

COMPANIONS OF CHRIST

DIOCESAN PRIESTS LIVING IN FRATERNITY

In This Issue...



The Companions of Christ's Priests in the front row, right to left: Fr. David Blume, Fr. Jeff Huard, Fr. Peter Richards, Fr. Kevin Finnegan, Fr. Michael Johnson, Fr. Jon Vander Ploeg, Fr. Jay Kybbe, Fr. Andrew Cozzens, Fr. Michael Becker. The Companions of Christ seminarians in the second row, right to left: Tony O'Neil, Justin Kortuem, Brian Park, Evan Koop, Luke Marquard, John Kelly. Not pictured: Fr. Tom Margevicius.

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From the Superior of the Companions of Christ...

We are happy to announce with this summer newsletter a new priest for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis and the Companions of Christ. Fr. Michael Johnson, although he is now the youngest priest in the Archdiocese, will make a wonderful contribution to the local Church with his energy, intellect and committed prayer life. You can read his vocation story on the back page of this newsletter. He was ordained May 30, with two other priests from the Archdiocese and will be serving at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in New Brighton with Fr. Michael Skluzacek. Fr. Johnson's ordination makes ten Companions of Christ priests, but he is only the second one who is actually native to the Archdiocese; the other eight of us came here because of the Companions of Christ.



One of the great gifts of this past year has been our new Archbishop, The Most Reverend John C. Nienstedt. He has been a blessing to work with and has strongly expressed his support of our life and charism in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. He is an extremely dedicated and generous servant, and we

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A New Church for Divine Mercy

“Come to him a Living Stone ... and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-5).



The Catholic Community in Faribault, MN dedicated a new Church on August 2, 2009. Fr. Kevin Finnegan, a member of the Companions of Christ, is the pastor of the first church in the state of Minnesota named for the Divine Mercy. “The whole process,” Fr. Finnegan commented, “has been one that has enriched our faith – even though at times it has been challenging. It has reminded us that the church remains a pilgrim people, awaiting our heavenly homeland. It has called us to deeper unity and, I believe, given us a more specified mission from God: to be Ambassadors of Divine Mercy.”

As with a church building, so too the church assembled. A church models the Church, the People of God. As the People of God form a church building, so too the church building forms the People of God. As a

church is beautiful and graceful, so too are we, the Church, called to be beautiful and graceful to behold. Some aspects of the new church include:

The Baptistry, through which one enters the church, has inscribed on the Font the prayer Our Lord shared with St. Faustina: “Jesus, I trust in you.” This simple phrase, though most challenging to live, reminds parishioners as they enter for Mass that they must grow in abandonment to the will of God. As they “go in peace” at the end of Mass, it calls them to their mission of bringing the tender love of God to all.

The Altar composed of Kato Stone and Italian granite is the main focus of the church, since from it flows the life of Jesus, the Bread of Life and the Cup of Eternal Salvation. Centered behind the altar is the **Tabernacle**, and hanging above the altar is a **Crucifix** (composed of a circa 1930 French or French-Canadian corpus on a new cross). This reminds all of the sacrificial love of Jesus made present in the sacrifice of the Mass. As parishioners come forward to receive Holy Communion, they meditate on the heart of the Christian life, the call to lay down one’s life in love, in imitation of Christ.

One of the features that strikes all who see the new church is the **Bell Tower and Spire**. Rising over 100 feet, the tower holds the newly restored bells from our three former churches which once again call the faithful to worship. The spire and bells make a bold statement: “We are not bashful!” They’ll be seen and heard by all. They are what the Church should be: a physical presence of God in the world. Where truth is covered up, the Church rings out; where justice is trampled, the Church rings out; when people are forgotten, the Church rings out; where despair is strong, the Church rings out; where Jesus is unknown, the Church rings out; when death comes near, the Church rings out. And like the cross-topped spire, we too must prophetically rise above the hatred, conflict, prejudice, confusion and alienation that spoil our world.



Fr. Finnegan saw his prayer and vision for the church inscribed at the Sanctuary of the Divine Mercy in Lagiewnike, Poland:

“I pray that this church will always be a place where the message of God’s merciful love is proclaimed; a place of conversion and repentance; a place for the celebration of the Eucharist; a fountain of mercy; a place of prayer and of constant appeals for mercy for ourselves and for the whole world.” (Pope John Paul II, August 17, 2002)

NOTE: Divine Mercy welcomes all to come and pray at the new church and to renew their commitment to being Ambassadors of Mercy in the world today. We hope to receive a first class relic of St. Faustina on Divine Mercy Sunday, at 3:00 PM April 11, 2010.

