

## **THE CHURCH OF ST. THOMAS MORE: 60 YEARS TO CELEBRATE**

Researched and written by Dot Meneghin, October 2009

Sixty years of living faith as a community is something to celebrate. On the feast of its patron in June 2007, The Church of St. Thomas More began a year-long celebration with an outdoor Mass on a knoll overlooking the church and Catholic Student Center – the very site where a black-robed missionary celebrated the very first Mass in New Hampshire in 1694!

So perhaps it's no coincidence that the Roman Catholic faith community of Durham, Lee and Madbury began as a mission in 1928 when the Diocese of Manchester placed it under the direction of St. Mary's Parish in Newmarket to serve University of New Hampshire students and area families.

For decades, when the steam train pulled into the Durham depot a curate from St. Mary's would step onto the platform and make his way across the field to say Mass in New Hampshire Hall, a building on Main Street far smaller than the present facility.

According to Peggy Kauppinen – active in this community from the time she entered UNH in 1931 until her death in 2003 – this fledgling Catholic community began with no more than 40 families and a few students who belonged to the Newman Club, a national Catholic student organization.

Despite the state's large Catholic population, few Roman Catholics attended UNH. Not only were Catholic families often large with incomes that were stretched thin, but the Church also actively discouraged parents from sending their children to a secular college for fear they'd lose their faith. Instead, the church encouraged parents to enroll their children in the growing number of Catholic colleges.

Paul Verrette, who graduated from UNH in 1953 and returned as a member of the music faculty, said Catholics were reluctant to attend secular colleges because they were perceived as a curious lot, with their strange Latin rituals and an apparent acceptance to do whatever they were told.

But times changed and so did attitudes.

World War II altered people's perspective. Military service was a great leveler. Members of the armed services were judged by their ability not their creed. And on the home front, families sought mutual support from neighbors of all sorts.

When the war ended in 1945, the GI Bill rewarded those who served by paying for their higher education. The UNH population swelled as returning veterans moved with their families into apartments hastily constructed from former Naval barracks. The room at New Hampshire Hall became too small to hold the growing flock, so Mass was moved to Murkland Auditorium. Each Sunday students wheeled on stage a portable altar that was stored off stage during the week, and another student had the privilege of playing a superb organ normally reserved for student recitals.

The Catholic community continued to grow. Nearly 150 worshippers were now attending Mass: town residents, students – many of them in ex-GI clothing – and a growing number of small children. The time had come for Durham, Lee and Madbury to have its own full-time priest.

And so on July 19, 1947, the Most Reverent Matthew F. Brady, D.D. Bishop of Manchester, established a new parish, and appointed the Rev. J. Desmond O'Connor its pastor. Because the UNH Newman Club chaplain who had been ministering to the greater Durham community for many years, Father O'Connor was given the privilege of naming the parish.

Dubbing it The Church of St. Thomas More after the scholar, statesman and “man for all seasons,” Father O'Connor set about bolstering the image of Catholics by sponsoring an impressive lecture series, and workshops that featured theologians, philosophers, sociologists and scholars esteemed by both members of the parish and the academic community.

The Rev. Robert Drinan S. J., the dean of Boston College Law School and later U.S. Congressman; U.S. Senator Eugene McCarthy, Richard Cardinal Cushing Archbishop of Boston (who arrived one hour late), and John Cardinal Wright, who became the first American to be a member of the Roman Curia were all speakers at Father O'Connor's Newman Club breakfasts.

Father O'Connor was so widely respected that he was elected President of the National Newman Club Chaplains in 1951 and 1952.

From the pulpit Father O'Connor seemed austere, but his warm, personal manner won him many friends and admirers. He loved sports and politics, and he was a man of action! When a UNH sociology professor's letter lambasting the Catholic Church appeared in *Look* magazine, Father O'Connor booked an eminent sociologist as a Newman Club speaker and invited the fault-finding faculty member to join his colleague at the head table. The invitation was immediately accepted.

