Monsignor William Oliver O’Neill will retire on June 15, 2013, after 17 years of unrelenting service as Rector of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist and 46 years as a priest of the Diocese of Savannah.

When I think of Msgr. O’Neill, several things come to mind:

- He’s Irish.
- He’s very funny.
- He has a love of history and old buildings.
- And he’s a dedicated pastor and priest.

Reflecting on Monsignor O’Neill’s journey from Tipperary Town, otherwise known as “Tib Rid Awren”, to Savannah, we are thankful 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 years at St. Peter’s Seminary in Wexford, even though he was nearly expelled after being discovered taking a bath in the Rector’s tub, we are eternally grateful. Interested in missionary work in Korea where his cousin was a priest, he was accepted by the missionary seminary. During this time he heard Monsignor Daniel J. 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.

It was very difficult for him when he first arrived in the US as he found it hard to adapt to life in this country. The culture was very different and the climate was hot. He was homesick, felt lost and after a year asked if he could go back to Ireland. A friend who had emigrated from Scotland several years before, advised him to give it a bit more time. He heeded that advice and told Bishop Frey and Fr. Boland, who were about to go to Ireland to recruit more priests, to disregard his request as he had decided to give it one more year. And we are certainly glad he did.

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. Afterwards, he spent four years in the merged parish before going on to Columbus as Pastor of Holy Family Church.

Being so far from home, moving from one assignment to another has always been a burden to Monsignor O’Neill. When he was assigned to Augusta for a long period, it was difficult for him to transfer to Columbus where he didn’t know anyone. And the move from Columbus to Blessed Sacrament in Savannah after 13 years was equally as heart wrenching as he loved living in Columbus, had established deep roots at Holy Family and made many friends there. I’m sure this burden was shared by many of the Irish priests who traveled far from their homeland and families to serve the people of our diocese.

In those early days at Blessed Sacrament, Monsignor O’Neill again
considered transferring to another Diocese. He had always been fascinated by the West and asked for a transfer to the Diocese of San Diego, which was much smaller and moves wouldn’t be far from the last assignment, thus not having to leave good friends far behind when moving to a new parish. Thankfully, Bishop Lessard talked him into staying in Savannah. His last move to the Cathedral was not that far and by then he was comfortable in the city.

Apparently Monsignor O’Neill was not the first choice to be Rector of the Cathedral. At least two other priests had turned it down before Bishop Boland asked him to lunch at Johnnie Harris’ to make the pitch. His first reaction was “Why me? I’m not a proper Cathedral guy.” But Bishop Boland convinced him the Cathedral was going to require a major restoration and that he was the right guy to supervise the project. Bishop Boland was recently quoted in the Savannah Morning News as saying, “He’s a hands-on fellow who lives to get things done and do it well.” Although Bishop Boland told him to take a couple of days to consider the move it was a relatively easy decision. Monsignor O’Neill had undertaken several major renovation projects at Holy Family Church in Columbus during his time there and this project certainly interested him. “I’m fascinated by old buildings and think it is great to restore and preserve them,” he said.

When he first arrived at the Cathedral on August 25, 1996, it was quite a different place than the parish we know today. The physical facilities were in need of a major restoration, the parish population was only about 400 households and with less than 40% of the registered parishioners contributing, the collection was quite small. The Cathedral parish had the reputation of being a cold, unwelcoming place, as evidenced by the fact that Monsignor O’Neill and Fr. Clark were not officially welcomed to the parish upon their arrival. “It was kind of a sleepy parish with nothing happening and only a few of the same people trying to do all the jobs. People came to Mass like they were going to a gas station to fill their tanks and then went home. Most parishioners had no parish involvement.” So Msgr. O’Neill set about restoring the building and revitalizing the parish.

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 in 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.

But it was not an easy job. The original restoration project was estimated to cost $5.3 million with an endowment of $1 million. However it burgeoned to $11.7 million and at the end of the pledge period, the Cathedral was left with a $1.8 million debt and no endowment.

Monsignor O’Neill faced many challenges in the project itself, not the least of which was that he was afraid of heights. Determined to oversee every aspect of the project both on the ground and above, he
slowly mastered his fear by going up a little higher each day and before long he was scrambling up the scaffolding in his green hard hat like a monkey. “I was determined to go up and see what was happening, determined to view all the deterioration and look at what was coming out and watching it be replaced.