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are grateful for the way he has been available to support us. You will see on page 2 of this newsletter that he has appointed two more Companions of Christ to work in seminary formation, and we are grateful to serve in this way.

In January we took our annual priestly retreat as a community. We had a seven day silent, directed retreat with directors from the Institute for Priestly Formation from Omaha, NE. The priests were very blessed to have this opportunity for prayer and solitude with the Lord. This retreat was patterned on the design of St. Ignatius, where the retreatant prays with Scripture and listens to the Lord in four different one hour meditations each day. In the times of prayer one learns how to discern when the Lord is speaking through his peace and love that we often call consolation. We found this to be a very fruitful time. This summer we will have our annual summer conference in the first week in August. Fr. Timothy Gallagher will be giving us teaching on the Discernment of Spirits, especially coming from St. Ignatius of Loyola. Fr. Gallagher is one of the leading retreat masters and teachers on Ignatian prayer and discernment so this will be a great opportunity for the Companions of Christ to continue to seek the Lord through Scripture and the teaching of one of the Church’s great saints.

You may remember from our last newsletter that the Companions of Christ have been founded in the Archdiocese of Denver Colorado with four seminarians there. The week after Easter we were happy to have them visit us here in Minnesota and they will join us again for our summer conference this August. It is exciting for us to see them starting out in this new way of life for priests and seminarians in their own Archdiocese. We regularly experience interest in the Companions of Christ from priests and seminarians around the country. It may happen soon that other dioceses will begin to have this option for diocesan priests to live a committed communal life in order to support each other to grow in holiness. This coming Fall we will have at least two young men living with us to discern the call to priesthood and the Companions of Christ.

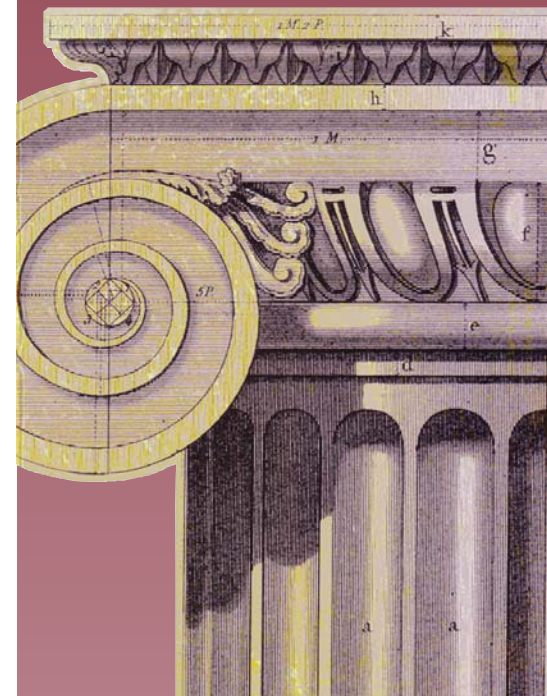
We are filled with gratitude for the many graces we know we will receive in this “Year of the Priest.” See the article by Fr. Andrew Cozzens in this issue, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the priesthood. Know that we count very much on your prayers and support to continue our way of life together supporting each other in priestly holiness. Your contributions help us to keep developing this way of life for future generations of priests. Know also that we pray daily for our supporters and benefactors.

Fr. Jon Vander Ploeg
Superior, The Companions of Christ



Some new tidbit here

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In his letter proclaiming this year of the priest, Pope Benedict XVI invites all priests to spiritual renewal. He holds up the patron St. John Vianney as a model of how priestly life can be lived and how it can change the world. St. John Vianney became so well renowned for his priestly holiness that even though he heard confessions at times for 16 hours a day, one often had to wait for more than a day to go to confession to him. In fact so many people wanted to use his confessional that the government built an extra train line from Paris to Ars in southern France to accommodate the crowds. The Holy Father points out that this was really a miracle, since, "in France, at the time of the Curé of Ars, confession was no more easy or frequent than in our own day, since the upheaval caused by the revolution had long inhibited the practice of religion." Would that in this year of the priest we might see a renewal in the sacrament of confession as St. John Vianney created in Ars. "The Curé of Ars was able to transform the hearts and the lives of so many people," says the Pope, "because he enabled them to experience the Lord's merciful love."

