



# HERE AT THE HEART



When not busy with their studies, the seminarians of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity contribute to the vitality of Detroit's Holy Redeemer Parish. From left, Br. Jacob Wisenbaker, Br. Nicholas Hamilton, Br. David Brokke, Br. Timothy Burnham, and Br. Richard Brooks.

# SOLTs for the City

Darci Swisher

Dressed in gray habits, seminarians of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity (SOLT) are hard to miss in the halls of Sacred Heart—and even more so on the streets of southwest Detroit.

“If you ask people in the community if they have seen people wearing ‘dresses,’ they say ‘yes!,” says Efrain Zumudio, Christian service director at Most Holy Redeemer Parish, where the SOLTs live and minister. Their presence, he says, is “impacting the whole community.”

## Detroit, a Great Fit

The SOLTs arrived in Detroit in August 2011 after deciding to move their House of Studies from Rome’s Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (the Angelicum) to Detroit. At the same time, Archbishop Allen Vigneron inquired about the congregation taking stewardship of Holy Redeemer.

The nearly sixty-year-old missionary society of apostolic life decided Detroit was “a fit all the way around,” says Fr. Mark Wendling, SOLT vocation director and rector of the House of Studies. “We serve in areas of deepest apostolic need. Detroit is exactly what we do. It was a good ministry for us to take.”

The society, which is based in the Diocese of Corpus Christi, includes priests, brothers, deacons, sisters, and lay members. SOLT members currently serve at missions in twelve countries.

## Serving the Underserved

All SOLT seminarians in the Americas and Europe now receive their priestly education at Sacred Heart. Father Mark notes that his religious community selected Sacred Heart specifically because of its innovative programs in the New Evangelization. One of his brother priests, Fr. Eduardo Montemayor, received his Licentiate in Sacred Theology in the New Evangelization from Sacred Heart, and Father Eduardo left so impressed with the strong academics and professors that seminarians were transferred to the seminary the following year.

Five SOLT seminarians are currently studying at Sacred Heart while living at Holy Redeemer: Bros. David Brokke, Richard Brooks, Timothy Burhan, Nicholas Hamilton, and Jacob Wisenbaker. “The SOLT community is such a singular blessing for all of us, seminarians, lay students, and faculty alike, modeling as they do the evangelical counsels [poverty, chastity, and obedience] lived out in freedom and such

obvious joy,” says Fr. Gerard Battersby, Sacred Heart’s vice rector and director of seminarian formation.

Br. Timothy Burnham, who is in his second year of theology, says that not only has his own relationship with Christ been deepened at Sacred Heart, he has learned ways to introduce Christ to those who have heard about him but do not truly know him.

“Our training in evangelization has given me a greater knowledge of the different tools that are available to spread the Gospel message in our culture,”

says Brother Tim. His education has been strengthened by living at Holy Redeemer. While studies are their primary focus, the SOLT seminarians have

apostolates at the parish.

“Living in southwest Detroit has been a blessing for us as we’ve been given the opportunity to serve the Mexican population there,” Brother Tim says. “This has been good training for us as future SOLT priests, as we often serve minority groups and those who are overlooked in society.”

“Living in southwest Detroit has been a blessing for us.”



### Revived by Revive

Besides the five seminarians, the SOLTs currently have three priests at Holy Redeemer, which is one of the largest parishes in Detroit and was once the regional base for the Redemptorist Fathers and Brothers. Most Rev. Donald Hanchon, auxiliary bishop of Detroit, began serving as pastor in 1999 after the Redemptorists' departure, and he stayed until after his episcopal ordination, when the SOLTs arrived.

Fr. Dennis Walsh, SOLT, was installed as pastor of Holy Redeemer in 2011, and has served since then, with Fr. Richard Klepac, SOLT, as his associate pastor. Father Mark rounds out the congregation's trio in residence at Holy Redeemer.

"I'm feeling well five years in," says Father Dennis. "Still, I'm always seeing a lot more that we need to do."

He points to the Revive program as one of the SOLTs greatest successes. Revive is a Spanish version of the Alpha program, a twelve-week course on the fundamentals of Christianity, with talks on Our Lady and the saints added to give the program a Catholic perspective. Revive always has a waiting list of people wanting to participate when it is held each fall. Revive includes a three-day retreat

midway through that teaches participants more about the Catholic faith, gives them the opportunity to discuss their faith in small groups, and encourages service work.

Brother Tim was amazed at the change he saw in the members of his Revive group.

"For most members, it was their first opportunity to have real fellowship with other Catholic

men and to openly discuss issues of faith," he explains. "By the end of the eleven weeks, all the men at my table had developed a bond with each other and felt open to share their faith and their struggles. Each member of my group grew in their knowledge of the faith and came to a deeper relationship with Christ."

