A SHEPHERD FOR 45 YEARS
Msgr. O’Neill feted by parishioners and friends

Monsignor William Oliver O’Neill’s 45th Ordination Anniversary, celebrated on Sunday, June 3, 2012, was a truly joyous occasion. Hundreds of people along with Bishop Hartmayer and Bishop Emeritus Boland, came together to pay tribute to this man, who in his own words, aspired to be only “a simple parish priest.”

When we reflect on Monsignor O’Neill’s journey from Tipperary to Savannah, we are grateful that he didn’t pursue his other career inclination, to become a veterinarian. That he chose to minster to people versus pets and also that he survived his seminary years, even though he was nearly expelled after being discovered taking a bath in the Seminary Rector’s tub, we are eternally grateful.

Interested in missionary work in Korea where his cousin was a priest, he accepted by the missionary seminary. During this time he heard Msgr. Bourke give a talk on the need for priests in “missionary” Georgia, so he opted for that path because he would not have to learn a new language and could get back to visit Ireland more frequently.

Once in Georgia, he indicated an interest in going to Latin America for a five year stint, but Bishop Frey asked him if he would work with the Society of African Missions priest at Immaculate Conception parish in Augusta. He was the first diocesan priest to work in a black parish and spent three years in that parish until it was merged with two white parishes. He spent four years in the merged parish before going on to Columbus as Pastor of Holy Family Church. He returned to Savannah in 1988 to become Pastor of Blessed Sacrament, until 1996 when he came down to the Cathedral as Rector.

I’m sure we all have fond memories of Monsignor O’Neill at the Cathedral. Most of us recall his tireless dedication, in his green hard hat, overseeing every detail of the Cathedral restoration. The time and effort Monsignor O’Neill devoted to shepherding this project through to completion and his unwavering commitment to pay off the debt preserved the architectural soundness, integrity and beauty of the cathedral, as a symbol of our faith for future generations.

And we also admired Monsignor O’Neill’s unflagging and courageous defense of the church entrusted to his care, in facing down the man with the “Blinkin’ gun” who tried to burn down the Cathedral. Anyone who ever doubted our rector would let a mere gun dissuade him from carrying out his duties surely underestimated the feisty and single-minded determination of our Monsignor.

My favorite memory came at the end of the Rededication Ceremony, when he was totally surprised by Bishop Boland’s announcement of his elevation to the rank of Monsignor. The sustained applause of the congregation for this very well deserved honor was a testimony to how we all felt about him. And his pirouette on the altar, in his fuchsia monsignor robes, at the end of his subsequent installation, as a prelate of the church, was just precious and so typically “Willie O.”

One of his objectives when he came to the Cathedral 16 years ago was to make the parish a warm and welcoming faith community, more like a family. Since the renovation, the parish population has grown from 500 households to over 1000 today. Clearly he is doing something right.

The popular World War I anthem proclaims “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary.” We are so grateful that Monsignor O’Neill left his home in Ireland to come Savannah forty five years ago. Being so distant from his family, especially in times of tragedy, has been very hard on him. We are very thankful that he came to be with us, his family in Savannah, and be our parish priest. And we are comforted by his intention to retire here, among those who have grown to love and appreciate him. Thank you, Monsignor for all you have done for us. We love you very much!
Many requests have been heard by sponsors and attendees wanting changes to be made in the Cathedral Heritage Ball format in order to bring more excitement and diversity to the event. The input has been heard. This year’s event will be different and we believe it will be a sensational social occasion. The Cathedral Heritage Ball will now be known as the Cathedral Heritage Gala. The mission is still the same: to raise funds for the preservation of our Mother Church, the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist. Over the past 11 years the Heritage Ball has raised about $800,000 for the Cathedral Endowment Fund, to preserve the architectural soundness, integrity and beauty of the cathedral, as a symbol of our faith for future generations. This year’s Co-Chairmen of the Gala will be Charlie and Cheryl Ganem.

The Cathedral Heritage Gala will be held for the first time in the Jepson Center of the Telfair Museums on Saturday, December 8, 2012. The evening will consist of dancing and Live and Silent Auctions (Online bidding will be available for silent auction items). However, instead of a seated meal, heavy hors d’oeuvres will be served over a three hour period. In addition, instead of cash bars, all alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages will be included. We also intend to have free valet parking available in the Robbie Robinson Parking Garage for those who wish, or you may park your own vehicle in reserved spaces.