Although he was pastor, he had neither a rectory for a home, nor a church for services. Until 1950, Sunday Mass continued to be celebrated at Murkland Hall, but daily Mass, evening Benediction and weddings were celebrated at the rectory on Dover Road at the corner of Bay View Road. The dining room of the white, two-story home was converted to a chapel with a small altar. If attendance were sizeable, the congregation spilled into the living room and center hallway.

Construction of the present church began in October of 1949, and it was dedicated on May 21, 1950. The community continued to grow. After the present rectory was built on the hill behind the church in 1957, Father O'Connor embarked on building the Catholic Student Center. Completed in 1962, it was sited between the church and Pettee Brook in the pasture where longtime Durham residents remember cows grazing.

By the time Father O'Connor was transferred to Laconia in 1966, there were 100 families enjoying a rich liturgical and social life: bake sales, Christmas fairs, fund-raising parties with Bingo, tea parties, bridge parties and stimulating adult education classes with outstanding speakers. A vigorous religious education program was underway with Mrs. Helen Gorman at the helm. The Ladies Altar Society grew to 40 members who cleaned the church, changed the vigil lights and polished the candlesticks. (And of its 40 members, it was the tiny Peggy Kauppinen who spent 40 years laundering altar cloths and elaborate pre-Vatican II vestments.)

The 1960s was fraught with remarkable cultural and liturgical changes. Historians agree that much of this can be attributed to the election of "the two Johns." Pope John XXIII, elected in 1958, convened the Second Vatican Council. He and published two encyclicals – the 1961 *Mater et Magistra* (Mother and Teacher) and the 1963 *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) – that were embraced by both Catholics and non-Catholics for their social teachings.

In 1960 John Fitzgerald Kennedy became the first Catholic elected President of the United States. He, too, inspired many with his ideals of world peace, social reform and an end to religious and racial discrimination. Pope John died of stomach cancer June 3, 1963; President Kennedy was assassinated Nov. 22, 1963.

It was a time of national and international unrest, with the escalation of the Vietnam War, growth of the Peace Movement, and calls for racial equality.

This climate prompted the Most Rev. Ernest J. Primeau to appoint the Rev. Vincent Lawless, a priest at St. Joseph's Cathedral in Manchester, as Catholic Chaplain of UNH and Parish Administrator of the Church of St. Thomas More. Bishop Primeau considered Father Lawless too young to be named pastor (despite 13 years experience as a priest), but his persuasive enthusiasm made him the ideal candidate to introduce the radical transitions mandated by Vatican II: Blend Catholic values with contemporary culture; ease the transition from a faith community that was governed by powerful clergy, worshipped in Latin liturgies and sang in Gregorian chant; to a community that was advised by a parish council, worshipped in English and promoted fellowship among parishioners, as well as outreach to all.

Father Lawless helped foster a strong liturgical committee and a music ministry to blend – yet transcended – popular culture. He recruited Sister Francesca Dery, R.S.M., and Sister Marie Richard, R.S.M., to direct the religious education program for the parish and to be Associate Chaplains to the university. These visionaries were among the first women in the country to serve in campus ministry.

Father Lawless became a strong presence in ecumenical affairs. Priscilla Richards Phenix, who attended meetings of the Durham Ecumenical Council as secretary of the Durham Community Church, described Father Lawless as “the most charismatic man to ever hit this town.” The council included the Rev. Albert Snow of St. George Episcopal Church, the Rev. Daniel Navotny, pastor of the Durham Community Church and his associate the Rev. Donald Babcock. “Pri” recalls that Father Lawless, wearing his pre-Vatican II black cape, would enter the room and announce, “Batman has arrived.”

Durham native Bill Cote says, “Kids were crazy about Father Lawless! They loved his Batman routine.” His rapport with children and young adults, and his ability to persuade parishioners to accept the Vatican II reforms were remarkable.

