

**Parish Self-Assessment Report**  
*We Walk By Faith*

Saint Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church  
401 Alderman Road  
Charlottesville, VA 22903-2403  
*Parish Council, Represented by:*  
*Ron Golden, Chairman*

June 1, 2010

The Parish Council of Saint Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church of Charlottesville, Virginia submits the following report following our parish self-assessment as per the instructions provided by the Diocese of Richmond.

**I. Introduction**

Saint Thomas Aquinas parish serves Catholics at the University of Virginia (UVA). We strive to make abundant use of our geographical location (on the edge of the main Grounds of the University) in fulfilling our mission toward students, faculty, and staff. At the same time, the breadth of the parish encompasses a great deal more than “Catholic campus ministry”; we are a full-service parish with six Sunday Masses, two weekday Masses, a very active religious education program for all age groups, youth ministry, undergraduate ministry (serving the large community of Catholic students at UVA—making up twenty-three percent of the over 13,000 undergraduate students currently enrolled), young adult ministry, and all the various programs and services that one can expect in a parish of over two thousand registered families.

The parish has been under the pastoral care of the Dominican Friars of the Province of St Joseph since the parish’s foundation in 1963. The Dominicans arrived in Charlottesville four years earlier, in 1959, to minister to the needs of the growing Catholic population at the University. Bishop John Russell of Richmond established St. Thomas Aquinas University Parish as a personal parish (non-territorial), unique in the Diocese, and in the intervening years, the parish has continued to grow and flourish, to the point that St. Thomas Aquinas is now the largest parish, by far, in our region of the Diocese of Richmond.

**II. Word**

The parish has an extraordinary number of programs in place to further catechesis, including a comprehensive religious education program for kindergarten through twelfth grade, Catholicism 101, a Natural Family Planning (NFP) education initiative, the Saint Anselm Society, the work of the Dominican Laity, the Rite of Catholic Initiation for Adults (RCIA), a Young Adult Group (YAM), Theology and Donuts, Grace and Truth, and numerous scripture study groups (including particular groups for men, women, and undergraduates). The Catholic Student Ministry (CSM) presents a similarly vast number of programs, many of them overlapping with events and programs in the wider parish. Also we have a close relationship with the Charlottesville Catholic School which, added to our intimate connection with UVA, places us in a somewhat unique position and provides us with wonderful opportunities for catechesis.

We adhere strictly to the doctrines and teachings of the Catholic Church. In this area, as in so many others, our particular apostolate is graced by our close relationship with the Order of Preachers. Indeed, our Dominicans provide an endlessly fruitful environment, wonderfully conducive to the proper valuing of study. We recognize the proper role of parents as the primary catechists and endeavor to serve both them and their children in the furtherance of the Church's mission for evangelization and the Dominican charism of preaching, in terms of both internal and external evangelization. We work to maintain high standards for teaching and to reach out to a wide spectrum of educational needs—from those who must learn the most basic tenets of our faith to those who hunger for a more theologically complex understanding. We also work very diligently to serve the catechetical needs and aims of the Catholic student body, recognizing this as our primary mission as a university parish. Challenges always remain, and we hope to increase communication regarding our numerous programs and groups. As our survey indicates, there is need for growth in the youth ministry in particular, and we hope to increase the catechetical fervor of that ministry in the next few years.

### **III. Worship**

As the Second Vatican Council teaches us (and as is noted in the official WWBF document), “the liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the church is directed and the font from which all her power flows” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10). We recognize this sacramental centrality; hence the liturgy remains as the proper and beloved center to our parish life. We offer the sacraments frequently, including our six Sunday Masses (which incorporate a wide range of liturgically-acceptable musical traditions, from Gregorian chant to traditional to folk music to modern), two daily Masses, special Mass schedules for Holy Days, and regularly scheduled confessions. The Dominican friars minister to the parish of St. George in Scottsville as well. Our Adoration ministry is also strong; though we have not yet attained the cherished goal of Perpetual Adoration, we are endeavoring to promote understanding of the Blessed Sacrament, thereby increasing participation in the ministry that, having obtained the necessary permission, we might offer such a beautiful sacramental opportunity for the community.

Such is our primary hope for expansion: that by sharing the rich and beautiful liturgy of our Church with our parishioners we will increase their love of God. Thus we have recently scheduled an additional Sunday Mass at 9pm and daily noontime weekday Masses at the UVA Chapel on Grounds—thereby serving further that vitally important student community. Similarly, in the interests of increasing participation in Adoration, we undertook an “Adoration Challenge” for the Lenten season in which we asked members of the parish and of the student community to take part in forty days of constant Adoration in the Our Lady of Perpetual Help chapel. The blessings abounding from this initiative were (and are) incredible, encouraging our hopes for Perpetual Adoration. We hope to increase our confessions to daily scheduled hours.

