

Centennial Edition: Faith in Action Ministry Guide



2024 -2025

**A Guide to Ministries and Opportunities
Parish Directory**

Our Beginnings



Fr. Aloysius Fitzpatrick (1924-26)



A wedding in the first Church



Rev. Robert Bogg (1926-27)



Rev. Joseph Drew (1928-40)

As World War I came to a close, the Catholic population of Grand Rapids was rapidly growing eastward. It soon became apparent that new parishes would be needed to serve the growing population. The first organizational meeting for the new east-end parish which became Saint Thomas the Apostle was held in June of 1923 in the basement of Saint Andrew's Cathedral. Reverend Aloysius M. Fitzpatrick, Chancellor of the Grand Rapids Diocese, was named the first pastor of Saint Thomas. Father Fitzpatrick boldly stepped up to lead his Parish of 75 families in worship, fundraising and construction of the new church building. On May 8, 1924, ground was broken at 1429 Wilcox Park Drive for a new Catholic church. While the church was under construction, Saint Thomas parishioners worshiped in the chapel at the Little Sisters of the Poor on Lafayette Avenue.

Saint Thomas was built as a combination church and school. The first floor housed the chapel and three classrooms. On the second floor was an auditorium/gymnasium, a music room and a small kitchen. Construction took eighteen months with the first Mass being celebrated on October 18, 1925.

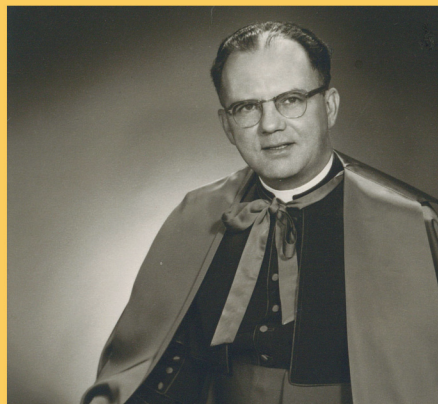


Photograph taken after the first Mass celebrated at the new Church - 1925

The early years were a challenge for our fledgling Parish. Fundraising was needed, money was tight and the Great Depression soon followed. The modest building served as a place of worship for 75 families in the chapel while three Dominican Sisters taught 63 students in the adjoining classrooms. After less than a year in the new church, Father Fitzpatrick who had worked so hard in directing the souls of the new Saint Thomas parishioners, while also continuing his work as Chancellor as well as caring for the Mission Church at Ravenna, resigned due to health reasons. Bishop Kelley appointed the young Diocesan secretary, Father Robert Bogg, to Saint Thomas. Father Bogg remained with us for two years as we continued to figure out God's plan for our new Parish.

In 1928 Father Joseph Drew was appointed pastor and remained until 1940. A beloved and scholarly pastor, Father Drew helped us to get on our feet, to establish our various groups and ministries, such as the Altar Society, the Women's Guild, the Holy Name Society for men, and to get us through the Depression years. At the time of the stock market crash in 1929, the Parish owned the present church/school building and had recently purchased additional land, foreseeing the need to one day build a new church. We had also acquired a house that was used as a rectory. Times were lean during the 1930's but God had a plan for Saint Thomas and Father Drew helped to lead us through financially challenging times.