One of the highlights of this year’s event, being offered in cooperation with the Telfair Museums, is free admittance to the exhibit, “Offering of the Angels: Paintings and Tapestries from the Uffizi Gallery.” This exhibition of Italian masterworks, drawn from the permanent collection of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, one of the world’s greatest art museums, will open at the Telfair on December 6, 2012.

The Telfair will also offer $10.00 discounts that evening only for your choice of a variety of annual memberships. In this way you may return to visit “Uffizi”, while it is open, or any other exhibit as many times as you like during the one year period.

Not all plans are finalized, but we hope you get as excited about the new “Gala” that we are planning for everyone’s enjoyment. If you would like to join in the fun of planning the event, or feel you have some talent to offer the Gala Committee, please contact Charlie or Cheryl Ganem at 912-354-7297.

The dictionary defines a Gala as “an especially lavish social event or festive celebration, characterized by sumptuous social pleasure.” Come see for yourself and experience the Gala!
Eucharistic and Marian procession, which attracted about sixty Catholics, from the parish and the surrounding area, was held on Saturday, May 5, 2012. Originally scheduled as a Marian procession back in October, it was preempted by the episcopal ordination and rescheduled for May, the Month of Mary.

Our prior processions consisted of carrying the statue of the Virgin Mary around the block near the Cathedral, so Fr. Ortega suggested that we extend the route, from Forsyth Park to the Cathedral and that we include the Blessed Sacrament, making the event an even more poignant witness to our Faith, by bringing Christ and His holy mother right through the center of the city.

Once the route was set, we then tried to find some of the special items that would be needed for the Eucharistic component of the procession. We were very grateful to Brother Robert for the gift of a processional canopy, a treasure from deep within his collection of liturgical artifacts. It was in fairly good shape, but the stitching had rotted from years of neglect. Thankfully, General and Mrs. Roth volunteered to restore the canopy. We are also grateful to Dr. Felix Maher for his assistance in organizing the servers and manpower necessary for the ceremonial portion of the procession. In addition, Miss Helen Almeter helped promote the procession via Facebook and her human network of young adults in the area and the Fourth Degree of the Knights of Columbus provided an honor guard.

The procession itself formed on a muggy May 5th afternoon, near the fountain in Forsyth Park, and then wended it way reverently down Bull Street to Harris. The participants sang Marian and Eucharistic hymns and prayed the rosary. We concluded with Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament in the Cathedral’s lower church.

The procession and the great turnout on the part of the parish was both edifying and deeply moving. Many of the participants suggested that we will try to organize another procession in the near future. Hopefully, this will become a regular and much anticipated feature of our parish life, as well as a tool of evangelization, as we pray for our community and bear witness to Christ by bringing Him to our neighbors.

There will be another opportunity to witness our faith in the public square at “Faith and Freedom Mass” celebrated by Bishop Hartmayer on Sunday July 1, @ 10:30 AM at the bandstand in Forsyth Park, Savannah. Please join him and other members of the Catholic community to demonstrate the importance of continued protection of religious liberty in a free society.
The Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist helped celebrate the 73rd Savannah Diocesan Catholic Women’s Convention with Mass, and hosted the dinner for almost 200 attending women.

Bishop Hartmayer concelebrated Mass at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist with Bishop Emeritus Boland, Monsignors O’Neill and Costigan, and Father Clark.

This Mass was also graced with the unveiling of the newly restored “Our Lady of Good Council” painting. This painting survived the Cathedral’s fire of 1898.

The Cathedral Council of Catholic Women had the honor of funding the restoration of this Cathedral treasure. “Our Lady of Good Council” is the patron of The National Council of Catholic Women. The Cathedral Council of Catholic Women also had the honor of acting as greeters, ushers, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion; with Noreen Buckstine as a reader for the Convention Mass.

During his homily, Bishop Hartmayer shared a story with us that happened on a recent trip to Buffalo to visit family. As he was checking in his crosier, the attendant asked if it was a staff. (Catholic bishops carry a crosier, which is an ornamental staff shaped like a shepherd’s crook. It symbolizes a bishop’s role as caretaker of his flock.) Bishop Hartmayer answered yes and that he had 80,000 sheep. The bishop said we are all called to be shepherds and lead others to Christ.

He thanked the Council of Catholic Women who lead and support their parishes in so many ways. He thanked those for accepting the call.

The theme for the convention program was “Of Our Hands We Give – Love in Action.” Bishop Boland presented an inspirational program as part of the Saturday morning program for the Savannah Deanery’s Council of Catholic Women at the official site of this year’s convention which was in Port Wentworth at the Holiday Inn Express.

