

Keeping the Keys to the Kingdom: Sacristans at Seton Hall

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The Honeymooners, a sitcom filmed in black and white, that first aired in 1955, offered some useful advice in the art of sacristan-ing. In an episode titled “The Babysitter,” Ralph Kramden, the main character, informs his wife, Alice: “I am the captain of this ship, do you understand that? You are nothing but a lowly, third-class seaman. That is what you are. Your duties are to get the mess, swab the deck, and see that the captain feels good. That is all you have to do.” As a Seton Hall sacristan, I have heard this quote my fair share of times from Fr. Nick Figurelli, Director of Campus Ministry and overseer of sacristans. He has a point in saying this. It is the duty of a sacristan to ensure that things run smoothly and are taken care of. Although Fr. Figurelli may try to have us believe he is the captain of the ship, in reality the captain of the ship is truly the community of Seton Hall; it is the sacristan’s duty to see that the members of this community feel good by being true servants and attending to the needs of the faithful and faith-seekers.

A sacristan, according to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, is “an officer who is charged with the care of the sacristy, the church, and their contents,” and is a derivative of two different jobs in early Catholicism “*ostiarii* [and]...*mansionarii*” or doorkeepers and treasurers (Goggin and Kelly). A sacristy is “a room in the church or attached thereto, where the vestments, church furnishings and the like, sacred vessels, and other treasures are kept, and where the clergy meet and vest for the various ecclesiastical functions” (Meehan). On Seton Hall’s South Orange campus, in the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, the sacristy is located behind the altar and is where sacristans are able to find the supplies necessary for every Mass that takes place on campus. At Seton Hall, there are several chapels that must be accounted for by the sacristans. These chapels include the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, or the main chapel; St. Joseph’s Chapel located in Boland Hall; Oratory Chapel in Presidents Hall; as well as Xavier Chapel in Xavier Hall. Within these chapels, all liturgical items and books must be accounted for and prepared before Masses.

For the Liturgy of the Eucharist, a sacristan must prepare for the Mass. Kept in the sacristy and essential for the celebration of Mass are a variety of objects and books. First, the sacristans at Seton Hall are granted a large set of keys. It is the responsibility of the sacristans to lock and unlock the chapel, the sacristy, and other closets and such. Once inside the chapel, the sacristan must unlock the sacristy as well as the door for the priest to enter from the priests’ garden, a walkway from the seminary to the main chapel. First, the sacristan prepares the lighting and sound equipment for the Mass and performs other housekeeping duties. Then, the chasuble must be laid out for the presbyter on the counter in the sacristy along with the stole, and cincture in the shape of an “M,” for Mary. The priest’s alb is hung and the books are sorted using an Ordo, for the correct readings and prayers to be said depending on the day. Next, the items for the Eucharist are prepared. These include a chalice, a paten with hosts, water and wine cruets, an ablution cup in order for the priest to purify his hands, a finger towel, a corporal and a purificator. Lastly, the sacristan lights the candles at the altar, appoints lectors or acts as a lector, and appoints Eucharistic ministers.

Along with this, the sacristan gets the opportunity to work closely with the priests who serve at Seton Hall. This may be one of the best aspects of the position. According to an article in *The Setonian*, Mary Molnar, a former university sacristan, agrees that the relationships made with the priests on campus really enhance the life of the sacristan: “A lot of these priests I would have never met had I not had this

job,' Molnar said. '[Fr. Francis and Fr. Brian] really love the Seton Hall community. They put time and effort into getting to know the students and getting to know me'" (Seda). More than 40 priests that are part of the priest community on campus. Working closely with these men of faith allows the sacristans to grow in their own faith and seek out opportunities to grow closer with Christ.

Aside from daily Masses and Sunday Masses, the university sacristans help to serve at the countless baptisms and weddings that take place in the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception. Known for its rich history and beautiful stained glass windows and exterior, the University Chapel is a highly sought-after spot for alumni to tie the knot. This requires the sacristan to ensure that the guests visiting the chapel understand the rules regarding safety and management of the chapel, as well as coordinating with visiting priests as well as photographers. Baptisms also occur frequently in the chapel and require the preparation of the Holy Chrism, baptismal font, baptismal candle, and baptismal garments. Aiding at these sacraments is another joy of service for sacristans on campus. To help the continuation of the Church in this way, though small, brings fruit to the work done by the sacristan.