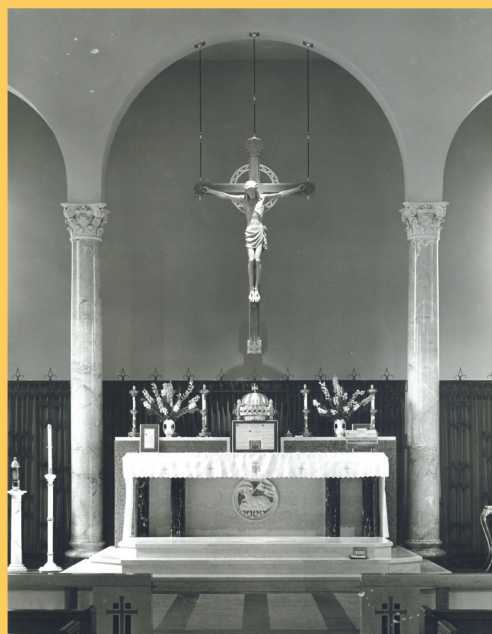
Building a New Church



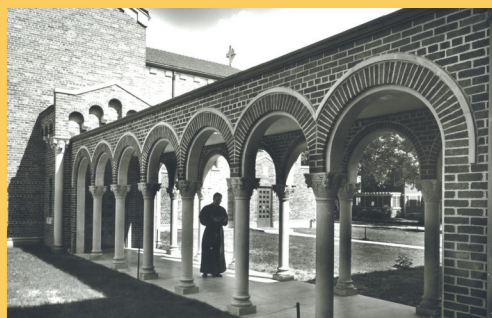
Msgr. Raymond Sweeney (1940-70)



Groundbreaking of new Church - 1953



New Church Altar and Cloister Walk



On July 3, 1940, Father Raymond J. Sweeney succeeded Father Drew as the pastor of Saint Thomas where he remained for thirty years, until 1970. These were years of tremendous growth and changes for the small Parish. The Parish population increased and many new organizations and expansions of existing groups occurred. The school also grew tremendously. In 1940, there were 147 students being taught in three classrooms by the Dominican Sisters who came over every day from their home at Marywood. In 1945, a small white house next to the school was purchased for use as a Kindergarten. A three bedroom house at 1420 Grace Street was purchased and became a convent for six Religious Sisters. With the growth of both Parish and school came the need for a larger facility. The land that the Parish had purchased for our new church was near the corner of Fulton and Carlton Streets but there was thought that there was not enough space for the expansion that was needed, which included a church, a rectory and an adequate parking lot. We were also not sure we wanted our church located on a busy "state highway" (Fulton Street). Eventually, a land trade with Holland Home enabled us to acquire the perfect property on Wilcox Park Drive with expansion to the east after an additional purchase of land from Aquinas College. Directly to the east of the rectory at 1436 Wilcox Park Drive, a house came up for sale. The Parish purchased it, and a breezeway was built attaching the two houses. This served sufficiently as a rectory until 1968.

Ground was broken for the new church in May of 1953. The church couldn't be built fast enough. After World War II, the building of new homes in the area and the population growth of families registering at the church and school was tremendous. Our church was too small and the classrooms were bulging. Classrooms held up to 55 students and there were waiting lists for enrollment. During the 1954-55 school year, when the new church building was completed but the main body of the church was still under construction, the middle school boys had their classroom in the lower level of the new church building.

After the completion of the new church, the students missed having the Blessed Sacrament so close to them and the ability to visit at any time, so Father Sweeney had the Cloister Walk built between the church and the school to join the two buildings as one. Remodeling of the "old church" into much needed classrooms began immediately. The result was four new classrooms, a library and a kitchen. The new church itself was just what we needed. It was a beautiful and holy place of worship. Designed in the style of Italian Romanesque architecture, its three altars were made of marble imported from Botticino, Italy. The main altar, which faced a life-sized hanging crucifix, was a privileged altar providing extra indulgences to persons having Masses offered on it. The altar contained the relics of our patron, Saint Thomas the Apostle, and Saint Fructuosus, the martyr. The interior walls were painted sand color and the ceiling was cream color. The sound system was the newest of its kind. Three confessionals were located in the main body of the church and a marble baptismal font near the entrance of the church. The church exterior featured the use of Ancient Christian symbols. These carved stone inserts follow the line of the gable at the edge of the roof. A statue of Saint Thomas the Apostle was placed over the main entrance. Bishop Allen J. Babcock blessed the church and consecrated the altars on December 21, 1954 (which at that time was the feast of Saint Thomas the Apostle).



The newly-built Saint Thomas the Apostle Church was dedicated on December 21, 1954.



