

Blending new with old

St. James the Greater celebrates parishoner's many talents

BY JIM MASTERS
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SAUK VILLAGE - When The Rev. Thomas Conde became pastor at St. James the Greater Catholic Church five years ago, the parish social center was in such disrepair he wondered if it wouldn't be better just to tear it down and start over.

The school wasn't in much better condition. The rectory, administrative offices and former convent building needed help, also.

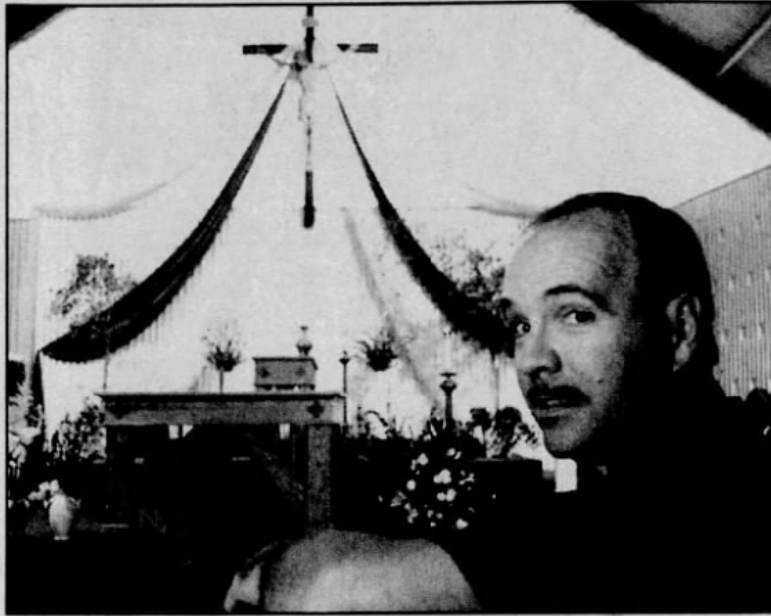
What has happened at St. James since The Rev. Conde took over has been truly remarkable. Throughout the parish, 22400 Torrence Ave., there are new floors, roofing, ceilings, windows and walls.

The social center, Father Didier Hall, has been refurbished and continues to undergo modifications. It's likely the largest meeting hall in Sauk Village and used for a variety of church and community social events, as well as a student recreation area and lunch room.

The church and sanctuary have a new look and many new amenities. A spacious church office and nearly an identical one for the school staff were also built.

"We've added about 5,000 square feet to an 80,000 square-foot facility," Conde said. "We've doubled the size of the sanctuary."

Students in kindergarten through eighth grades at the school, have benefited from the addition of a 25-station, state-of-the-art computer lab. A new library, which includes a conference room, is under construction



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The Rev. Thomas Conde sits in the sanctuary at St. James in Sauk Village.

to serve the school's 200 students, as are new science and art labs. There's also a new outdoor play area for preschoolers.

"The general appearance of the building just makes the kids happy to be here," principal Dan Fitzgerald said.

"Depressing, dingy and dark" is how Conde described the decor of the 35-year-old parish upon his arrival. The parishioners, however, had hearts of gold.

Joe Matlon, the parish publicity chairman said, "there's no debt incurred from the approximately \$1.3 million in improvements, and Sunday collections have made the difference."

"Since I've been here, we've lost 300 families but we've

gained 300," Conde said. "But, the collections have doubled." The parish currently has 1,200 families.

Parishioners were surveyed as to which improvements they would like to see. From there, he made a "honey do" list.

"There was considerable savings, since Conde and parishioners did most of the work themselves. Many of the parishioners are skilled tradesmen who lent their expertise.

"I like to lay floor tile, so whenever I get a chance I lay floor tile," he said.

One parishioner, Stanley Jew-

ula, hand-crafted all of the oak sanctuary furnishings, including the altar itself.

The church at, 223rd and Torrence Avenues, is actually the fourth home for St. James. Former parishes include three buildings at Illinois 394 and Sauk Trail Road, the first dating back to 1842. Conde was searching for church artifacts in the attic of the former church building when he uncovered a large wooden cross with "1885" inscribed on it. It was from the first St. James the Greater Church.

"The cross was in relatively good condition, as it was found face down," he said. A parishioner restored it to its original beauty. Now, it hangs in the rear of the church.

As the most southerly parish in the Chicago Diocese, one thing the church has always had plenty of was land - 15 acres, in fact. It's not unusual to look out a classroom window and see a horse, escaped from its corral, running through the adjacent prairie.

"When kids go out for recess they don't have to play on black-top," Fitzgerald said. Students have plenty of room for soccer and baseball. "We even go out and do archeological digs."

Matlon wants people to know St. James the Greater Church is alive and kicking and its doors are open to all. That visibility was heightened last week when a new sign was erected.

"What has happened here is like day and night," Matlon said.