This year of the priest is special for us Companions of Christ, because the Holy Father encourages in his letter two things which are central to our way of life. First, he encourages all priests to live the Evangelical Counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. He points out that "the Curé of Ars lived the 'evangelical counsels' in a way suited to his priestly state." Second, the Holy Father encourages the importance of new movements and priestly fraternity. He says, "I would like to invite all priests, during this Year dedicated to them, to welcome the new springtime which the Spirit is now bringing about in the Church, not least through the ecclesial movements and the new communities." Then he adds a note about the importance of the many ways of incarnating priestly fraternity: "This communion between priests and their Bishop, grounded in the sacrament of Holy Orders and made manifest in Eucharistic concelebration, needs to be translated into various concrete expressions of an effective and affective priestly fraternity." We have long considered ourselves as Companions of Christ to be a new movement which gives concrete expression to priestly fraternity. We hope and pray that through our life together we might become witnesses of how fraternal life leads priests to greater holiness.

The Holy Father invites the whole Church to pray for renewal in the priesthood this year. Every married couple, every single or consecrated person knows that they need times of renewal in their life to be encouraged to greater fidelity to their call. Please pray that this year might be such a time for priests everywhere. Pray that priests might be renewed in their relationship with Christ and more devoted to their ministry that through their greater self-oblation the Church might be drawn more into the life of God. As the Holy Father says, "Dear priests, Christ is counting on you. In the footsteps of the Curé of Ars, let yourselves be enthralled by him. In this way you too will be, for the world in our time, heralds of hope, reconciliation and peace!"

Three New Assignments for the Companions of Christ

Archbishop John C. Nienstedt has assigned two more priests of the Companions of Christ to seminary formation in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis and given a new parish to one of our priests. Fr. Michael Becker will begin this summer to work in spiritual direction and formation at Saint John Vianney College Seminary. Fr. Jeff Huard will be director of spiritual formation at the Saint Paul Seminary. Fr. Peter Richards will become pastor of St. Michaels Church in St. Michael.



Fr. Becker, ordained in 1999, spent the first three years as a parochial vicar at St. John the Baptist Church in New Brighton. In 2002 he became pastor of St. Michael's Church in St. Michael Minnesota. There he supervised the building of a beautiful new Church and dedicated himself to the spiritual growth of his parishioners. As Fr. Becker recently wrote in his Church bulletin, the spiritual biography of St. Michael's Catholic Church during his time as pastor has included, "reverencing the Eucharist, protecting life, teaching Catholic values, walking as pilgrims, imploring our Mother Mary's intercession, confessing our sins, listening to the Word of God, opening to the Holy Spirit, always obedient to Mother Church. In sum, our individual endeavor has been to become Saints; our corporate endeavor has been to be fully Catholic." Fr. Becker looks forward to working with Fr. Bill Baer who has built a wonderful seminary in his ten years as rector, now respected as the largest college seminary in the country. Fr. Becker will be joining a team of priests who seek to help college-aged men grow in their relationship with Christ and discern their call to service in the Church. The strength of Fr. Becker's preaching and the example of his character will be a great gift to the seminarians at St. John Vianney seminary.



Taking Fr. Becker's place at St. Michael's Church will be his fellow Companion of Christ Fr. Peter Richards. Fr. Richards was ordained in 1998 and served for three years at Mary Mother of the Church in Burnsville, and then he was assigned in 2001 to St. Albert in Albertville. In 2003 he became pastor of St. John the Baptist in Dayton in addition to St. Albert. Fr. Richards is well known for his humility and dedicated, joyful service. He will only be moving a few blocks a way but will be taking on a larger parish. There are always mixed emotions when one leaves a parish to go to another. Fr. Peter expressed deep gratitude for his time in Albertville and Dayton: "The priest to follow me is inheriting lovely people to pastor and walk with."



