A Special Edition recalling Br. Robert’s many contributions to the beauty of the Cathedral
Brother Robert Sokolowski is officially the Pastoral Assistant but those of you who have been members of St. John the Baptist Parish for a number of years know that he is much more than that. Brother Robert was born in Chester, Pennsylvania, about twenty-two miles south of Philadelphia in 1941. He attended St. James High School and entered the Marist Fathers and Brothers upon his graduation. Brother Robert completed his studies as a novice in Watch Hill, Rhode Island and made his Profession of Faith as a brother in 1964.

Before coming to Savannah, his career was quite varied including assignments in Washington, D.C (several times), Rome, Italy, Cleveland, Ohio and then Brunswick, Georgia. If you want a good story ask him about decorating Nancy Reagan’s Christmas tree at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. In 1988, he was transferred to the Cathedral Parish and since then we have all been the beneficiaries of his hard work.

His responsibilities include everything concerning the physical facilities of the Cathedral as well as its aesthetic environment. In response to an inquiry of his Provincial as to what was his job, Brother Robert responded, “Maître D’ Hotel”.

Most of us realize that we have him to thank for the decorations that make the Cathedral so beautiful at Christmas and Easter, as well as other special days. But as I spoke to him recently, on the Tuesday after Easter, he was all alone on his knees in the side aisle, personally watering every single plant in the window boxes on the Harris Street side of the Cathedral. “They dry out on the south side very quickly because of the sun,” he said. “I’ll probably have to water them twice a week for about the next three weeks,” he added. Brother Robert finds decorating the Cathedral for the Easter Season the most challenging assignment of all his yearlong activities. “But when the lights come up at the Gloria during the Easter Vigil Mass, to reveal the Cathedral in all its splendor, I have a very great sense of personal satisfaction,” he said.

As for frustrations in the job, the chronic problems with the elevator are a constant source of irritation to Brother Robert. Hopefully the renovation project will take care of that. “What about your hopes for the Cathedral Parish,” I asked. He smiled and replied, “I have a dream that St. John the Baptist Cathedral Parish will be the spiritual and cultural center of the South, like St. Patrick’s is for the North and the Vatican is for the World. We have the most beautiful building south of D.C. and this parish can do so much more good, he concluded.”

It will probably take the efforts of the entire parish and perhaps the diocese to make Brother Robert’s dream come true. We are blessed to have him assigned to our Parish Staff.
For the past 15 years, Brother Robert has decorated the Cathedral during Advent and substantially enhanced our Christmas experience.

While living in Rome for several years in the mid-Sixties, Brother Robert was exposed to elaborate crib scenes in Naples and Rome where he got many ideas which would later be incorporated into our display. He initially decorated the Cathedral in 1986 while still working down in Brunswick. That early effort involved only about 8 statues and 5 or 6 trees on St. Anthony’s altar. Over the next couple of years he received permission to expand the display into the full depth of Our Lady’s Chapel.

Brother Robert has been very pleased at the reaction to his work. Overall, it has been extremely positive not only from the people in the parish but the entire City of Savannah. Over 18,000 people visit the Cathedral each year during the Christmas season to see the beautiful decorations. Many people make an annual pilgrimage from various parishes around the diocese and snowbirds from up north regularly stop here en route to Florida to see our beautiful Cathedral all decorated for the season.

According to Brother Robert, the most significant and unique aspect of the decorations is the Poinsettia Tree. It has grown from the initial effort in 1988 of 90 plants, which was 7 feet tall to the current display of 250 plants, which stands about 15 feet. “I like the way it unites the members of the parish both alive and dead, as people honor their deceased loved ones as well as family members who are still living,” said Brother Robert.

Brother Robert had sort of a sabbatical when the Cathedral was closed during the restoration, but it was frustrating too. “I missed having the Cathedral to decorate,” he said.

None of this would be possible without the assistance of from 20-30 dedicated volunteers, notably Bruce Maslar, who is primarily responsible for setting up the crib scene. Our thanks to all of them for making our Christmas so meaningful every year.
Christmas Over the Years
Brother Robert Sokolowski, S.M., is officially the Pastoral Assistant at the Cathedral but those of you who have been members of St. John the Baptist Parish for a number of years know that he is much more than that. He transferred to the Cathedral Parish in 1988 and since then we have all been the beneficiaries of his hard work. His responsibilities include everything concerning the physical facilities of the Cathedral as well as its aesthetic environment. We have him to thank for the decorations that make the Cathedral so beautiful at Christmas and Easter, as well as other special days during the year.

Brother Robert has been very pleased at the reaction to his work, not only from the people in the parish, but the entire City of Savannah. Over 18,000 people visit the Cathedral each year during the Christmas season to see the beautiful decorations. Many people make an annual pilgrimage from around the diocese and snowbirds from up north regularly stop in Savannah, en route to Florida to see our beautiful Cathedral decorated for the season. Southern Living magazine carried an article, complete with pictures, about Brother Robert and the Cathedral Christmas decorations a few years ago.