“One night after returning from a trip, I went up into the attic over the Cathedral ceiling and the wind blew the door closed behind me. As all the workers had gone home and it was before cell phones, I had to sleep on the narrow wooden walkway hoping that I didn’t roll over and fall through the plaster ceiling. In the morning when the workers arrived, I called down to them through one of the light fixture holes. They were shocked and thought God was calling to them from on high,” he recalled. He found it exciting to watch the craftsmen working every day to restore the terra cotta decorations on the outside and the wood work in the stained glass windows plus the people from Conrad Schmidt painting and decorating the interior of the Cathedral.

There were a lot of decisions to be made and some of them required a bit of inspiration. The initial plan was to remove the three tabernacles on the altars dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, St. Anthony and St. Joseph but Monsignor O’Neill hates to throw anything away. While shaving one morning he came up with the idea to repurpose them into the ambry to hold the Holy Oils. When Bishops from around the country came to Savannah to participate in the Rededication ceremony, they told Bishop Boland they were jealous of the ambry. It was the most beautiful one they had ever seen.

Much attention was paid to detail which is exemplified by the new altar and baptismal font. In order to make them fit in with the century old liturgical décor of the Cathedral, castings were taken of the old high altar and sent to Carrara, Italy where they were carved to match. Then the column look was copied from altar to altar and the panels on each end of the high altar were used as the side panels on the new one. The same approach was used to craft the new baptismal font to create an exquisite effect. The overall end result was nothing short of breathtaking, a word used often by the many tourists who visit the Cathedral each day.

My favorite memory came at the end of the Rededication Ceremony, when Bishop Boland thanked Monsignor O’Neill for his dedicated efforts to restore the Cathedral. “He climbed the scaffolding, swept the floors, always with a watchful eye that the workers did it right. He was an architect, artisan and a hands-on project manager,” he announced. And then totally surprised O’Neill and the entire congregation with the announcement that Pope John Paul II had elevated him to the rank of Monsignor, in recognition of his total commitment to the Cathedral restoration. The sustained applause of all assembled, to 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.”

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

One of his objectives when he came to the Cathedral 17 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 1200...
today with 75% attending and 65% contributing. Clearly, Monsignor has doing something right.

The CCW, which was practically moribund when he arrived, has been completely revitalized and is now one of the most active groups in the Deanery. The Parish Life Committee began holding Coffee and Doughnuts receptions and Covered Dish Suppers which helped make this a more welcoming place. Ushers became Greeters at all the masses to make parishioners and visitors feel welcomed when they worshiped at the Cathedral. The Christian Service Committee, which only conducted the Food Drive once a year, began providing hygiene packets to the Social Apostolate and Savannah Care Center as well as holding a Ministry Fair every other year to invite parishioners to participate in one of our many ministries. Tour guides are on duty every day to give our visitors insight into the history and beautiful décor of the Cathedral. And the Heritage Balls, now Galas, have raised sufficient funds to build up the Cathedral Endowment to over $1 Million. All these activities and many more have been recorded for all in Twin Spires, the Cathedral newsletter. His modus operandi was to put the right people in charge and let them go.

Monsignor O'Neill stressed that as members of God's family, we all have a responsibility to share more fully in the life of our church. He encouraged members of St. John the Baptist to use their special gifts to further Christ’s work and enrich their relationships with other people. He invited everyone to become a more active member of our parish, to glorify God as well as serve others. “In addition to personal growth, you will have a sense of belonging, knowing that you are a unique and contributing member of our faith community,” he said.

Monsignor O'Neill is a very funny guy. With him, what you see is what you get. He says what’s on his mind and sometimes he can be very blunt. “I am what I am,” he has said many times. “But I never hold a grudge.” Despite his frankness, it is his sense of humor that makes him so endearing. His funny stories, whether he's talking from the pulpit or lingering after Mass out on the plaza sharing his experiences with people, make him the human and real priest we’ve come to love.

He is the fourth longest serving rector having been here for 17 years. Monsignor McNamara holds the record at 29 years, Fr. Jeremiah O'Neill who served at both the old Cathedral on Drayton Street then here at the new Cathedral as its first rector for a total of 20 years, followed by Fr. Cafferty who died in office in 1896, after serving for 19 years.

Our parish community owes Monsignor O'Neill an immeasurable debt of gratitude for his extraordinary dedication to the people and to the endless restoration and preservation efforts required to maintain the pristine condition of the Cathedral.