Growth Continues

As growth continued throughout the 1950's and into the 1960's, the need for more facilities became evident. The remodeled school became too small. We did not have adequate parking for the multitude of parishioners who were coming to us from further away and driving more cars to Sunday Mass. The convent and the rectory needed more space, and our students needed an improved gym. The first plan was to construct one building attached to the west of the school that would house additional classrooms and a gym. But, when enough land could not be acquired, it was decided that additional classrooms would be added to the west of the school and the gym would be located on the far east side of our property line. The old convent would be razed and a new convent would be built at 1420 Grace Street, with the purchase of an additional lot.

In 1956 Monsignor Sweeney suffered a heart attack and credit must be given to Father Lionel Harnish, associate pastor, who graciously oversaw the planning of this new construction. The school addition and the all purpose gym were completed in 1961. The new convent was completed in 1963 and the new parking lot, in 1968. The parking lot was completed after a tremendous amount of work was required to fill in the creek bed and to lay tile to enclose the winding creek, known as Coldbrook Creek, that traveled through that portion of the property. The new rectory was built directly to the east of the church and was also completed in 1968. It contained an administration office and lobby and three offices for priests, in addition to the priest's living quarters. By the end of the 1960's, the school enrollment was 475 students and 850 families called Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish their spiritual home. We certainly had grown, and we now had the adequate facilities to take us into the future.



**The new School
Addition -
completed in
1961**



The new Convent - completed in 1963



Mass in the new Convent with Msgr. Sweeney - 1963



The new Rectory - completed in 1968

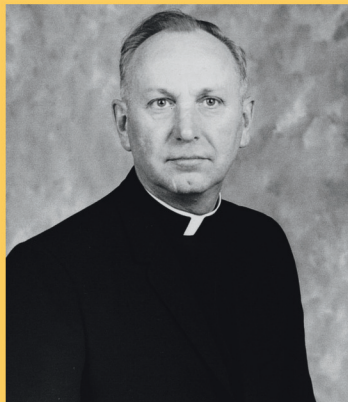


The newly-built Gym for the Parish and School - 1961

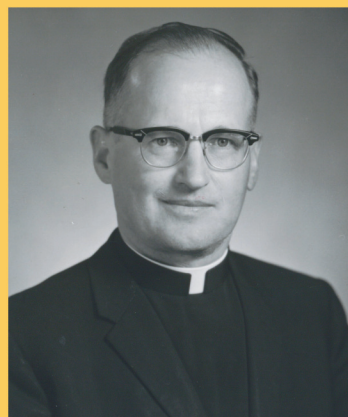
50 years as a Parish



Fr. Raymond Bruck (1970)



Fr. Frederick Voss (1970-77)



Fr. Walter Jude (1977-78)

When Father Sweeney, now Monsignor Sweeney, stepped down as pastor due to his failing health in March of 1970 after serving for 30 years, he was named Pastor Emeritus and remained at the Parish he loved for the next several years. Father Frederick Voss was named pastor in July 1970. Father Raymond Bruck had served as administrator during the interim and coordinated the transition. With construction tasks having been completed, Father Voss' challenge was raising the money needed to complete payment for this construction. But, perhaps his biggest challenge was making the mandates of Vatican II come to life. The restructuring of our Parish organization was prayerfully and thoughtfully accomplished as numerous parishioners accepted the new tasks and responsibilities for Parish life.

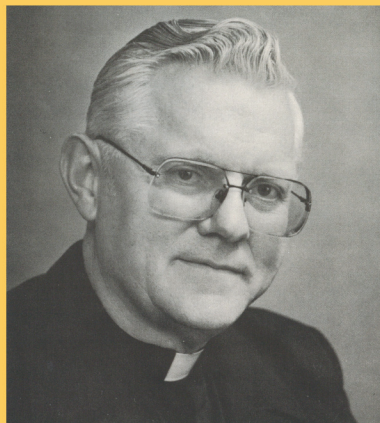
As an added effort to help integrate old ways into the new, Father Voss scheduled what he called a "Good Ole Fashion Mission" in 1972 as a Parish Renewal. It was a time of spiritual inventory and a time to reevaluate goals. In 1974, we celebrated our Golden Jubilee, fifty years as a Parish. The celebration included a Jubilee Mass, a Mass honoring the deceased of the Parish and a festive evening of dinner and dancing. However, too soon after, Father Voss was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumor. After he lost his ability to walk, the step was removed from the front of the church so that he could enter safely using his wheelchair. In February 1977, in a final gallant effort, he appeared during Sunday Mass for the last time. He was cared for in the rectory by Associate Pastor Father Ron Schneider and other parishioners until his passing on March 4. It was said that in a unique way, Father Voss' illness and passing were a great blessing to many by opening new vistas of service and dedication. Father Walter F. Jude was assigned as a transitional pastor after Father Voss' passing.