As the parish doubled in size, Father Lawless was finally given the title Pastor. To accommodate the growing congregation and liturgical reforms, the church added two new wings, expanding in the shape of the cross.

But on the night of July 11, 1972 as he was closing up the church, Father Lawless was struck by a fatal heart attack at age 45. It was a traumatic event for the entire Durham community. The congregation placed in the sanctuary the shepherd's crosier presented when Father Lawless was deemed "old enough" to be named pastor. Town of Durham named its five-acre athletic field on Fogg Drive Father Lawless Park, a tribute to his outstanding leadership in establishing community activities. Some say each time a player steps up to the bat, it's a tribute to "Batman."

The Rev. Paul McHugh, an ordination classmate to Father Lawless agreed to leave his administrative post at Boston College to serve as Interim Pastor, a daunting task for no one could replace predecessor. He returned to academic life in 1973 when the Rev. Joseph Desmond was transferred from St. Joseph's Parish in Dover to become Pastor and UNH Chaplain.

Father Joe's self-deprecating humility was legendary – he hid the fact that the bishop awarded him title of Right Rev. Monsignor. He begrudgingly acknowledged that it was given in recognition of his completing the assignment of persuading the nuns of the diocese to swap their medieval habits for more modern garb.

Father Joe's Greek fisherman's cap was a familiar sight to students as he strolled through campus in the early morning or late evening. A baseball fanatic, a former daredevil ski-jumper and sports reporter who played a range of musical instruments, Father Joe's door was always open to homesick students, distraught parents, couples in conflict, children and parishioners who needed advice, comfort or good conversation.

In 1976, to encourage more students to attend Mass he began celebrating a 5 p.m. Mass each Sunday. Because the dining halls dining halls closed by the time services ended and to create a small faith community within the larger university, Mass was followed by a free, home-cooked meal prepared by members of the parish and served family style in the Student Center.

He worked with Sister Monique Thereault, R.S.M of the Christian Life Center in directing religious education programs for adults, and Sister Shawn Marie McDermott,

H.S.P., with youth. Many fondly remember when he transformed Christmas Eve Mass into a birthday party for Jesus. Whether reading Shel Silverstien's "The Giving Tree" as his Christmas homily, quoting lyrics from popular songs, or drawing sports analogies, his homilies were memorable.

The Rev. Leon Gaulin, who became Father Desmond's Associate Pastor in 1976, was replaced by the Rev. Frederick J. Pennett as Associate Pastor and Associate UNH Catholic Chaplain. Parish enrollment had grown to 250 families. In 1980 Nottingham was added to the parish, and membership swelled to 400 families, and deaconate student Maj. Charles Schladenhauffen, USAF Ret., was assigned to help out.

During this time Betty and John Lindsay and Susan and Michael Nolan asked the parish to donate to a Yard Sale that would provide UNH students with items for their rooms and apartments, and would raise funds for parish activities. The initial effort raised \$2,800.

In 1982 the Most Rev. Odore J. Gendron transferred Father Desmond and appointed the Rev. Richard Thompson Pastor. The tone of campus life had changed; 53 percent of the student population was Catholic. Since there was no need to aid students in their defense of Catholicism, the priority turned to ministering to the entire university community with gospel values.

With this in mind, Bishop Gendron split the priests' responsibilities. He designated Father Rick as Chaplain to the University and Director of the Christian Life Center. Because attendance at the 5 p.m., Sunday UNH student Mass was exceeding fire codes, a 9:30 p.m. Mass was added to the schedule. Between 150 and 200 students enjoyed the home cooked meals and interaction with parish families following Mass. *Newsweek Magazine* even sent a photojournalist to include St. Thomas More and its spirited chaplain in its issue about the resurging spirituality on college campuses.

Bishop Gendron gave Father Thompson full responsibility for parish life. He was aided by Sister Harriet Cutting, S.N.D., as Director of Religious Education. Because the Student Center was to be used for UNH student activities, the church basement was remodeled with a kitchen and classrooms. Ramps were constructed to permit easy access to the basement and the church itself.