“As I come to the end of my tenure as Rector of the Cathedral, I look back with pride and satisfaction on all we have done together. It was a challenge to repair this big old church. I got so involved with the project that I was on fire with it. I have given so much to the Cathedral that I am a
little sad that my role as its steward has come to an end. But I’m glad I won’t be leaving, I love this place.”

Now he gets the chance to be the simple parish priest that he has spoken about so many times. “Helping people was one of the main things I have enjoyed about being a priest. In retirement, with no administrative burdens, I can be a full time priest and sacramental minister visiting the sick, shut-ins, homeless and down-and-out. I didn’t have time to get around to see these people while I was the Pastor and Rector, but now I will be making regular visits to them in their homes and in the hospital. Reaching out to the sick and the lonely can make a difference. Sometimes it is simply a case of having someone to listen to them.”

He will also have the opportunity to spend more time in Ireland. “I’ve been here so long everybody refers to me as Willie or occasionally Willie O. But back home in Ireland, the people in my old home town, who still remember me from when I grew up there, refer to me as Billy Oliver or Willie Oliver. The “Oliver” part of my name somehow got lost when I came to Georgia and I regret that! I’m glad they still remember me by that name, as it is a part of my identity and my roots go deep in Ireland,” he concluded.

The popular World War I anthem proclaims “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”. We’re so grateful that Monsignor O’Neill left his home in Ireland and came all that way to Savannah forty six 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 O’Neill for all you have done for us. We love you very much!
**Restoration Journal**

Monsignor O’Neill kept a journal throughout the restoration Project. Here are a few notable examples from that journal:

August 25, 1999:
Sr. Jude’s cat which was buried in the ground at the North Transept wall was exhumed today and buried in another location in the courtyard of St. Vincent’s. The cat had to be removed because the exterior of the basement wall had to be dug out for water proofing. After digging down to the cat we discovered that it was buried in an old suitcase.

September 2, 1999:
A sister from St. Vincent’s Academy phoned Fr. O’Neill to complain that the men who are erecting the scaffolding are whistling at the St. Vincent’s girls. Fr. O’Neill responds that the girls must be delighted.

September 3, 1999:
Another caller to Fr. O’Neill complains that the workers are looking in the windows at the girls in the restrooms. Fr. O’Neill says to put a sheet across the window.

September 13, 1999:
Hurricane Floyd moving toward Florida. This is a major hurricane. Notice issued today for mandatory evacuation from Savannah by tomorrow because of Hurricane Floyd. Contractors have to take down planks from scaffolding around the two spires. Fr. O’Neill reluctantly leaves this evening for Annual Clergy Retreat at Hickory Knob, South Carolina. He would prefer to remain and wait out the hurricane. Before leaving Fr. O’Neill places a bottle of holy water in each of the bell tower areas of the steeples to protect them if the hurricane should strike Savannah.

September 14, 1999:
Savannah and all of Chatham County evacuated. Brother Robert Sokolowski, Pastoral Assistant at the Cathedral stays at Rectory to keep Fr. O’Neill informed on what is going on in Savannah.

September 15, 1999:
Looks as if Hurricane Floyd may pass Savannah. Tonight it hit the coast of North Carolina.

September 16, 1999:
Evacuation orders lifted for Savannah and Chatham County. Fr. O’Neill returns from Retreat tonight. No damage done to Cathedral. Deo gratias!

September 21, 1999:
Rolf Rohn, Liturgical Consultant, leaves for Pittsburgh, and takes the plaster mold casts with him. They will be sent to Italy for making marble panels for the new altar and baptismal font.

January 03, 2000:
Fr. O’Neill’s pants fell down around his legs today while he was climbing up the straight ladder to the area above the bell tower in north steeple. He forgot to wear his belt when he put on his pants this morning. With pants down around his ankles, he had to get one leg free to get off the ladder and step on the platform. He lost a shoe while kicking his leg out of his pants. He later retrieved the shoe from the valley area between north steeple and upper roof. Hopefully, there were no photographers around at the time.

May 08, 2000:
Workers found that vandals were up on the scaffolding over the weekend all the way to top of south steeple. $30,000 worth of damage done to newly gold leafed cross. Police report filed. Police officer sent to top of steeple to get finger prints from cross. Four SCAD students suspected of vandalism of cross.

June 18, 2000:
Arrive in Milan, Italy. Met by Edmund Rabanser (woodcarver) of Orteisi. Drove to Cumo.