To celebrate Saint Thomas' 50th Jubilee, the back wall of the church was adorned with gold wallpaper and the black grate fence was removed. Part of the fence currently encloses the Saint Joseph Garden along the walkway between the rectory and the NE corner of the church. A forward facing altar was also installed to accommodate Vatican II initiatives for worship spaces.

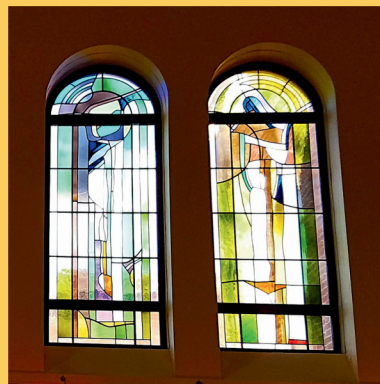


Mass for Msgr. Sweeney's 50th Ordination Anniversary - October 1979

Church Renovation



Fr. James Cusack (1978-87)



New stained glass windows



Newly-installed pipe organ

On July 2, 1978, Father James Cusack was appointed pastor. While progress had been made during the 1970's restructuring the organization of the Parish and adapting to changes to the Mass, we still needed to focus on renovating the church according to the decrees of Vatican II. Plans were made in late 1979 and renovation was completed in 1981. Perhaps the biggest change was the removal of the high altar and the placement of a permanent forward facing altar. In addition, the side altars were removed and the statues of Mary and Joseph were placed together on one side, and the Eucharistic chapel was on the other side. The sanctuary was redesigned and the three confessionals in the main body of the church were renovated. The stained glass windows, which were designed in a non-representational form rather than a traditional religious form, were installed, in addition to a pipe organ and new sound system. With Father Cusack's initiative, a successful fundraising campaign was held and debt was paid off. It was during this time period that the Parish also began to give 5% of their weekly collection to Esperanca, a medical missionary project on the Amazon River in South America. In 1983, under Father Cusack's leadership, the Saint Thomas Educational Foundation was established. The Foundation provides funds to support the operations and educational programming of the school as well as scholarships for students.



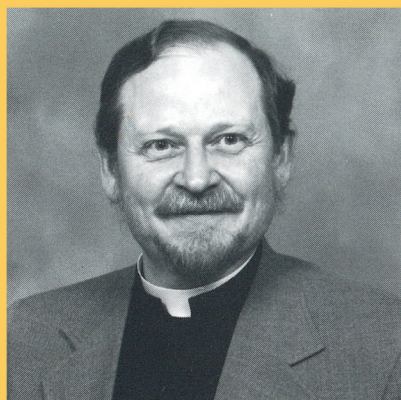
The newly renovated Church - 1981



Second groundbreaking for expansion of the Mercy Respite Center - 1989

In 1984, Saint Thomas owned a piece of property on Fulton Street, east of Holland Home which Father Cusack referred to as "Grand Rapids finest crop of weeds." At the same time, the Mercy Respite Center which offered respite care for special needs children and adults, was looking for a new home. Several Parish families were involved with the Mercy Respite Center. These families approached Father Cusack and asked if the Parish would be willing to donate the land. Upon approval by Bishop Joseph Breitenbeck, the land was donated and funds were raised for the construction of a building. On March 16, 1985, the new Mercy Respite Center was dedicated in a Prayer Service of Thanksgiving. This marked the beginning of forty years of service this building has provided to children and families. In 1989, the Parish donated 60 additional feet of land to expand the size of the building.