Within the past few years at Seton Hall, sacristan positions have been left to undergraduate students enrolled in many of the different areas of study. However, this was not always the case. Upon interviewing Fr. Figurelli on his knowledge of this position over the years, I learned that up until recent decades the position was held by men in seminary on campus. Immaculate Conception Seminary required one or two seminarians to serve as sacristan for the entirety of the campus. Although the frequency of Masses has varied from then to today, this would have been a time-consuming duty in addition to schoolwork and other requirements of seminary life. In fact, seminary life in the days of seminarian sacristans was not a cake walk. According to records, seminary life in the 19th century meant that "during the school year, rising was at 5 a.m., with prayer and meditation in the chapel from 5:30 a.m., preparing for Mass at 6 a.m." (Wister). The day did not end there, however: "the morning was spent in class or teaching and proctoring the collegians. Noon was the time for prayer and a particular examination of conscience, followed by lunch and time for study and spiritual reading. Classes and other activities resumed at 2 p.m., continuing until 6:45. Then it was time to return to the chapel for prayer and the rosary, followed by the evening meal. The day ended with night prayer and a general examination of conscience" (Wister). For those select few who served as sacristan, in addition to a schedule such as this, they were required to carry out their duty as servants and keep up with the schedule allotted.

Sacristan positions began to be held by undergraduate students sometime after the 1950s or so. This allowed for lay students to be able to take part in liturgies in a special way, aside from being a Eucharistic minister or lector. Over the years these students have come from many different backgrounds, have been involved in several different areas of study, and also have participate in lots of different activities and clubs on campus. There are six university sacristans at a given time, primarily. Among the six, one is usually considered to be the head sacristan. This individual is in charge of overseeing and training the other sacristans and of keeping inventory of all chapel items and orders, if needed. The head sacristan also carries a larger, more extensive set of keys that are referred to as "keys to the kingdom," colloquially. One chapel to maintain and other duties are spread among the remaining five sacristans. These include bringing soiled linens to be cleaned, bringing collection money and documents to the campus ministry office, checking the bulletins, changing the message board, steaming clean albs, and more.

Fr. John Francis Morley graduated from Seton Hall Preparatory High School "in 1954 as Valedictorian of his class, Seton Hall University in 1956, and Immaculate Conception Seminary in June 1958" (O'Keefe).

Fr. Morley also oversaw the “University [sacristans] from 1967-1992” (O’Keefe). Fr. Morley was a very prestigious member of the Priest Community at Seton Hall and unfortunately passed away in April of 2020. Fr. Morley is remembered for his service as Head of Sacristans during that time as well as being “recipient of the McQuaid Medal in 1991, the Humanitarian of the Year on April 14, 2002 of the Rose Thering Endowment at Seton Hall” (O’Keefe). The director of the sacristans, like Fr. Morley, and the current director Fr. Figurelli, provides guidance and leadership for the student workers. These men have aided and continue to aid the sacristans in not only their work but their spiritual lives as well. In the article written for *The Setonian*, the former sacristans touch upon this: “The people that I work with in Campus Ministry and everyone I’ve encountered [have] enriched my life in a way I didn’t think this job would initially” (Seda). The article also added that for the former sacristan Nicole] Floyd, “her job with Campus Ministry has become a home” (Seda). Fr. Figurelli also added that “I think it reinforces their faith” (Seda). This reinforcement of faith is very real. To be able to take part in the liturgies and feel responsible in some way for the Mass allows a person to have a different kind of relationship with God—one that is not just to listen, pray, and receive the holy Eucharist, but one that also enables the sacristan to be a steward of Christ’s love and service to his people.

Serving with a spirit of love and giving allows God’s children to be drawn closer to him because of the attempt to embody Christ. We know this when God tells us that “God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him” (New American Bible, 1 John 4: 16). There are many different ways a Catholic can serve. Many serve within their parish by teaching CCD or singing in the choir. Other times, people choose to do service via other channels such as going to a soup kitchen or taking part in Habitat for Humanity. The sacristans on campus give back and serve the priest community, the community of students here, chapel visitors, and Christ. Although the tasks may be mundane, it is of the sacristans’ doing that these little steps can become prayers when they are offered to God in sacrifice and thanksgiving. The job may simply include putting cups and books out on tables, or lighting candles and folding linens, but by doing so with a humble spirit and offering these small actions to God, they can be monumental actions. By giving up their time and by taking on these responsibilities as well as this lifestyle, the university sacristans have a special opportunity to grow closer to Christ. There is a wonderful prayer called “The Sacristan’s Prayer” that can be said by the sacristan while they are working. One line is especially thought provoking: “guide my hands and my steps that I may fulfill my duties with grace and devotion.” These words can allow one’s actions to become truly the actions of Christ, one of which is making one’s work a prayer.