June 19, 2000:
Stop at foundry in Corti near Cumo to check on bronze door for tabernacle, and bronze frames for ambry doors. Drove to Orteisi via Trent. Visit home of Edmund Rabanser to see wood carvings for pulpit and confessional.

June 22, 2000:
Drove to Pietrasanta via Venice to see the marble floor for baptism font area. Drove to Pisa to see the leaning tower and on to Carrara to see marble altar and baptism font.

July 10, 2000:
Debris falling from roof over Altar of Reservation bounces off scaffold and breaks face of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque in stained glass window in the Sacred Heart Chapel.

**Dedication Day — November 29, 2000:**

Dedication Day has arrived. Weather very nice. Cathedral packed with people. Ceremony begins as the bell strikes @ 2:00PM. At end of Mass, Bishop Boland made the surprise announcement that Father O’Neill is to become a Monsignor.
Early in the 4th century AD, during the rule of Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, Christians were allowed to worship their faith without oppression and by the end of the 4th Century, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Christians who had been worshipping secretly in private houses now wanted to build churches. They did not want the churches to look the same as Roman Temples, so early Christian churches followed the structural and design elements of the Roman Basilica, a longitudinal room with multiple aisles and a projecting upper story that had long been employed in antiquity as courthouses, reception halls and throne rooms. Such buildings usually contained interior colonnades that divided the space, giving aisles or arcaded spaces on both sides, with a semi-circular part or apse at one end, where the magistrates or rulers often sat on a slightly raised dais. The central aisle tended to be wide and its ceiling was higher than the flanking aisles, so that light could penetrate through the upper or clerestory windows. A basilica was a good plan for a Christian church. They were largely rectangular in shape, could accommodate a large number of people and the aisles were useful for people to move around. The semi-circular part at one end, the apse, was just right to put the altar. This basic basilica plan was applied to early Christian buildings and over time this basic layout was modified as the long nave came to be crossed just before the apse by a shorter transept creating the cross-shaped plan known as “cruciform” that remains a standard basic design for the church that is still used today.

The crowning of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor in AD 800, gave impetus to a new era in which the architectural and decorative ideals of antiquity and early Christianity were resurrected; The Romanesque architectural style, which means “descended from Roman”, a twofold reference to the Roman Empire and the Roman Church, emerged as a predominate design for churches and spread across western and southern Europe from the 9th through the 12th centuries. It combined features of Roman and Byzantine buildings that are characterized by heavy masonry construction with narrow openings, semi-circular stone arches and massive thick walls.

Beginning in the 12th century, that style began to be displaced by an elegant new style of architecture that originated in France and was initially simply called “The French Style”.

What is French Gothic?

By Peter Paolucci
Appalled at the abandonment of classical Romanesque lines and proportion, it was derisively called “Gothic” by Italian art theorists who described everything they considered barbaric or cloddish as “maniera dei goti” (in the manner of the Goths), alluding to the barbaric Goths who sacked Rome in 410AD, which ultimately led to the fall of the Roman Empire. Gothic architecture was a unique combination of existing technologies that came together to produce the emergence of a new building style which emphasized verticality and light. Those technologies were:
- The pointed arch
- The ribbed vault
- The flying buttress

In Gothic architecture, the structural parts of the building ceased to be its solid walls and became a stone skeleton system comprised of clustered columns, pointed arches and ribbed vaults, in which stone ribs carry the vaulted surface, which allowed high wide spaces to be vaulted without reinforcement of the foundation walls. In addition, abutments or free-standing, arched, flying buttress attached to the external walls, diverted the thrusts of the roof or vaults, toward the outside of the structure. This allowed builders to construct high cathedrals with soaring interior spaces and a verticality which suggested an aspiration to Heaven.

Due to the versatility of the structural elements, the size of the windows increased and became one of the most distinctive characteristics of Gothic architecture. The windows developed from simple openings to immensely rich and decorative sculptural designs. These expansive windows became radiant “mosaics of glass” which allowed the interior to be deluged with color as the sanctuary was charged with light. The effect of morning sun pouring through the multi-colored windows was beautiful and spellbinding. As the sun followed its course throughout the day the interior became a kaleidoscope of color. The look and mood was also transformed by each cloud that passed overhead. Stained glass thus became a medium for figurative and narrative art, one of the most beautiful and characteristic features of French Gothic architecture, in which it achieved its most perfect development.