Growing in Faith and Service



Fr. Donald Heydens (1987-93)

Father Donald Heydens was appointed pastor in 1987 and served as pastor for six years until 1993. During his tenure, Father Heydens added an emphasis on Youth Ministry at the Parish and carried us through a transitional time as less priests were available to serve parishes and more lay staff members were necessary to coordinate Parish activities.

Upon the departure of Father Heydens, and as we approached the new millennium, the Parish was in need of a new focus, a renewal of faith. When Father James Chelich was appointed pastor in 1993, the crucifix was moved back to the center of the sanctuary to remind us that Jesus should be at the center of our prayer life and worship. Jesus was our focus and our renewal of faith. Through his homilies and many written booklets, Father Chelich taught us about our faith and about developing a personal prayer life. He taught us about the Mass, about God's love, and about our relationships. He taught us that everything has a "right order."



Fr. James Chelich (1993-present)

Under Father Chelich's leadership, the school embraced their Catholic identity as a Dynamic Education Centered in Christ and the enrollment began to increase. A preschool program was added in 1994 and, once again, more space was needed. The remaining Dominican Sisters returned to Marywood and the convent was no longer needed. Utilizing this space efficiently, the Parish chose to renovate the convent into a Ministry Center which would be connected to the school.

The **Building Ministry Together** capital campaign was initiated to raise the needed funds for the new Ministry Center project. It was completed in 1999 in time for the celebration of our 75th Jubilee. The Ministry Center was built with a multipurpose room and kitchen, several conference rooms, a Preschool and Kindergarten room for the growing school, and a chapel which displays the stained glass windows that were originally used in the convent chapel. The Dominican Sisters who helped to form and shape our school's mission and served faithfully during our first 75 years are remembered regularly during Masses. In their honor, a statue called *Dominican Sister and Children* was commissioned and placed in the garden between the church and the school.



The Ministry Center was created, joining the vacated Convent with the School building - 1999.



Honoring Our Legacy

Beginning in 1999 and continuing into the new millennium of 2000, we celebrated our 75th year as a Parish. In honor of this jubilee, we embraced a new project known as our **Jubilee House of Faith**. This home building project was a collaboration with the Inner-City Christian Federation. The purpose of the project was to bring the Parish together in a powerful display of Christian Service and witness as we constructed a safe, new, affordable home for a family in our community. Over 120 parishioners volunteered over the course of the year.

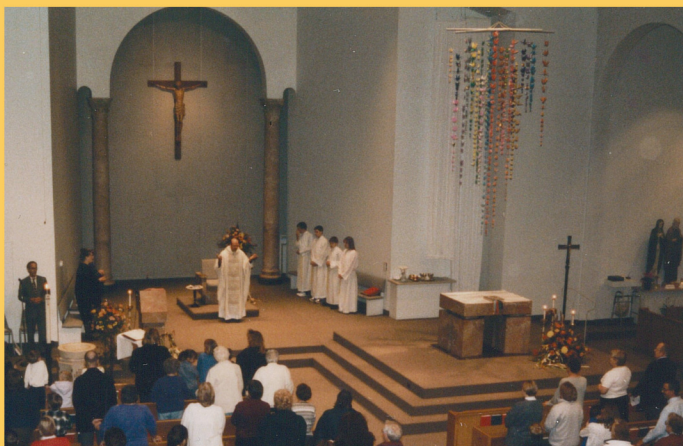
Our 75th Jubilee was highlighted by a Jubilee Mass celebrated on October 17, 1999 by Bishop Robert Rose, Father Chelich and former clergy who had served at Saint Thomas. During his homily, Bishop Rose highlighted our Jubilee House Building project as an “undertaking concretely embodying our faith.” A reception was held after Mass and a dinner dance was held the following Saturday on October 23. A Mass honoring all of the deceased from our Parish over the 75 years was held on November 2. Many parishioners of all ages attended the Parish picnic and pig roast that was held at Townsend Park, where many of the early Parish picnics took place. As we boldly moved into the new millennium, we celebrated with a special New Year’s Eve Mass held at 11:30 pm on December 31, 1999. Family activities to ring in the new millennium took place in the church lower level. We continued our Jubilee Celebration into the New Year with a Parish-wide Lenten retreat led by Paulist Father Mike Martin. A housewarming shower was held for the family moving into the Jubilee House of Faith. Our year-long celebration concluded as the family moved into their new home.