The Savannah Deanery’s Council of Catholic Women is comprised of ten CCW affiliates: Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, St. Ann (Richmond Hill), St. James, St. Benedict the Moor, St. Boniface (Springfield), Resurrection of Our Lord, Blessed Sacrament, St. Peter the Apostle, St. Frances Cabrini, and Our Lady of Lourdes (Port Wentworth).

All of the Savannah Deanery affiliates took part in hosting the Savannah Diocesan CCW Convention which was held April 27 – 29, 2012. Other Deanery councils were represented at the Convention from Albany, Augusta, Columbus, Macon, Statesboro and Valdosta-Brunswick.

The National Council of Catholic Women consists of more than 4,000 affiliated Catholic women’s organizations in parishes and dioceses throughout the U.S., representing hundreds of thousands of Catholic women. The NCCW is a member of the World Union of Catholic Women’s Organizations (WUCWO) and is recognized by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The NCCW actively participates in partnerships with other Catholic groups.
Three exciting events capped off the successful school year for the Children’s Religious Education program. During the children’s faith formation, our children worked hard and their parents made sure they arrived at class ready to learn about their Catholic Faith. We had an 80% attendance rate throughout the school year…that is phenomenal!

The Sacrament of Confirmation started our big events. Five children from the Cathedral participated in the celebration of the Confirmation Ritual. Bishop Gregory Hartmayer conveyed the sacrament during the Deanery-wide celebration on May 1st. Shannon Harris, Phoenix Kang, Raoul Montano, Augustine Morris and Tristan Senkowski worked very hard throughout the school year under the direction of Mr. William Gill and Father Chris Ortega. They were prepared and ready for any question the Bishop asked during his examination of faith while confirming the candidates. We wish these newly confirmed members of our parish to be active and productive members in the Catholic community throughout their lifetime.

The next event involved the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. Evan Blasy received these sacraments during the Easter weekend. He was prepared by Mrs. Amy Schuler. Alexis Almeida, Erica Brown, Gianna Capachione, Ian Jones, Nicholas Jones, Samantha McCormick, Brett Portzer, Rosemary Prieto, Vincent Sottile, Kyra Stillwagon, Jocelyn and Phoebe Taylor, Vannessa Thompson and Nathan Williamson all received the sacraments during the Mother’s Day weekend. Throughout their preparations, under the direction of Mrs. Leslee Holtzclaw, is was evident that the children participated closely in their faith formation and grew in their knowledge of the Catholic teaching with a little help from chocolate chip cookies. During the Mother’s Day weekend celebration the sacraments were conveyed by Father Chris Ortega. As the Children’s Religious Education clergy representative, Father Chris knew the children very well since he routinely visits their classroom during the school year. The children look forward to his interesting stories about the Catholic faith and enjoy his probing questions. They were comforted to see him during their first Reconciliation and Eucharist and responded well during the sometimes scary first sacramental experience. They will no doubt fondly remember receiving these sacraments for the first time as they continue to grow in understanding and appreciation of their Catholic faith.

The final event of the school year was the Crowning of Mary. All the students, their teachers and parents gathered in the Parish Center for the May Crowning. Each child participated in the ceremony by singing songs of Mary, praying the rosary to Mary, reciting a poem of Mary’s life and presenting flowers to Mary before the crown was placed on her head by some of our youngest members of our education program. It was a wonderful way to end our school year.

Our program would not be successful without the dedicated Catechists that teach every Sunday with such enthusiasm and creativity. I want to thank Shannon Lancaster, Julie Estvander, Leslie Holtzclaw, Jenna Nobles, Betsy Blalock and William Gill for their tireless dedication to our religious education program. It is
inspiring to work with them throughout the year. I could not ask for a better volunteer staff of faith formation catechists.

Additionally, I want to thank the parents for their continued support of our program. They are truly faithful members of our Catholic family who want their children to continue with the tradition of being life long disciples of Jesus and active members of their parish community.

The Children’s Religious Education Program will continue in the fall of 2012. Please read the bulletin for the days and times of registration and for the events throughout the school year. See you in the fall.
“The worship of the Eucharist outside of the Mass is of inestimable value for the life of the Church,” Blessed John Paul II wrote in his 2003 encyclical Eclesia de Eucharistia (On the Eucharist in Its Relationship to the Church). “The Eucharist is a priceless treasure: By not only celebrating it, but also by praying before it outside of Mass, we are enabled to make contact with the very wellspring of grace,” John Paul continued, then quoted Pope Paul VI: “In the course of the day, the faithful should not omit visiting the Blessed Sacrament.”