Seton Hall is one of the best campuses on which to practice one’s faith. For those who seek it, celebration of faith is available at one’s fingertips and in every facet of the university. In an attempt to understand some of the feelings of the sacristans who are among the faithful in our university, interviews were held to gather feelings and attitudes toward the role they play on campus. Many students in their first year venture to Campus Ministry and meet other students wanting to keep their faith alive in their new home. For some of the current sacristans, this was the place that deepened their faith more than they had experienced before. For Dan O’Shea, Class of 2021, “[he] discovered a renewed passion and interest in my faith,” through Campus Ministry and pursued the sacristan job because he “saw becoming a sacristan as, first, a step in better understanding the most foundational aspect of the Catholic Church in which I grew—the Mass—and, consequently, as a new way to grow in my own faith journey.” Campus Ministry and getting involved in their faith life on campus is the main way many sacristans hear about the position; additionally, knowing former sacristans is a way that sacristans learn about this role. Mary-Cate McGlone, Class of 2023, comes from a long line of Seton Hall sacristans, in fact. She said,

I have a few family members that have held this position, especially my older brother who was a sacristan for three years. I was able to witness the personal and spiritual growth that resulted from the job. Personally, I saw growth in how he was able to communicate clearly and confidently with people of all ages, ranging from elderly clergy to young parents coming for a child's baptism. On a spiritual level, I saw his relationship with God and with the people around him change for the better.

It is a special experience to see how one's own life is touched by God, but being able to meet God in the same way as you have seen him work in someone close to you is also very special.

An amazing part of this position is the impact it can have on a student's life at Seton Hall specifically. Nate Valyo, Class of 2021, shared

that setting and cleaning up the Masses has become a part of my everyday life for the past three years. It has become as natural to me as going to class. I have loved every sacristan team I've been a part of, and I've come to know a ton of terrific people through the other sacristans and their friends.

The work that the sacristans do can aid in the experience one can have while living the faith on a college campus. One has an opportunity to work, pray, and live among other young people of faith with like values and beliefs. Kelly Murphy, another sacristan in the Class of 2021,

expected the position to make my academics much more difficult due to lack of time. However, [she has been] pleasantly surprised about how it has offered [her] interesting points of discussion in classes, intellectually fulfilling conversations with the priests, and overall a greater appreciation for the actual work it takes to run a church/parish.

It gives a student a well-rounded education and opportunity to share an unusual experience in different areas of university life. The sacristan's role can have an impact not only on academics but also on other aspects of university life. Many of the people one socializes with are those who share common values and beliefs. What a perfect example of a value-based friendship: one among those who serve God in this way. The relationships made among sacristans are virtuous and inspiring.

One common theme among interviews with the sacristans of the 2020–2021 academic year was the appreciation of the meaningful relationships they have developed as sacristans. These sacristans are connected with clergymen in the heart of the diocese and are able to make connections to brilliant priests who serve as professors, researchers, and even rocket-scientists. Amarilis Rodriguez, Class of 2022, shared, "The priests and religious sisters are all so welcoming and willing to help me grow in my faith. I know that I can continue pursuing the sacraments in other churches near home after college."

And Murphy shared, "I never expected to be close with so many priests. Many have become spiritual fathers to me, and I am so glad this position offered me the opportunity to grow close with them."

Murphy further shared just how impactful this part of the position has been, adding,

becoming close with the priests as spiritual fathers has broken down so barriers I had toward regarding God as my Father. Just as I had thought of priests before, my image of God as Father was punishing, reprimanding, and altogether frightening. However, I have come to know spiritual fatherhood as a role filled with mercy, understanding, gentleness, and providence.

In the Catholic Church today, this is truly a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Since the role of a university priest is fairly different from that of a parish priest, it is so beautiful to see God's hand in creating these relationships.