75th Jubilee Mass - October 17, 1999



75th Jubilee Picnic in Townsend Park



**Mass to honor those deceased from our Parish -
November 2, 1999**



Jubilee House of Faith - 1999

Embracing a New Millenium

We welcomed the new technology of the millennium with the launching of a Parish website in 2001. Email became a new and effective way to communicate. The entire campus became connected through a Parish Wi-Fi network. As the 2000's progressed, both the Parish and school created a YouTube channel and Facebook page and connected to our parishioners' cell phones via myParish App. The school introduced wireless computers, smart boards and new, innovative ways of teaching which opened the door to the receiving of several awards, including the Schools of Distinction Award and the Catholic Schools of Tomorrow Award. Families receive Tuition Angel Grants thanks to the generosity of many donors who value a Catholic education. The school has also been blessed by the leadership of several outstanding principals who have embraced the "Unapologetically Catholic" culture at Saint Thomas the Apostle School and have served as bold visionaries for our future.

In 1994, Father Chelich recognized the need to establish a concrete direction for moving the Parish into the 21st century. This was the first step in beginning the long range planning process. Over the next two decades, several Long Range Planning Days were held and surveys were developed as key issues were identified, goals were set and action steps toward those goals were taken. In 2014, a Strategic Map was completed outlining our Parish Mission and Vision, and Eight Factors Critical to our Community's Success. The long range plan is continuously evolving as we strive to achieve our vision and live out our mission to provide a spiritual home for all God's family.

Fundraising for Saint Thomas School and Parish took on a new look beginning in 2002 with the first ever *Emerald Auction*. The auction was held in the church lower level and featured an evening of hors d'oeuvres, fellowship and silent auction items. In 2007, the first off-site auction was held at the Wege Center at Aquinas College allowing more people to attend and offering a full evening of dinner, live auction and entertainment. After great success, the auction moved to an even larger venue the following year. In 2010, the auction was renamed *Auction with a Twist* and featured "twist tables" in addition to the live auction. By 2012, the auction was being held every two years and was raising ample funds to cover two years of Home and School budgets, money for Parish ministries, capital expenditures and technology improvements for the church, plus generous donations to the Tuition Angel program.

Another important fundraising campaign called **Renewing our House of Faith** took place in 2004. This project became the largest church renovation project since 1981. Projects included a renovation of the church sanctuary to make room for a new fully immersive baptistery utilizing the original baptismal font and to return the full arched ceiling of the sanctuary to its 1954 line. Decorative tile flooring was installed around and under the altar. The main level choir area was reconfigured to open clear access to the Eucharistic Chapel and allow space for an accessible ramp to the sanctuary. The choir loft was remodeled and the organ was refurbished. The Stations of the Cross were grouped together under the stained glass windows in the main seating section of the church. New carpet and paint and the refurbishment of the pews and kneelers completed the work in the church. In the lower level, the kitchen was renovated and air ventilation was improved. (Air conditioning had been installed in the church in 2002.) These renovations were celebrated with gratitude in the fall of 2004, which coincided with the 50th anniversary of the completed construction of our present church.



The immersive Baptistery - 2004



The renovated Church sanctuary - 2004

Living Our Mission

Christian Service outreach took a high priority for our parishioners throughout the 2000's and beyond. Since our initial Jubilee House of Faith project, we have assisted in the building of several other homes in partnership with Habitat for Humanity and the Inner City Christian Federation. We also partnered in Christian Service with GRACE Congregation Partnership, Heartside Gleaning Initiative, Kids Food Basket, In the Image, Catholic Charities of West Michigan and other organizations. Parishioners traveled to Nicaragua as Esperanca Ambassadors in 2015 and 2017, and Father Chelich traveled to Haiti in 2018 to visit the work of Hope for Haiti. Currently, Saint Thomas supports the work of Amazon Relief, Hope for Haiti, and local outreach through our offertory giving. We host Thanksgiving dinners and Winter Community dinners open to all parishioners and people of the surrounding areas. In 2015, through a generous donation, we reacquired the vacant building which had housed the Mercy Respite Center and leased it to a brand new initiative to serve children and families called the Children's Healing Center.



