



SAINT THOMAS THE APOSTLE EDUCATION FOUNDATION

GOD MAKES ALL THINGS

REVELATION 21:5

MSW! ✨

With the start of a new school year and a new season in parish life, we welcome Father Stephen Durkee as pastor of Saint Thomas the Apostle. For Father Stephen, this moment is bittersweet leaving behind his former parish family at St. Pius X in Grandville after five joyful and faith-filled years and now stepping into a new role, new relationships, and new opportunities. His arrival and the church jubilee year of hope gave birth to our 2025-26 school theme: "God makes all things new."

"I truly believe this is God's will," he shared. "There are new people to meet, children eager to grow in their love of Christ, and a community that desires to experience Jesus deeply." For Father Stephen, proclaiming the Word is not just a calling, it's a joy.



GOD'S PLAN IS FOREVER UNFOLDING ...

Raised in a loving Catholic family, Father Stephen attended Caledonia public schools and rarely missed Sunday Mass, even if it meant squeezing it in between weekend soccer games. "Back then, I think I was a typical Catholic kid," he recalls. But everything began to change during a confirmation prep retreat in high school when Father Lou Anderson told him simply: "God loves you." "That was the first time I really heard it -- not just with my ears, but in my heart," Father Stephen said. It was the beginning of a journey that would stretch across years, filled with quiet nudges and growing clarity. While he once imagined a future with 12 children and a traditional family, God had something else in mind.

A powerful moment came during his senior year at a peer ministry retreat. As he prayed alone in the Chapel before the students arrived, he sensed a clear invitation from God: "Would you consider the priesthood?" The question stayed with him, even as he pursued a degree in education from CMU with plans to become a math teacher. But slowly, steadily, God's plan unfolded and Father Stephen followed. He entered seminary after college, trusting that if God was truly calling him, the clarity would come. And it did. "In seminary, I realized I was meant to love a parish. That is where my heart feels at home."



"IT'S A BEAUTIFUL
THING TO HAVE A
SCHOOL WHERE A
DYNAMIC CATHOLIC
EDUCATION IS
ACCESSIBLE TO ALL."
-FATHER STEPHEN

...MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

Looking back, Father Stephen recalls how his parents longed to send him to St. John Vianney for elementary school but it simply wasn't financially possible. That memory stays with him even today. Now, as pastor of Saint Thomas, shepherd of our school, and devout follower of the Detroit Lions, he is deeply inspired by the mission of our Education Foundation. "It's a beautiful thing to have a school where a dynamic Catholic education is accessible to all." Father Stephen sees great hope in the inclusive, faith-driven, and leadership-centered model at Saint Thomas. He believes we are not just forming students academically, but preparing them to be confident, compassionate leaders in both the church and the world. He sees the foundation as a way we knock and God opens the door for families, for students, and for the future of the Church. He looks forward to walking alongside this parish and school community, praying with us, growing with us, and seeing what good things God has in store.



WELCOME FATHER STEPHEN!

GO LIONS!

KICKING OFF THE SCHOOL YEAR...

...WITH PURPOSE AND *Passion!*

This year our middle schoolers continue to mentor younger students in learning and prayer. Serving as reading and math buddies, science partners, classroom helpers and Mass mentors, they feel connected in service to community.



RIGOROUS
ACADEMICS



SERVANT
LEADERSHIP

VIRTUOUS
FAITH



This school year, we will celebrate weekly all-school Mass with Father Stephen and continue our tradition of daily morning chapel, weekly adoration and the sacraments.

Thanks to the generosity of many, 51 new students joined Saint Thomas this year, and many others continued, thanks in part to the financial assistance provided.

PEACEFUL
CLIMATE

EMPOWERED
COMMUNITY



The Saint Thomas Educational Foundation is more than a financial resource, it is a ministry that thrives through the involvement, generosity, and faith of people like you. Whether through a financial gift, volunteer service, or simply spreading the word, your support makes a lasting impact on the lives of our students, families, teachers, and community.