The growing parish benefited in 1983 when newly ordained Deacon

Schladenhauffen was now able to baptize, witness marriages, conduct wake and funeral services.

Father Dick served as N.H. National Guard Chaplain and was sensitive to the needs of young people. He often organized impromptu excursions to the movies for a group of teens wrestling with adolescent demons.

When Father Thompson was transferred in 1987, he was replaced briefly by the Rev. Paul Pouliot who instilled a lasting spirit of fellowship in the congregation, establishing neighborhood fellowship groups. The Rev. David Morely, who had taught many parishioners when he was at St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Dover, was named pastor later that year.

At Christmas Father Rick Pennett fell off a high stepladder removing the heavy crucifix above the altar and broke both wrists. The event prompted discussion of the sanctuary layout. A lighting and set designer from New Hampshire Public Television made suggestions for a simplified the sanctuary area that employed softer and more direct lighting on the altar itself, and used interchangeable panels that could be placed as backdrops to the corpus. These were incorporated into the present altar setting.

Father Dave, who was often accompanied by his Welch corgi Flika, revived the ancient rite of the Blessing of the Animals to coincide with the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi in October. And at an outdoor Eucharistic celebration at the Marian Shrine – complete with lighted pumpkins and a bonfire supervised by the Boy Scouts of Troup 154 – he introduced the children's Saints and Heroes Mass on the Vigil or All Saints Day to infuse meaning into Halloween.

Patricia Mulvehill assisted Father Dave as Director of Religious Education; she was replaced by Sister Nadine Overbeck, O.F.M.

In November 1991 The Most Rev. Leo O'Neil transferred Deacon Charlie to his home parish in Portsmouth and appointed as pastor the Rev. Patrick Irwin, a deeply spiritual, native Irishman blessed with a wry humor. Prompted perhaps by recalling his oft-quoted father's attitude towards Lenten practices ("Prayer and fasting are good for the sinner, but a working man needs his dinner."), Father Pat introduced Bread and Soup Suppers to precede evening prayer during Lent and Advent.

Father Irwin increased the community involvement in church governance and

initiated a redesign of the church to provide an expanded welcoming entrance, a sacristy area that would bring the Blessed Sacrament Altar nearer the congregation, and an area that gave more prominence to the choir.

He stressed the need for moderation and reaching out to the marginalized. During his tenure, the parish sponsored an extended refugee family from Rwanda; instituted tithing programs, where the parish itself tithed with charitable programs that served people in need; and established the food pantry to serve the Durham, Lee, Madbury and Nottingham area.

Father Pat tapped former parishioner Paul Flynn, who had recently retired as vice president of marketing for USA Today to bring the church Yard Sale to a new level to benefit parish finances and to benefit the greater by providing household items and clothing at modest prices. Paul introduced the concept of advertising into the publicity mix and sales soared.

Father Irwin was initially assisted by Sister Ruth George, C.S. C., and Sister Lucille Medeiros, C.S.C, in the religious education program. Mark Freidereich was followed by Ann Kimball as Director of Religious Education in 1995. The warm and witty Amy Hickey was hired in 1995 to assist Father Rick as UNH Associate Catholic chaplain. She began taking students on a UNH Spring Break Alternative to serve the people of Appalachia.

After 21 years as UNH Catholic Chaplain, Father Rick Pennett was given his first parish assignment. In July 1997 Bishop O'Neil named him pastor of the what was then the state's largest parish, St. Anne in Hampstead.

The bishop once again combined UNH student and parish responsibilities, appointing the Rev. Daniel A. St. Laurent as pastor and UNH Catholic Chaplain, naming and the newly ordained Rev. Georges de Laire as his Associate Pastor and Assistant Chaplain for UNH.

Students returning to campus, glimpsed the impeccably dressed blond priest, the accent he'd acquired living in France for the first 18 years of his life and a seemingly endless number of female students developed a need for "spiritual counseling." *Quelle dommage!* He was as conservative as he was charming. While they may have been dismayed, all were delighted that he'd swapped a successful career in counseling for a

commitment to celibacy and self-sacrifice.