Saint Francis of Assisi statue amidst a flourishing garden



The Saint Joseph Grotto, the Marian Grotto and flowering trees beautify our Saint Thomas the Apostle campus

Under the horticultural leadership of Father Chelich, our campus has become a garden of beauty featuring many flower beds, flowering trees, a Marian Grotto, a Saint Joseph Grotto and a school habitat garden. He added one new tree or shrub during every year of his tenure, leading to over thirty new trees and shrubs. The Saint Joseph Grotto was rededicated by Father Chelich during Respect Life Month, in October 2021, as a place of reflection for mothers who have lost a child before birth. The Marian Grotto was blessed during the Month of Mary, in May 2022, as a place where an entire school or Parish group could gather to crown Our Lady or pray the rosary. The Grotto also welcomes any individual to kneel before Our Lady in prayer at any time.



In 2015, the large tabernacle from the original 1954 church was moved from the Eucharistic Chapel into the main body of the church. The marble chair, which had been formally used by the priest presiding over the Mass, was removed, and the marble from the chair was used to construct a stand for the tabernacle. A smaller tabernacle that had been placed on one of the side altars in 1954 was moved to the Eucharistic Chapel. The marble chair has been replaced by a modest yet suitable set of chairs placed slightly off to the side for the celebrants at Mass. Now, the main focus of our church truly is Jesus; both on the crucifix and in the tabernacle placed directly beneath it.



The original Tabernacle is refurbished and returned to the center of the Church - 2015

Building our Future

In 2019, our Parish celebrated the ordination to the priesthood of our own parishioner and Saint Thomas school graduate, Andrew Ayers. Father Ayers was the first priest ordained from our Parish since Father Jon VanderPloeg was ordained as a priest for the Companions of Christ in 2001. Father Ayers's Celebration Mass was held on June 2, 2019. This was indeed a very special moment in our Parish life and a beautiful Mass was celebrated with a multitude of clergy present. A reception was held afterwards in the church lower level where Father Ayers bestowed his first priestly blessings on many parishioners whom he had known since his childhood. We have also been blessed to have had four men from our Parish ordained into the Permanent Diaconate since the year 2000. Dcns. Dennis Williams and Jim Thorndill were ordained in 2006. Deacon Dean Vernon was ordained in 2017. And Deacon David Bevins was recently ordained in 2024.



Deacon Jim Thorndill, Transitional Deacon Andrew Ayers, Father James Chelich, Dcns. Dennis Williams and Dean Vernon - 2018.



Children's Healing Center to become the new Early Childhood Center - 2025



The 100th anniversary of the Groundbreaking of Saint Thomas - May 8, 2024

As we approach our 100 Year Jubilee, we are a vibrant and faith-filled Parish. We continue to strive to learn more about our faith and to serve others through our many ministries. With the relocation of the Children's Healing Center and the growth of our school, we will be opening an Early Childhood Development Center in the same building that has been serving children and families for over 40 years. The new center will be home to a Preschool, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd program and After School Care program. It is scheduled to open in the Fall of 2025, one hundred years after the first Mass was celebrated at Saint Thomas the Apostle. We continue to be renewed in our Catholic faith through the teachings of our pastor, Father James Chelich, who is now in his 32nd year of service to our Parish. During this past year, Father Chelich's teachings have focused on Eucharistic Devotion in collaboration with the United States Bishops Year of Eucharistic Revival which culminated with the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis in July 2024. We are taking a fresh look at how we come to Mass, specifically looking at gratitude and thanksgiving. We are taking a deeper look at what it means to receive Holy Communion; we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, we personally invite Jesus to live within us, and we walk with Jesus out of the church and into our day and week ahead. With Jesus as our focus, we, the parishioners of Saint Thomas the Apostle, move boldly and freely into our next one hundred years.