If not apparent by now, although it includes the benefits of room and board, sacristan is not the average campus job. Aside from the usual professional roles of answering emails, locking and opening doors, and

keeping stock of product, the university sacristan has added responsibilities. McGlone said it wonderfully:

there are extraordinary responsibilities that come with the job too: cheering up a priest before Mass who had a bad day, calming a nervous groom who is awaiting his bride, or even chasing a bird out of the chapel. These are the responsibilities that I did not expect to inherit when I took this job, but they are what make it worthwhile.

A sacristan is expected to be an active member of the Church, one who abides in God's love and lives the way in which we are instructed to do as Christians. In the world of higher education, this can be somewhat of an impossible feat at times; however, the graces received through serving in the role of sacristan ensure that the Spirit acts as an aide.

There is no doubt that this role would impact one's spiritual life. For most, it has been impacted in a positive way, and for some it can also be a cause for distress. It would make sense to say that acting as sacristan would make a person more involved in liturgy in one sense, but it can also be a distraction.

One person interviewed (who preferred to remain anonymous) shared,

I don't know if this position has benefitted me [spiritually]. It has made me appreciate the person and humanity in each priest, but I do not feel like my faith is stronger. If anything, it has made me pay more attention to the physical parts of the liturgy and less attention to the spiritual. I find myself more interested in making sure I put out all the correct chalices and books, than in concentrating on the Eucharist or prayer.

When added responsibility of ensuring the operation runs smoothly falls on one person, it can provide enough distraction to take one away from what is truly happening. Staying focused in Mass is something most Catholics may struggle with. It is suggested that when feeling this distraction, one could "make up a spiritually absorbing phrase or prayer and focus on it by repeating it until [you] overcome the distraction" (Kabali). One possible phrase or prayer could be part of the sacristan's prayer or something short to remain in the Mass rather than focusing on things that may have been forgotten or worrying about what part of the liturgy comes next. However, this feeling of spiritual decline was not the response of the majority and remainder of the sacristan team. The overall consensus was that carrying out these tasks, and the sheer amount of time spent in the chapel and with the clergy, enable the sacristans to understand in a deeper sense the importance of the Mass as the center of one's life and routine. Valyo shared that a lesson he would take away from his time as university sacristan is "that the Mass is the center of my faith, and that I must prioritize it going forward, even when it is not as easily accessible as the campus chapel." As he is graduating at the end of this year, Valyo is glad to have formed the habit of prioritizing his faith in this way. For many post-grad young adults, it is challenging to find a parish and fit in the same way one might have in their university parish. Valyo has learned that above all else, to stay close to the sacraments is important in navigating life, especially in times of transition and uncertainty. In this time of change for him, he at least knows he is "a practicing Catholic striving to develop a strong relationship with Jesus Christ every single day, and I am confident that being a sacristan is what made me who I am today." What a spectacular gift to graduate knowing fully one's own identity in relation to God, the Creator.

Other interviewees had other things to share in what they will be taking with them as lessons from their job. Murphy, another graduate of the class of 2021, who finished a semester early, is confident in the preparation the university has given her in her career pursuit. She is grateful not only for the time she spent as a student sacristan but also for the priest community of Seton Hall and "hopes to maintain [her] relationships with the priests, as they have provided [her] with incredible guidance along the way." Performing this job has led O'Shea, the other graduating sacristan, to prepare for the real world by teaching him "how to manage my time and balance various responsibilities as well understanding more

what it means to work and act professionally.” Along with this, a lesson he learned and will also take with him is “the importance of carving out time every day for prayer and meditation, of surrounding [himself] with driven and virtuous people, who are willing to hold [him] accountable and walk alongside [him in his] faith journey.” In these ways, the university has truly accomplished the job it had set out to do upon its formation. In the University Mission statement, the Board of Regents share that the University “focuses on academic and ethical development” (Sheeran), and in this way prepares its students for life after college in a comprehensive manner. Through the role of university sacristan, these students have been able to receive the comprehensive education provided by this school.

The Catholic Mission of Seton Hall University enables the Lord to have encounters with students willing to seek Him out. One significant aspect of the values and traditions a Catholic school has to offer is the call to service. At Seton Hall, this may mean community service through DOVE, or Habitat for Humanity, or being involved within a Greek organization. However, serving those within the community can be truly life changing, as seen in the lives of the university sacristans. Sacristans serve students, faculty, and clergy, but in doing so, the sacristans serve their Lord and Maker. In this service, sacristans can be developed as leaders in mind, heart, and spirit, just as the founders of the University intended. Although the job has changed through the years, the fruits it bears have not just remained but multiplied.

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