from Medjagore, and no way was he going to give them up! They had come a long way, from a very special place.

Then Sam realized. How bleak Renfrew’s life must be. God knows where he will sleep tonight, and he will be forever apart from others, unable to communicate...

“You can have them,” Sam said. “I hope they will comfort you.”

Renfrew walked over to the big stand where Sam kept his Bible. He paged through the book then, motioned to Sam, his finger pointing to Matthew, Chapter 25, Verse 3 “For I was hungry, and ye gave me to eat, thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in;”

Then he moved his finger to Verse 36 “naked, and ye clothed me;”

David entered the room and Renfrew greeted him and shook his hand. Renfrew stepped up to Sam, facing him. Gently he placed the rosary beads in Sam’s hand. He traced a cross on Sam’s forehead. “Bless you Sam Good,” Renfrew said in a clear, deep voice.

Then he just vanished.

“I’ll be damned!” Sam exclaimed, as he staggered back. “No, Dad,” David said, “I don’t think there’s any danger of that.”

Bill Calabrese
May I walk with you to the temple, Simon?” My Hebrew was not what it should be I thought, but I wasn’t sure whether Simon understood Aramaic.

He stopped, and turning to me he said in Aramaic, “Ezra is your name, is it not?”

I nodded and I took my place next to him noting the broadness of his shoulders. The man simply radiated strength.

He said, “Travel faster. I don’t want to miss seeing the Messiah-Prophet. Jerusalem is a mad house with Passover crowds and this Jesus, with his grand entrance into the city on a donkey has caused more excitement than one can imagine.”

“The Messiah-Prophet?” I innocently asked? I was trying to imagine him making an appearance in Jerusalem while riding in on a donkey. Now I could see a Roman legion with the banners, cohort standards and the requisite serenading bugles parading before him acknowledging his supremacy, but on a donkey?

“Where have you been the past few days?” Simon’s question brought me out of my reverie.

“The man was arrested, tried before the governor, found guilty and sentenced to be crucified all within a few hours. So much for Roman justice!” said Simon, not bothering to conceal the bitterness in his voice.

Simon again increased his pace. Simon continued. “I have heard this man speak! I have seen him heal the sick!”

“Slow down, Simon.” I now was practically at a trot to keep up with him. “Your Messiah will still be at Golgotha. Trust me when I tell you he isn’t going anywhere soon.”

I saw and heard the multitudes lining the road to Golgotha. The crowds were four deep on both sides of the road and generated excited voices, some in adulation and to my surprise, most jeering. I now saw him for the first time in the middle of the road dragging the cross. One could not ignore the agony clearly etched on his face. His garments were tattered, and the scars on his back could be seen clearly yet he slowly, relentlessly moved forward. It was evident that this Jesus had a task. Simon, due to his physical size, was able to simply move people out of his way to get closer to his prophet.

I followed Simon and was standing next to him when we saw Jesus fall. I felt Simon’s body stiffen. I gasped.

A Roman soldier who was standing next to us ordered. “You! Pick up the cross and follow him.”

“Me?” I said in stunned disbelief. “No. Not you, him.”

Simon, who had never taken his eyes off the tragic figure, pushed me back and went to lift the cross which Jesus had released from his grasp.

“Let me help.” Did I just say that? No matter; a Roman soldier, with the use of his spear, motioned me back to take my place with the hostile crowd.

“It is why I’m here. This is my purpose, to help him fulfill his destiny,” Simon declared. I heard him say that to me, I’m sure.

I walked along the road to Golgotha and after having seen Jesus fall twice more, I wanted to reach out to ease his burden. Soon I was only yards from Simon and Jesus, yet I remained with the crowd but watched them move to the hill crest.

One soldier, an officer I think, directed Simon to place the cross on the ground; then others took Jesus and placed him with his arms stretched on the cross. Not being able to watch any more, I quickly moved to help Simon to his feet as he had fallen to the ground in exhaustion. Simon raised his head and looking at me with tears in his eyes while holding me, whispered, “What have I done?”

“Oh, Simon! How far could Jesus have gone without you? Maybe someone else could have been chosen to carry the cross, but the soldier chose you. You said your purpose was to fulfill his destiny… and you did.”

Simon, wearing a weak smile, nodded, and with Simon leaning on me, we returned to Jerusalem. I know in our hearts we were each determined to fulfill the purpose God intended for us.

Dennis McLaughlin

Authors Note: Luke, Mark and Matthew never again mentioned Simon. John doesn’t even include Simon in the Passion story. May one presume that he was merely an incidental character in God’s plans? We must not forget that we are incidental too, but are comforted by the faith that each one of us, like Simon, will fit into God’s plan. Shalom
Continuing the theme started in Part I, today’s focus is the most dominant seat in the sanctuary, the priest’s chair.

History
Every year, in February, Catholics around the world celebrate the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter. You might be thinking—Why celebrate a chair? Actually, it’s not the chair that is being recognized, but rather what the chair represents. The office of the “Bishop of Rome,” originally held by St. Peter and currently held by Pope Benedict XVI, is the cause behind the feast.

In a similar way, in a diocesan cathedral, the bishop’s chair is seen as representing the office of the bishop. The Latin base “cathedra” actually means seat or bench. Hence, the “cathedral” of a diocese is the church that holds the bishop’s chair. It is often a very imposing, ornate appointment that has a commanding presence on the altar. As such, it provides a highly visible, concrete marker to the importance of the bishop’s leadership role. It’s job in that regard, is more important than its functional role as a comfy thing to sit on. To some degree, the chair, or more correctly the office that the chair represents, is more important than the current office holder.

Our Priest’s Chair
Similarly, the priest’s chair in a parish church represents his office and role as “teacher” and “leader.” Much has been written about the chair and its representation of the priest celebrant’s role in the “activity” of the liturgy. The role has a dual quality—one as “presiding” over the activity, the other as “exercising the priestly office” within the context of the liturgy. Accenting the former might lead a priest, while seated or standing in front of the chair, to act as a chairperson presiding over a committee with a degree of individualism and freedom. In the latter, the priest might take a more formal approach, strictly respecting the structure of the liturgy as expressed in Church doctrine.

Chair Placement
Interestingly, both views can impact how the chair is positioned on the altar. If the priest views his role as primarily that of “presider,” the chair might face directly toward the congregation. If he sees his role as “office holder,” he might prefer to have the chair angled toward the altar. Bear in mind, this is a simplistic treatment of this topic since there are numerous other issues including design, physical constraints and liturgical priorities that can impact the exact positioning of the chair.

The General Instructions of the Roman Missal (GIRM) offers numerous guidelines regarding the priest’s chair. For example, per GIRM No. 50, the chair is the correct point from which the priest begins the Mass with the congregation: “When the Entrance chant is concluded, the priest stands at the chair and, together with the whole gathering, makes the Sign of the Cross...” And GIRM No. 64 dictates who can and cannot use the chair in certain situations: “…This chair is not used by a lay person who presides at a service of the word with Communion or a Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest.” And lastly, GIRM No. 64 also comments on the import of the chair and its placement: “The chair of the priest-celebrant stands as a symbol of his office of presiding over the assembly of direct prayer. An appropriate placement of the chair allows the priest celebrant to be visible to all in the congregation. The chair reflects the dignity of the one who leads the community in the person of Christ, but is never intended to be remote or grandiose. The priest-celebrant’s chair is distinguished from the seating for other ministers by its design and placement.”

Although modern altar layouts appear far less rigid than their predecessors, one shouldn’t forget that each sacred appointment still has a special function and a history steeped in tradition.

D.A. Narducci III