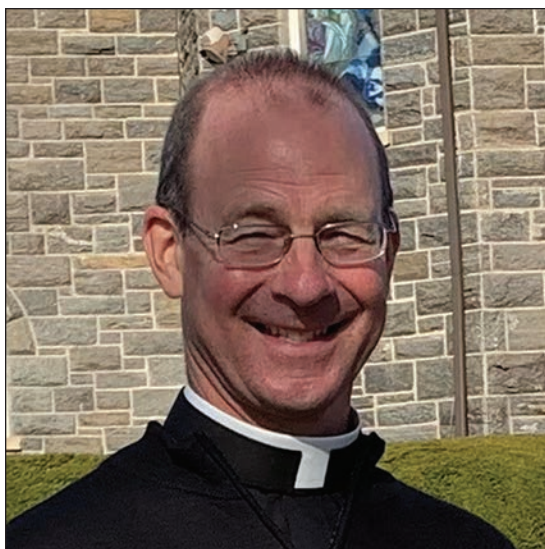


Reigniting a Mission

**An Interview with Monsignor Thomas W. Powers,
Pastor, Saint John the Evangelist, Darien**



Saint John the Evangelist, Darien, Connecticut



Monsignor Thomas W. Powers

church. In just 17 months from groundbreaking, on the 29th of August 1888 to dedication on December 8, 1889, the Connecticut Bluestone building was built. Originally called Noroton Catholic Church, the Church was a mission Church with just Sunday services. In 1895, Saint John's was established as a parish.

Fast forward to our third pastor who was the right man at the right time. Father James J. McGuane was named Pastor in 1910 and held that position for the next 42 years. Father McGuane conceived of Saint John's as the vibrant center of Catholic life in Darien. He fielded a football team and a softball team as well as an award-winning fife and drum corps. Truth be told, these were as much community teams as they were parish teams.

Father McGuane began several parish ministries and the parish grew. A well-known and much loved figure around town, he was asked to serve on the Selective Service Board during World War II, and on the Housing Authority Board once troops began coming home, marrying and wanting to live here in Darien. After Father McGuane's retirement in 1952, the parish saw various pastors but still remained a vital part of what made Darien an enviable community in which to live.

In 1971-1972, the Blanchard Center, a large Parish Educational Center, was built on the acreage behind our church. This space included a gym and a stage for concerts and plays. In the 1990s, it was home to Saint John's Community Theatre



founded by another of our Pastors. An important section added to this building in 1987 was space for a preschool. Again responding to community needs, Saint John's Preschool was founded in 1989. Like our Church, our Preschool grew. It began with seven three-year-olds in its first weeks and is now, and has been, at maximum capacity of over 40 children year after year. Saint John Preschool delivers a nurturing, play-based learning curriculum for ages two through five. Comprehensive in approach, the curriculum encompasses themes of religion, science, social studies, literacy, music, arts and community.

Will you highlight the history and heritage of Saint John Church in Darien?

A short history of our parish tells the story of a place of worship that has responded to the needs of its parishioners for 130 years. When I arrived in September 2020 in Darien, I was thrilled with my little New England Church. I grew even more delighted when I read of its history, its adapting as necessary through a depression and two world wars, and its current position – taking on 2021's problems and still serving the people in the community.

With the extension of the railroad into Noroton, as Darien was first named in the middle of the 19th century, many Catholics from surrounding towns moved here. These families worshipped in a small chapel in the home of Hugh Collender. When the number of Catholics outgrew that room, which was called the Chapel, Mass was held in the Fitch Soldier's Home that was also located in Darien. It was the very first Soldier's home in the country and residents included a preponderance of Civil War veterans.

By 1888, Darien Catholics wanted to establish their own church, a mission church to be serviced by a priest from Saint John's Parish in Stamford. The Rev. William Rogers of nearby Stamford agreed. Hugh Collender and a wealthy businessman from New York, John D. Crimmins, a summer resident of Darien, combined their efforts and donated \$5,500 to purchase four acres with a house for the site of our first

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Because of the school’s proximity to the Church, the children get to know our priests and church staff and see religion as much a part of their lives as school.

The year 2021 has brought to light the need for reigniting different parts of our mission. Liturgically we are establishing various contemporary outreach efforts and involving members of the parish in leadership roles rather than having the various areas clergy-driven. Whether sponsoring food drives, community Christmas aid to less fortunate families and seniors, or providing telephone prayer services, Saint John Church is still responding to the societal needs of our community in Darien.

You assumed the role of Pastor of Saint John Church in Darien in September 2020. What excited you about the opportunity and made you feel it was the right fit?

Although a priest for almost 25 years, I have only served in parish ministry for three years, which was from 1998-2001. That means when I took over as pastor of Saint John’s I had not been a parish priest for 19 years. However, I was very happy and eager to once again serve God’s people at the parish level. The Bishop thought that the parish and I would be a good fit, and it turns out that his episcopal intuition was right on the money. Our parish family is filled with faithful, generous and dedicated people, and it has been an honor and a joy for me to be their spiritual father.

How do you define your role and focus your efforts as pastor at Saint John Church in Darien?

The diocesan bishop, under whose authority the pastor serves and in whose ministry he shares, entrusts the pastor with the spiritual care of the parish community. Therefore, I view my ministry as an extension of the Bishop’s ministry and pastoral vision for the Diocese.

My focus is to help each member of our parish encounter the Lord Jesus Christ through the sacraments through which they receive His mercy and forgiveness, are nourished by Him in the Eucharist and befriend Him on the path to eternal salvation. This is the reason our parish exists, and the lay faithful and I collaborate together on this shared mission on our journey of faith.

Will you highlight the Music Together program that is a part of the curriculum at Saint John Preschool?

In 2013, the nationally acclaimed Music Together program contracted with Saint John Preschool for all the children of the school to enjoy weekly music classes. Saint John Preschool

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is the only preschool in Darien, Connecticut that has a partnership with this unique program for the last eight years. Due to Music Together’s unique traditions of adult inclusion and family music activities for all ages, a shared repertoire of songs and activities have become a part of Saint John Preschool’s culture.

How did the idea for this program come about and what has the impact of the program been on the students?

The Martha Witucki Dilenschneider Music Program at Saint John Preschool was established in 2021. Mrs. Dilenschneider was a faithful parishioner of Saint John Catholic Church and supported

initiatives to foster the Catholic Faith and to enhance liturgical music. This program, therefore, combines perfectly Mrs. Dilenschneider’s love and passion for youth and for music. Saint John Preschool is delighted that their beloved music program will carry on due to the great generosity of the Dilenschneider family.



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*Monsignor Thomas Powers with Debbie Moran,
Director, Saint John Preschool*

How does the Music Together program engage the parents of the school’s students and help build parent/child, parent/teacher, and parent/school relationships?

The program creates a natural circle of learning music to build parent/child, parent/teacher and parent/school relationships. These weekly classes include an artistically conceived flow of original songs, nursery rhymes, instrumental jam sessions, fingerplays and movement activities. The children then bring the music home to their families with their interactive books and digital access codes.

Music is an area that is often eliminated when there are budget cuts at schools. How valuable do you feel music is as part of the learning environment and curriculum for students?

Some of the most joyful moments on the parish campus are when the children are learning new songs and movements and singing with smiles on their faces. When they are outside, their voices can be heard even inside the church and in the parish offices. The happiness they bring to those who hear them mirrors the joy they experience themselves.

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