Like his predecessors, Pope Benedict XVI heartily advocates Eucharistic adoration. He wrote: “The act of adoration outside Mass prolongs and intensifies all that takes place during the liturgical celebration itself.” He continued, “It is precisely this personal encounter with the Lord that then strengthens the social mission contained in the Eucharist, which seeks to break down not only the walls that separate the Lord and ourselves, but also and especially the walls that separate us from one another.”

Prolonged Eucharistic adoration is one of the distinguishing features of Roman Catholicism and is credited with the calling of saints and the bringing of converts to the Catholic Church. Saint Faustina Kowalska stated that she was called to religious service while attending the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament at age seven. Two notable examples of conversion are Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and Blessed John Henry Newman, both having converted from Anglicanism following Eucharistic adoration. The Church gives us a bonus gift for Eucharistic adoration: a partial indulgence granted under the usual conditions for those who visit the Most Blessed Sacrament to adore it; a plenary indulgence granted under the usual conditions if the visit lasts at least half an hour.

One of the adorers, Carol Letcher, prompted this article when she told me, “I have only been a member of the Cathedral since 2000 so have not ever been privy to the history of the Adoration Chapel. All I know is that to sit in that little room and look at the Chapel windows is the most peaceful feeling. It is like being alone with God.”

According to an article in The Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen’s Association of Georgia, dated September 27, 1941, “Arrangements for installing a number of stained glass windows in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist have been completed according to an announcement made by Monsignor T. James McNamara, Rector. A total of 27 windows are being purchased from the F. J. Coolidge Company of Atlanta, Georgia. Joseph Llorens, artist for the company stated that the windows will be delivered as soon as possible, but that there may be some delay on account of defense priorities. Some of the windows will be installed as memorials to the Bishops of the Diocese.”

The adoration chapel opened on Easter Sunday 1996. Previously it served as a confessional room off the sanctuary in the lower church. Father Mark Ross helped to paint and prepare the room along with Jim Routon. The stained glass windows in the Adoration Chapel are not seen by many people, so we have pictured them here for the benefit of everyone. The window on the right lists all the bishops of Savannah through 1941. The bishops’ coats of arms are pictured in the window on the left. Eucharistic Adoration takes place from 8 AM to 5 PM Tuesday thru Thursday. If you are willing to spend just one hour with Jesus each week contact Gretchen Reese, Chapel Coordinator at 912-232-2192.
Over the past 14 years, Twin Spires has become part of the fabric of the Cathedral parish. We have come a long way from our humble beginnings in May 1998 when a “No Name”, four page, black and white publication was first mailed out. Initially our objective was to communicate with all parishioners to provide information on parish activities, invite wider participation by all and create a closer sense of community. Over time this broadened to include discussing events of the liturgical seasons, running news stories from the church at large, reporting on diocesan programs and events as well as looking back at the history of our beautiful cathedral. Those early efforts were modest at best, but in late 2005, the quality of our publication was substantially enhanced by the addition of Walt Kessel to our staff. A member of Blessed Sacrament Parish, Walt generously agreed to work on Twin Spires and for the past seven years, we have all benefitted from his efforts. The layouts are more professional, benefitting from Walt’s career as a member of the staff of WTOC television (1954–1980) and his work with the Little Theatre of Savannah (1950–1985) and now, with our recent move to color, his creative talents know no bounds. The publication process is pretty straightforward. As Managing Editor, I submit the stories via email to Walt who adds his magic touch to make them come alive. Recently it occurred to me that I get really excited when I receive that email transmitting the 1st proof of a new issue from Walt, who is behind the curtain. It’s a bit like opening your presents on Christmas morning to download the attachment and take a look at what “Walt the Wizard” has wrought. Walt also does the newsletters for Blessed Sacrament, The Kairos Prison Ministry of Georgia and The Serra Club of Savannah, which has won the Outstanding Newsletter National Award for 2006, 2007 and 2008 as well as the award for Region 14 for 2005, 2009, 2010 and 2011. On behalf of the Cathedral Parish I would like to express my appreciation to Walt for lending his time and talent to make Twin Spires a beautiful publication.
The Charter for the Colony of Georgia prohibited Catholics because of the general intolerance of Catholicism in the 18th century England as well as the fact Georgia was founded as a buffer colony against Spanish Florida whose inhabitants were Catholic. The religious tolerance guaranteed under the new Georgia State Constitution and the new US Constitution ratified in 1788, gave Catholics vast opportunity to seek a better life in the Deep South.