The retreat is especially powerful. Given the economic status of most parishioners, a weekend away is not a luxury they are often afforded—even at a rustic camp, according to Father Dennis. To ensure retreatants are focused on prayer and exploring their relationships with God, mobile phones are even taken away.

The number of parishioners who are now more active at Holy Redeemer proves the Revive program's success.

"People really are taking ownership of the

parish, which is great," Father Dennis says. "When I got here, I had to cut back on expenses because of the debt. Now, volunteer teams take care of lawn care. People volunteer to clean the church twice a week."

### Reaching Out from the Heart

Brs. Jacob Wisenbaker and Nicholas Hamilton, both in their first year of undergraduate philosophy, teach religious education to the parish's fourth- through sixth-graders as their apostolates. After addressing the children's initial curiosity about what brothers are, how they cannot get married, and why they live "at church," the two men set out to translate what they have learned in the seminary to non-seminarians—and very small ones at that. This catechetical approach proved to be a challenging task at first, says Brother Jacob.

"Kids will rise to the expectations we set for them, so I try to explain the truths of the faith and then bring them up as high as they can go," he says. "Allowing the kids to stretch their minds has proven most beneficial. Give them a thought to ponder, and their wheels start turning. The lights come on in their eyes as they begin to ask questions, exploring the topic in ways that I have never thought of.

"The Holy Spirit definitely takes over during the lessons; Brother Nick and I just provide the initial push."

Brother Nicholas feels that serving in Detroit is invaluable to his future ministry.

**"The Lord is preparing me to be ready for anything and to serve anywhere."**



5.

3.

4.

“The Lord is preparing me to be ready for anything and to serve anywhere,” he says. “Here we encounter a variety of persons in many stages of life and faith.”

One “life-changing” instance took place one afternoon, when a woman came into the rectory crying and desperate for someone to talk to, only to learn all of the priests were out hearing confessions. Brother Nicholas was able to convince her to sit with him on the stoop, and the two engaged in deep conversation.

“I learned how to communicate God’s love with a person who was so far in the depths of distress that even the mention of God would send her into a fit of anger,” he says. “By living here, I am learning something similar to St. Paul, that all of Creation yearns for the coming of Christ; that each person desires to love and be loved, completely, heart, mind, and soul.”

### Bustling Ministries

Bishop Hanchon is pleased that the SOLT seminarians are so involved in the life of the parish. The positive comments he hears about the SOLTs from Holy Redeemer parishioners reinforce what first he thought when finding out about the community: On that day, “God smiled on me,” he says.

“Father Dennis has continued the progressive renovation of the church and grounds, has stabilized the grade school, and given the parish a path forward.”

Indeed, the parish seems to always be bustling with activity. Each Tuesday night, 160 parishioners attend Bible study—a parishioner studied *The Great Adventure* Bible study course and is now guiding others through it in Spanish. Men’s and women’s intercession groups meet weekly to pray for the parish, as well as each time Revive is in session.

Two years ago, parishioners requested Eucharistic adoration. In addition to morning adoration in the church, an adoration chapel was set up in a front room in the office. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, “people are in and out” constantly, Father Dennis says.

An extension of the Image of God crisis pregnancy center was established in the church basement a year ago. Father Dennis says that women of the parish had already asked him about pro-life activities when Deacon Joe Iskra called from the primary location at Detroit’s St. Augustine and St. Monica Parish to see if Holy Redeemer had interest and space.

“Right away, we probably had twelve ladies who wanted to be involved in this crisis pregnancy center,” he notes. Today, he adds, the women receive help from people outside the parish, and even outside the southwest Detroit community.

### Changing for the Better

Seeing such quick and amazing results has given Efrain Zumudio and those who

### Captions:

1. Fr. Dennis Walsh, SOLT, pastors the 3,174 registered parishioners of Holy Redeemer Parish.
2. Grade school religious education students learn a lesson about God’s love from Br. Jacob Wisenbaker, SOLT.
3. Fr. Mark Wendling, SOLT, is responsible for the spiritual formation of the SOLT seminarians.
4. Br. Nicholas Hamilton, SOLT, catechizes candidates for the Sacrament of Confirmation.
5. Holy Redeemer’s directors of religious education Marcella Solis and Martín Solis chat with Br. Richard Brooks, SOLT, in the parish’s grade school.

help him both incentive and energy for Christian service work at Holy Redeemer, which includes a weekly food pantry and assistance with utility bills and prescriptions. His only criticism of the SOLT community is that they “work too much.”

“The SOLTs haven’t had any breaks since they came in,” he says. “They are very active. The parish is changing. You can see the difference, in the community and in the people who attend Sunday Mass.” ■

Darci Swisher is a freelance writer who lives in Chicago, Illinois (darcicwordsmith.com). Photos by TimFullerPhotography.com.