There are many examples of these technologies utilized in the construction of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. The next time you are in the Cathedral, take a closer look at the various structural elements that make such a beautiful church possible.
At a recent Parish Council meeting, Pro Life Representative, Geraldine Pufahl posed that question. The correct answer to this question is of course St. John the Baptist. This fact raised several issues in my mind relevant to both our Cathedral’s Patron Saint as well as the Pro-Life issue. A few years ago a United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Pro-Life pamphlet, proclaimed that “By the power of the Holy Spirit, the unborn child Jesus announces his presence to John, his unborn cousin.”

This is recorded for all time in St. Luke’s Gospel 1: 39-45:

“At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

Throughout the history of the Church the doctrinal teaching of the “Sanctity of Life” (Genesis 1:26-27) has been the belief that Man is created Imago Dei (Latin: in the image of God) and therefore has worth at all stages of life. This is the bedrock of Western civilization’s understanding and practice of human dignity.

We are told in the gospels that John the Baptist was known by God, called by God, named by God and then filled by God with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother’s womb. This is an example of the biblical worldview of Personhood. Today, as the debate rages about whether the unborn infant is someone who should have status as a person, we have this excellent example of why personhood should be accorded to the unborn from the moment of conception. Can you imagine extinguishing an unborn child who could recognize his Savior?

Personhood is the new prolife paradigm for the 21st century. Personhood is a Christ-centric, biblical worldview approach to the issue of the sanctity of life. We believe that all innocent human life is exceptional and unique and must be recognized by law and imbued with “rights and privileges”.

A contemporary singer/songwriter, and Catholic convert, Danielle Rose expressed it this way in one of her songs, written from the perspective of Elizabeth & Mary.

“Jesus Within You”

“Look how God has chosen to reveal his soul
In each of his own children—you & I, young & old.
We must cherish Jesus’ presence in every human life.
The first to worship Jesus was John, the unborn child...”

Who was the first to worship Jesus?

The Holy Family with Sts. Elizabeth and John the Baptist. Peter Paul Rubens, circa 1614. oil on panel. 136 x 100 cm (53.5 x 39.4 in). London, Wallace Collection.
In proclaiming a Year of Faith, which began on October 11, 2012 and will continue until November 24, 2013, Pope Benedict XVI declared that, “The door of faith is always open for us, ushering us into the life of communion with God and his church.”

During the past school year the students in the Cathedral’s Children’s Religious Education (CRE) program learned many ways to experience a closer communion with God while practicing their Catholic faith.

When asked what a Year of Faith means, Bridget Connolly, a 7th grade student, stated “It means to be enlightened by our faith and continue to grow through what we have done in the past and how to continue in the future.” Dylan Ullery, also in the 7th grade, said “It is an opportunity to pray for the sick, poor and wounded military men and women fighting for our freedom.” And his sister, Sarah, a 6th grader, observed “A Year of Faith is a time to learn about the Catholic Church and our new Pope.”

Many of the students experienced their faith while preparing to receive the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist on May 12 and June 2 at the 10:00 Masses. This year 16 children received these sacraments. They are Paloma Gullikson, Nicholas Eskander, Emily Meis, Yezzi Onorato, Rory Schuler, Ava Stillwagon, August Fougerousse, Jazmine Green, Joseph Pufahl, Anthony Wood, Xander Leslie, Eamon Murphy, Sarah Ullery, Dylan Ullery, Tyler Montenegro and Josi Klug. Their sacramental faith formation was provided by their parents and Mrs. Sherri Rachael, their catechist.

We also had 11 students who received the Sacrament of Confirmation from Bishop Hartmayer on May 8th along with 50 other candidates from throughout the Savannah Deanery. Our newly confirmed are Bridget Connolly, David Meis, Steven Metrejean, Riley Stillwagon, Evan Blasy, Patrick Connolly, Savannah Leslie, Teagan Livingstone, Jon Kavanagh, Noah Kavanagh and Cecilia Morris. Along with their parents, they had guidance from their catechist, Mr. William Gill.

The Year of Faith was a busy year for the students and catechists of the CRE program. We focused on each child to help each of them become a disciple of Jesus. We congratulate the children, especially those who received the sacraments for the first time this year. We thank their parents for ensuring that their children arrived to class ready to learn. We ask all members of the parish community to pray for the children as they continue on the path of becoming active, productive, and caring members.
of our Catholic community. We hope and pray that they always realize that the door is perpetually open to them in our Catholic Churches wherever life takes them.

A family tradition continues as Communicant Xander Leslie wears the same white suit worn by his father and five other family members.