French Catholic émigrés, who fled France after the turmoil of the Revolution and came to Savannah in the aftermath of a slave uprising in Haiti, established Savannah’s first Parish, the Congrégation de Saint Jean le Baptiste, shortly before the end of the 18th century.

On May 30, 1799, the Mayor and Alderman of Savannah passed a resolution reserving for the use of the Roman Catholics of Savannah, lot number nineteen for the erection of a house of worship. Subsequently, on May 30, 1800, Reverend Olivier Le Mercier laid the cornerstone of the church and on that half of the trust lot on Liberty Square at State and Montgomery Streets, the site of the Chatham County Courthouse; a small frame church was erected, dedicated to God under the patronage of Saint John the Baptist. It served the congregation until the late 1830’s when they outgrew it and a larger church was built at Perry and Drayton Streets, the site of the Parker’s Market parking lot.

Fr. Le Mercier is regarded as the first rector of St John the Baptist. Le Mercier had been authorized by Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore to exercise his priestly ministry in Savannah in 1796. He came from Santo Domingo and was given the title “Missionary of Georgia”. Records show that Le Mercier remained in Savannah for only a month in 1796 and settled in Locust Grove for a while. In May 1798 he returned to Savannah and made the parish of St. John the Baptist his headquarters. The Board of Trustees of the parish was incorporated in 1801 and on May 30th of that year, the Legislature of Georgia incorporated the “Roman Catholic Church of Savannah.” Governor Josiah Tattnall, Jr. signed the act on November 30, 1801.

Various entries in the church records denote Le Mercier as the rector of St. John Church, for several years with the last record of his second term of office as rector dated July 25, 1803. He was ultimately named Pastor of St. Mary’s Church in Charleston. In 1812, Father Le Mercier was lost at sea on a trip to the West Indies.

French speaking families formed the nucleus of the parish of the little church located at 123 Montgomery Street. Most of the early arrivals were of noble birth, some former courtiers of the King, who were driven from France by the Reign of Terror and then from Haiti by a slave uprising. Many of them became prosperous, prominent citizens of Savannah and today we still find such names as Gaudry, Falligants, Rossignol and others. Julius Gaudry, one of the regular ushers at the 10 AM Mass, traces his ancestry back to those early French settlers. His forebears came to Savannah in 1802 and settled at Perry and Abercorn Streets. His Uncle John R. Gaudry was a member of the Board of Trustees of St. John the Baptist Church and served as the Treasurer for a number of years. Another Uncle Jean-Baptiste Gaudry volunteered to fight with General Andrew Jackson against the British and was wounded in the Battle of New Orleans; afterwards he settled in Savannah. In the early 1800s, there were Irish as well as French in the congregation and among the trustees. The total number of Catholics in the city was approximately 100.
A few years ago, the Catholics Come Home campaign heralded the beginning of a fundamental change in the spirit of our parish, to make the Cathedral a more welcoming place of worship, the kind of faith community Monsignor O’Neill hoped the Cathedral Parish would one day become when he arrived here 16 years ago. Since then the center doors are always opened wide before Mass, thereby creating the impression that we actually want people to come into the cathedral and join us for liturgy; one of our priests is usually out on the plaza before the Mass and upon entering the Cathedral our ushers warmly greet attendees.

Our objective is to formally welcome all who come through the doors of Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in a cheerful and sincere manner. The Ushers try to let everyone know how excited and glad we are that they are attending our liturgy. They also offer assistance in whatever way they can to make visitors truly feel welcome and at home. Hopefully you have seen the difference and feel welcome.

It’s not just the ushers who should be welcoming. The Cathedral of St. John the Baptist hosts many visitors at Mass every Sunday and our celebrant usually greets our visitors and welcomes them to our church. We are all “Ministers of First Impressions,” who a visitor is likely to encounter on a personal basis. First impressions can be enormously important.

We are God’s public relations people, representing the church to every parishioner and visitor. A “good morning” with a smile or even moving over in your pew to make room for someone, can make a tremendous difference in making a member or a visitor feel welcome.

It may not just be a tourist but rather someone shopping for a parish. Our Cathedral Parish has grown from about 500 households before the restoration to over 1000 today. Hopefully we are doing something right to make new people feel welcome. Let’s keep it up!