Fr. Jeff Huard served as superior of the Companions of Christ from 1993 until 2008. Ordained in 1994, he was first assigned as an associate pastor of All Saints Catholic Church in Lakeville. Then he spent ten years serving as director of campus ministry at the University of St. Thomas. Most recently, Fr. Huard was assigned as pastor of St. Mark's parish from 2007-2009. Fr. Huard has been well known throughout his various assignments for his evangelistic outreach, his inspiring preaching, and his love for families. He says that he will miss all the various aspects of parish life, from the school children to the nursing home masses. He has brought many young families into St. Mark's parish in his two years there, and was greatly loved by the parishioners and staff. He is saddened that his stay has been so short but understands the importance of his new assignment. Fr. Jeff has been a sought-after spiritual director by priests, seminarians and laity alike and now looks forward to working closely with Monsignor Aloysius Callaghan, who strengthened the Saint Paul Seminary greatly in his four years as rector. At the Saint Paul Seminary Fr. Huard will be in charge of all the spiritual formation, which according to the US Bishops document on priestly formation "stands at the heart of seminary life and is the center around which all other aspects are integrated." Fr. Huard will be charged with helping the seminarians develop and maintain lives of communion with Christ rooted in prayer. He will give regular spiritual conferences, organize retreats, direct the various aspects of formation and be a spiritual model for the seminarians in the house. Please pray for Fr. Becker, Fr. Richards and Fr. Huard as they begin their new assignments.

Meet Our Newest Priest: Fr. Michael Johnson



“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it” (Matthew 13:45-46). Though Jesus uses the pearl of great price in this parable as a metaphor for the kingdom of heaven, the pearl of great price is a good metaphor for many things in life, especially those things that

pertain to the spiritual life.

In reflecting upon my ordination as a priest of the archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis on May 30, I find, in particular, two pearls of great price within my own life. The first is my vocation to the priesthood and the second, embedded within the first, is my calling to the Companions of Christ. Unlike the merchant in the parables who Jesus says was searching for these fine pearls, I was not searching for either of these pearls when I found them. A better way of saying it would be that these pearls of great price found me.

Unlike many of the other guys in seminary, I had never considered a vocation to the priesthood. I was content as a student at the University of Minnesota, pursuing a degree in geophysics that would bring me happiness and worldly success. My world was turned upside down when I attended a Mass celebrated by a priest who was celebrating 35 years of ordination. He spoke about the great joy he had in serving the Lord, and then asked all the men, young and old, to be open to the possibility of the priesthood. The Holy Spirit was tugging at my heart, and I may not have had the courage to respond if my sister, who was also at that Mass, had not said that she was thinking about me as the priest was speaking. Seven and a half years after that Mass I was ordained to the priesthood. Only years later would I find out that this priest, Fr. Tim Nolan, was a friend and supporter of the Companions of Christ.

This brings me to the second pearl of great price, which found me in an equally unexpected way. I was studying in Rome as part of my undergraduate degree in Catholic Studies, and while there I was working through

a vocation crisis of sorts with my spiritual director. He and I were discerning if I was called to a religious order rather than the diocesan priesthood. I had no desire to be a priest who, once ordained, lived without a community around him and did his own thing. My spiritual director in Rome also happened to be a friend of Father Andrew Cozzens. At the end of my time in Rome, my spiritual director encouraged me to continue looking at religious orders, yet he also said that there was a group of priests living out their vocation as diocesan priests in the way that I was articulating to him. He said that if I could not find a religious order then perhaps I should look at the Companions of Christ. This second pearl of great price was placed before me, but I did not pick it up to examine it just yet.