The parish discovered immediately that Father Dan was an exceptional story teller. “All stories are true, some of them actually happened,” he’d say. Blessed with a beautiful singing voice and a flair for the dramatic, he’d have succeeded on Broadway. His televangelist/faith healer imitation, was dead-on!

Instead, Father Dan set about involving more parishioners in parish life. He expanded the number of parish commissions. He helped the parish council draw up our first mission statement, one that says we are “called ...to worship as one Body; to proclaim the Gospel in word and action; to build a just community without boundaries; and to stand with the poor in solidarity.”

Father Dan was a charismatic advocate for implementing the directive in Pope John Paul II’s 1999 encyclical *Ecclesia in America*. It called for “one America,” inhabited by one people, not separate Americas divided by regions of North, Central and South or by economic conditions; and it called for a new evangelization of social action where those who had resources share with those who have little.

UNH students put this directive in action by expanding their March 2000 Spring Break Alternative. Nine went to Caritas Mission in Frenchville, West Va., with Mary Beth Nazzaro who’d been hired as Associate Catholic chaplain when Father Georges was assigned a parish of his own. Thirteen students went with Father Dan to Guaimaca, Honduras with Father Dan. Father Dan said, “First and foremost, we will go as learners and listeners – and to ask ourselves, ‘What can we learn from the poor about their reality, and how are we connected with their lives?’”

Seeing such great need during this “third world” experience inspired Father Dan to seek permission to return to Honduras as a missionary from the Catholic Diocese of Manchester to serve the community there. And so in July 2001 The Most Rev. John McCormack appointed Father Robert G. Biron as pastor. By now the parishioners, especially newcomers, were skeptical that anyone could successfully succeed the departing dynamo. But longtime parishioners were right when they said, “Fortunately we’re the University’s parish, so we’re spoiled.”

Father Bob was a quieter man with a wonderful chuckle and a gift for explaining difficult theological concepts in understandable terms. He loved being university chaplain

and was active in UNH affairs. He was Diocesan Representative for Ecumenical Dialogue, and he often wove into his homilies quotations from philosophers and theologians who were Jewish or members of other Christian denominations.

The Yard Sale expanded each year under the careful guidance of Michael Sack. After the 2001 sale raised \$12,000, Mike passed the baton to Sean and Mary Madden, a seemingly tireless. The parish continued to grow, and word about this behemoth sale spread, too. Like the Durham Christmas Fairs, the other churches in town started yard sales of their own and the weekend following Labor Day became a destination event for people in Northern New England. In 2002 the 700-Family Yard Sale netted \$14,000.

In June 2002 Amy (Hickey) Cady resigned as Associate Chaplain and Bishop McCormack appointed Deacon Arnold Gustafson to help Father Biron with sacramental duties and with the responsibilities of the Rite of Christian Formation for Adults.

Father Biron didn't cook for himself and never needed to, because people were so eager to get to know this genuinely nice man. So the parish was squeamish when a rumor spread that he was being transferred. This rumor was true. Father Bob was transferred to New London and Padre Dan came home to Durham. And so began an even closer bond with our Honduran brothers and sisters.

While both Spring Break Alternative trips continued, Father Dan made additional trips Honduras accompanied by parishioners. A stronger bond developed among these fellow Americans who planted trees together in the village of San Francisco de la Paz, or helped care for the sick. The stories the returning parishioners told strengthened that bond and all were eager to participate in some way.

Note cards with drawings by Honduran children were sold to help villagers attend school. Project Eden was founded as a separate non-profit to help the people of San Francisco de la Paz's agricultural needs, improving their gardens with a wider variety of nutritional foods, planting fast-growing trees that would provide firewood to sanitize cooking. Project Eden employs villagers to coach their neighbors in good farming practices and hopes to hire local university students to tutor children to encourage them to stay in school beyond the fourth grade.