### **IV. Community**

St. Thomas Aquinas parish has a multitude of opportunities to enliven and deepen the faith of its members, many of which have been identified with regard to the other three categories of this survey. Additionally we offer or host a number of programs that help build our sense of community within the parish, including a comprehensive welcoming committee, various pilgrimages and retreats, lectures, Life in the Spirit seminars, home and hospital visitation guilds, Ignite 242, Catholic scouting, a Chapter of the Dominican Laity, the St. Thomas More society, a parish library, books for prisoners, a tri-parish support group for divorced and separated Catholics, and a wealth of social events and receptions from

“Coffee and Donuts” after Sunday Masses to meals for new moms and the sick, all to help build a sense of community in the parish.

Our students, once again, are a special and constant consideration. Their organization includes small groups, “Fireside” Masses, a regular Tuesday night dinner, and innumerable service projects. They are encouraged to participation in all aspects of parish life from religious education to liturgical service. Among other things, there is a constant seat on the parish council for a representative of CSM. We also have vibrant communities in our youth, young adult, and senior ministries. Our minorities are represented as well, as in our Korean Catholic student group and the Philippine ladies rosary group. We are attendant to interfaith relationships; CSM is particularly active in this area.

## **V. Service**

The Peace and Justice committee, supported by other dedicated groups within the parish (particularly our very active chapter of the Knights of Columbus) promotes active involvement in over twenty-seven organizations and programs that provide social services to various groups including but not limited to: IMPACT, Habitat for Humanity, the Salvation Army, the Emergency Food Bank, Pacem, Catholic Relief Services, Right to Life (which participates in the National 40 Days for Life initiative as well as working to promote public awareness within Charlottesville of the pervasiveness of abortion in our own city), the Virginia Catholic Conference, the Virginia Council of Churches, the Virginia Interfaith Center of Public Policy, and our sister parish of St. Michel in Saltadare, Haiti.

In this, as in every other branch of parish life, we face familiar challenges. Many of the tasks and initiatives of the committee overlap. Many of our volunteers work very hard to fulfill the second greatest commandment given to us by Jesus Christ: to love your neighbor as yourself. We value greatly the impressive generosity of our parish community, and hope that by increased communication and promotion of service-oriented events and programs, we will increase participation in those particular organizations in which our parish already is involved. We also hope to continue to encourage the incorporation of the Catholic Student Ministry (CSM) in peace and justice activities. In all of this, we are (as always) tremendously supported by the example and dedication of the Dominican friars, whose service to the suffering in our community, especially but not exclusively at our local hospitals, is inspiring.

## **VI. Plans for renewal and meeting parish need**

We take very seriously our mission as Catholics and as a Catholic parish, and are acutely aware as well of the particular challenges we face by virtue of our status as a university parish. The task of a parish self-assessment was therefore taken up soberly, joyfully, and prayerfully. We are eager to share the abundance of God’s love with all of those in our community, as well as reaching out to others who may be helped or inspired by our deeds and the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Peter 3:15). In each aspect of our parish life we marvel at the passion and commitment demonstrated by our many volunteers. At the same time, herein lies our major need for improvement—and an age-old problem remarked upon by Our Lord Himself—“the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few” (Luke 10:2). We host over sixty ministries at our parish; many who participate in a handful of them understandably know nothing of the others. We pray constantly for the Lord to send us more laborers, and constantly seek to assess our methods for communication and advertisement of our work. We seek to support our responsibilities for external and internal evangelism, the proper extension of the sacramental invitation to all souls. Our plans, both practical and spiritual, involve the following:

- Installation of televisions in our link to advertise important events and programs (accomplished)
- Expansion of the weekly bulletin and production of large print bulletins (accomplished)
- Installation of extra seating (pending)
- Purchase and installation of a better sound system (pending)
- Increasing of lights on our staircase (pending)
- Scheduling of a regular Sunday and weekday Masses at UVA Chapel (accomplished)
- Commencement of Perpetual Adoration (after an in-depth educational and advertising initiative)
- Construction of a “Welcome Home” Campaign (for students and local inhabitants of Charlottesville)

## **VII. Diocesan support**

First and foremost, we gratefully rely upon the prayers, friendship, and ecclesial example provided by our home diocese. As to particular needs in which the diocese may support us, these are various and include: continued support for our various ministries (including our NFP initiative) and continued affectionate respect for the Dominican friars. The Diocese could also assist in identifying programs that our parish could share with other parishes and vice versa. This would partly be accomplished by providing practical assistance in helping our Catholic members to evangelize and establish outreach programs, helping us to reach out to both non-Catholic and inactive Catholics and to those of different ethnicities.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

Throughout the two millennia of the Church’s existence, many hardships have been faced by Christ’s people. Life lived in the light of Christ brings great challenges, and in those challenges we find the extraordinary joy that only Christ can give. We see in our own era special challenges—particularly those of widespread secularism and unbelief even within the members of the Church herself. The temptation to indulge in a breed of “cultural Catholicism”—without understanding or real conviction of the truths of our faith—is strong and many suffer deeply as a result of poor catechesis. We see our place in Charlottesville and in relation to the University of Virginia as an extraordinary opportunity to combat weakened understanding and falsehood and to bring Eucharistic richness to many. We hope in the years to come, supported by our beloved Dominicans, to continue in our service to the Church.

In that hope, and with great respect, we remain,

Yours in Christ,  
 St. Thomas Aquinas Parish Council  
 Represented by Ron Golden, *Chairman*