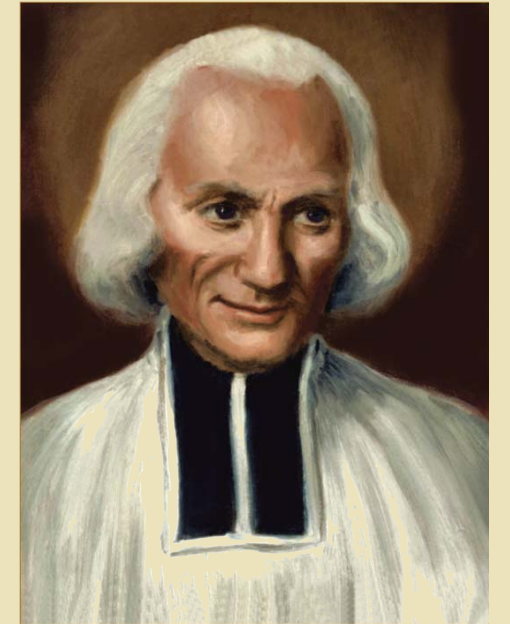
I spent the remaining two years at Saint John Vianney College Seminary looking at religious orders, especially the Benedictines, but never had peace with the thought of being a religious brother or priest. I had all but given up my search for a religious community by the time I arrived at the Saint Paul Seminary. It was there that a sign on a door in the seminary tickled something in the back of my mind: “Companions of Christ Study Room.” That tickling in the back of my mind was the dusting off of the pearl that my spiritual director in Rome had placed before me, and which I had all but forgotten about. In speaking with fellow seminarians Steve Villa and Jon Kelly, I realized that they were living the life that I had been looking for while in Rome. That year I began participating in their life as Companions by entering a men’s group and joining them for meals. That summer I began living in a household with them and formally joined as a seminarian, which started me on the journey that led to my ordination as a priest and member of the Companions of Christ.

As I begin my priestly ministry, I am assigned as Parochial Vicar of St. John the Baptist in New Brighton under Fr. Michael Skluzacek, a friend and supporter of the Companions of Christ. I am looking forward to the joys and challenges that await me there and through Fr. Skluzacek’s mentorship I hope to realize the full beauty of the pearls of great price that have been given to me.

The Companions of Christ Give Thanks for “The Year of the Priest”

On June 19, 2009, the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Pope Benedict XVI inaugurated “the year of the priest” in order to “deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a more forceful and incisive witness to the Gospel in today’s world.” (Letter of Benedict XVI Proclaiming a year for priests, see: www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20090616_anno-sacerdotale_en.html) The Holy Father decided to do this in honor of the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Vianney, August 4, 1959. On this same day in 2009, Pope Benedict will declare St. John Vianney patron of all priests. Currently he is the patron only of parish priests.

The Holy Father is inviting the whole Church to reflect upon the “immense gift which priests represent, not only for the Church, but also for humanity itself” (Letter, para. 2). It is through priests that the work of redemption is carried on in the Church. St. John Vianney defined the priesthood as the “the love of the Heart of Jesus.” In his letter proclaiming this year of the priest, the Holy Father quotes St. John Vianney’s understanding of the priesthood: “A good shepherd, a pastor after God’s heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy.” “O, how great is the priest! ... If he realized what he is, he would die... God obeys him: he utters a few words and the Lord descends from heaven at his voice, to be contained within a small host...” “Without the Sacrament of Holy Orders, we would not have the Lord. Who put him there in that tabernacle? The priest. Who welcomed your soul at the beginning of your life? The priest. Who feeds your soul and gives it strength for its journey? The priest. Who will prepare it to appear before God, bathing it one last time in the blood of Jesus Christ? The priest, always the priest. And if this soul should happen to die [as a result of sin], who will raise it up, who will restore its calm and peace? Again, the priest... After God, the priest is everything! ... Only in heaven will he fully realize what he is.” (All quotes are from the “Letter Proclaiming a Year for Priests”)



To some modern ears these words might sound excessive in their praise of the priesthood. But the Holy Father is inviting us to see who priests really are, and who they are called to be. Of course the priest does not exist in isolation; rather, he exists entirely with and for the People of God. In his letter the Holy Father holds up St. John Vianney as an example of cooperation with the laity. But the priest gives to the Church what no one else can, the very life of Jesus in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, this life which is poured out for us from the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the Cross. The greatness of the priesthood is not found in an individual man but in the gift of the office of priesthood for the Church. After all, no man can do what a priest does. Only Christ can say, “This is my body” and have it actually become the Body of Christ. God alone has the power to forgive sins. And yet God chooses to use his priests as instruments of this saving grace which he gives to us. This is the greatness and the humility of the priesthood. As St. John Vianney said: “Were we to fully realize what a priest is on earth, we would die: not of fright, but of love... Without the priest, the passion and death of our Lord would be of no avail. It is the priest who continues the work of redemption on earth... What use would be a house filled with gold, were there no one to open its door? The priest holds the key to the treasures of heaven: it is he who opens the door. He is the steward of the good Lord, the administrator of his goods ... Leave a parish for twenty years without a priest, and they will end by worshiping the beasts there ... The priest is not a priest for himself, he is a priest for you.”