Parishioners raised funds to ship medical supplies through the International Medical Equipment Collaborative. That humanitarian effort continues today. On the first

Wednesday of each month, St. Thomas More volunteers go to IMEC's North Andover, Mass., headquarters to pack containers of medical supplies for needy people throughout the world. Many parishioners knit caps for newborn babies to be included in the shipping container

The energetic and thoughtful Mary Beth Nazzaro resigned as campus minister in 2004. Like Amy, she had accompanied student volunteers to St. Charles Home to run with or to tutor the children there, to CityReach to learn about homelessness and to Crossroads House to serve the homeless and hungry. She was replaced by the effervescent Julie Tracy, another in a strong line of female campus ministers who counsel students wisely and mix fun with an array of service activities, including nursing home visits.

Julie added other dimensions to the UNH Catholic student experience. While students' trips to Honduras for an Alternative Spring Break continued; other students worked at Nazareth Farm, in rural West Virginia. The Farm' is an intentional community of lay volunteers that focus their lives and their work on the cornerstones of community, simplicity, prayer, and service. They are "devoted to developing relationships and eliminating sub-standard housing through home repair in rural West Virginia.

Deacon Arnold accepted a post as permanent deacon in Keene in 2005 and Administrative Assistant Venise Gonya retired after more than three decades of loyal service to UNH students who needed hugs, parishioners who needed practical help, and pastors who needed to learn who's who and what's what.

When Ann Kimball became Pastoral Associate in 2004, and Kristine Ingrassi became Director of Religious Education for the 2004-05 school year. Marianne Jacobs replaced her for the 2005-07 school years, and Geraldo Pilarski assumed that position for the following school year. When Geraldo moved, parishioner Kathy Brunet became the new Director of Religious Education.

In 2006 the parish began a Prayer Shawl Ministry, where crafting shawls, baptismal blankets, comforters and newborns' caps that are blessed to enfold people facing illness or distress; to encourage, soothe, console and to remind them they are surrounded by the love and prayers of the St. Thomas More Community.

In July 2006, when Father St. Laurent heeded the call to return as a missionary to

Honduras, Bishop McCormack sent Father Andrew W. Cryans to Durham as pastor and UNH Catholic Chaplain. Again, the parish rejoiced to be shepherded by another member of a vanishing breed: a New Hampshire native.

The amiable Father Andy proved to be an enthusiastic scholar who offered a series of workshops on topics like the letters of St. Paul and St. James; a succinct homilist who summarizes sermons with a memorable nugget like, “The heart of the matter is always the heart.”

The ultimate test of his mettle? Father Andy was the first pastor brave enough to work – not just at the annual Christmas Faire Extraordinaire – but to pull a full shift at what’s reportedly the state’s largest Yard Sale the parish offers widespread pick-up of bulky items or the content of a house. Perhaps his example prompted increased participation and helped the 2008 Yard Sale achieve a memorable milestone in receipts: \$29,928.32!

With so many virtues, many in the parish were aghast to discover something about this Littleton, N.H., native. They choose to believe Jesuits in the Bronx brainwashed this Fordham University graduate, but Father Andy claims it was listening to the radio as a child that led him to become a Yankees fan. Members of Red Sox Nation still believe in miracles; they hope that he remains pastor here long enough for them to work a conversion.

The parish ended its year-long 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration the way it began, with an outdoor Mass commemorating the Feast of St. Thomas More. What followed was another barbeque, fun and games. The following day many returned to usher in the parish’s Renovation and Beautification Project.

They moved the altar, the ambo, statues and other sacred items from the church to the Student Center where Mass would be celebrated while the church was insulated, cleaned, painted and carpeted. New benches and kneelers were donated by a generous parishioner; the old ones sold quickly to raise funds to help complete Phase I of the project. A fund-raising campaign is underway for Phase II, which includes installing a sprinkler system in the church basement and Student Center.