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In recognition of Brother Robert’s 70th birthday, members of various churches in Savannah and beyond, both Catholic and other faith traditions, came together to produce a floral tribute. It was on display in the Cathedral over the weekend of May 28–29, 2011 in appreciation of how he has enriched our lives over these past 23 years. What better way to express our appreciation to Brother Robert for his talent and inspiration that have enhanced the beauty of the Cathedral for so many years. He has also shared his knowledge to bring the same beauty and inspiration to other churches. It was fitting that so many church members on floral committees joined together to install elaborate floral designs in the Cathedral to celebrate his birthday. There were 14 arrangements in all from the following churches: Blessed Sacrament, Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, Sacred Heart, St. Anne from Richmond Hill, St. James, St. Joseph from Macon, St. Frances Cabrini, St. Peter the Apostle, Calvary Baptist, Christ Church Anglican, Christ Church Episcopal, Skidaway Island Presbyterian, St. John’s Episcopal and Wesley Monumental United Methodist. Brother Robert was overwhelmed by this beautiful floral tribute.
Brother Robert was transferred to the Cathedral Parish back in 1988 and since then we have all been the beneficiaries of his hard work, decorating the Cathedral to make it so beautiful at Christmas and Easter, as well as other special days. Here is what some of the bishops and rectors he has worked with had to say about his service.

Bishop Lessard brought Brother Robert to Savannah in 1988. “I first met Brother Robert in Rome when he was at the Marist motherhouse there. Meeting him in later years in Brunswick, I saw that he could bring a wealth of gifts to the Cathedral in Savannah; being responsible for the beauty of the church as well as for the ceremonies so frequently celebrated there. I was also looking at someone who would be qualified to serve as an assistant MC for pontifical celebrations. As long as I was the resident bishop of Savannah, I was very satisfied with his performance in that regard, but also for the way he decorated the cathedral church for the special seasons, especially Christmas. May he enjoy his well-earned retirement.”

Bishop Boland commented, “My abiding observation of Brother Robert is how well he cared for the “Liturgical Table” of the Cathedral. As he enters his retirement years, we are mindful of his faithful care of the sick, the beauty of the Christmas Crèche, and the magnificent Poinsettia tree reaching toward the heavens. Liturgical prayer should be grounded in the integration of movement, the proclamation of the Word, the majesty of music and the solemnity of silence. As the Master of Ceremonies, Brother Robert guided these moments of praise and gratitude within the sacred walls of our Cathedral. In his retirement years, may God’s Spirit abide always with him.”

Bishop Hartmayer said, “The Cathedral has been blessed by the faithful and quiet ministry of Brother Robert over the years. He has been a wonderful resource serving the bishops and priests who celebrated Mass at the Cathedral, as he prepared the vessels and vestments for each liturgy. I never worried about what to wear and what to do because Brother Robert was always there. I am personally grateful for the care and attention that he always gave to me. He will be greatly missed.”

And Monsignor O’Neill added, “On the occasion of my Silver Jubilee of ordination in 1992, I was Pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church here in Savannah. I invited Brother Robert to be the Master of Ceremonies for my Jubilee Mass and I will be forever grateful to him for obliging. We were truly blessed by his decorative creativity for each of the liturgical seasons.”

Fr. Schreck, who worked with Brother for only the past two years, had this to say, “Brother Robert has meant so much to the Cathedral Parish. For twenty-seven years he has cared for the Cathedral as if it were his own home, being so dedicated to making the Church beautiful. He has always been willing to help me by doing whatever I asked. Because he worked for so many years with my mother Patty when she was organist and choir director, I have looked upon Brother Robert as a “member of the family.” I am grateful to him for everything that he has done to make the Cathedral, as he has always been fond of saying, the ‘Spiritual and Cultural Center of the Church in the Southeast.’ I wish Brother Robert a very happy and restful retirement, and look forward to having him in Savannah and around the Cathedral.”

Brother Robert’s dream that the Cathedral would become a spiritual and cultural mecca in the Southeast, like St. Patrick’s up North and the Vatican in Rome, has essentially come true as TripAdvisor ranked it a top US attraction for the past two years. We have been blessed to have Brother Robert with us these past 27 years. Although he is retiring, Brother Robert plans to stay in Savannah, so we will still be seeing him around the Cathedral from time to time.
Creating beauty and elegance for 25 Years

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It was previously reported that Brother Robert Sokolowski recently marked 25 years of service to the Cathedral.

It’s worth noting that the Tour Guide Ministry, which was his brain child, is still thriving today, warmly welcoming visitors from all over the country and around the world, to our beautiful Cathedral.

And the recent accolade from TripAdvisor of a 6th place ranking among top US attractions, is in no small measure due to Brother Robert’s elegant decorations, which adorn our church throughout the various liturgical seasons. It is not unusual at Christmastime, that well over 1000 visitors a day, come through the Cathedral, to view his Nativity masterpiece.

It’s hard to imagine the Cathedral without him! He has shared with us his time, treasure and talent in ways we can never measure. God Bless you Brother Robert, as you continue your service to the Marist Brothers and the Cathedral Parish.