To get involved, donate, or learn more, please visit www.stthomasgr.org/education-foundation

In Memory & with Gratitude

FONDLY REMEMBERING JOAN MEAD

Joan Mead passed away this summer at the age of 95. During her funeral, Father Jim affectionately described her as “a tough nut.” Joan spoke her mind, loved a good laugh, and would give anyone the shirt off her back. Her honesty, warmth, and generosity were hallmarks of a life lived in service to others.

Raised in Grand Haven by a single mother, Joan learned the value of kindness early on. Her daughter, Ann Ensing, believes her generous spirit was shaped during those early school years, when her family couldn’t always afford the extras. A fellow school mom quietly filled the gaps, a gesture Joan never forgot. That moment taught her the power of compassion and community.

On July 4, 1952, fate and a few fireworks brought Joan together with a handsome young man from Grand Rapids named Dan Mead. He was at the lake with friends “looking for cute chicks,” and he certainly found one. They married the following year settling in Grand Rapids, joining Saint Thomas parish. Over the next 15 years, they welcomed seven children, all attending Saint Thomas School.

Once her children were in school, then-pastor Msgr. Raymond Sweeney invited Joan to help around the parish. She volunteered often and even served as a substitute teacher in the early elementary grades. In those days, students went home for lunch. Ann recalls her mom’s first day subbing with Joan coming home at noon, gathering every belt in the house, and declaring her students needed “help” staying in their seats. Thankfully, the belts stayed home after that first day.

Joan soon became a vital part of what we now call liturgical art and environment. Alongside fellow parishioner Agnes “Pete” Gerke, they brought the church to life with seasonal decorations and a true artistic vision. After someone told her she had a natural gift, Joan found her calling. She became the parish’s unofficial artist-in-residence.

Her talents extended beyond the sanctuary to the stage. With the parish’s vibrant theatre group, the TheaterCrafters, Joan created elaborate backdrops, props, and costumes for their beloved annual productions. Whether it was “Annie Get Your Gun” or one of many others, her imagination and artistry brought each performance to life. She is fondly remembered for crafting a life-size horse for “Annie Get Your Gun”, which was later donated to the Buckaroo Rodeo show starring Buck Berry on WOOD-TV. Joan not only made headlines, she made it onto television too.

Her creativity didn’t stop there. Every Christmas, Joan lovingly hand-crafted dolls, angels, Santas, and Christmas trees. Ann believes these gifts were her mother’s way of making sure no child felt the absence she once did—without a doll of her own at Christmas. No matter how little they had, Joan’s mother made the holidays magical, and Ann fondly recalls Joan carrying that tradition forward with her family.

Much of what Joan gave to Saint Thomas was done behind the scenes. Today’s families may not know her name, but they continue to benefit from the foundation she and Dan helped build with love, faith, and creativity. Her legacy lives on in the memories of those who knew her and in the spirit of the parish she helped shape.

Together Dan and Joan supported the foundation not only financially, but with Dan serving as the founding treasurer from 1983 into the early 2000s.



Our next issue will highlight the remarkable history of the Saint Thomas TheaterCrafters, a group that brought joy and artistry to our community for years.

CELEBRATING 42 YEARS OF FAITHFUL

This year marks the 42nd anniversary of the Saint Thomas Educational Foundation, a ministry rooted in faith, vision, and a deep commitment to the future of Catholic education.



Support!

Founded in 1983 by Father Cusack, parishioner Dan Mead, and many others, the Foundation was created to provide lasting financial support for Saint Thomas the Apostle School and ensure a Christ-centered education for generations to come.

Thanks to your unwavering support, the Foundation has grown steadily over the past four decades. Today, we manage an endowment of \$3.2 million and this year alone, we're providing \$211,000 in direct support to our students and school. These funds help sustain a vibrant, faith-filled learning environment that nurtures academic excellence, spiritual development, and a strong sense of community.

Over the last school year, the Foundation completed a Strategic Plan focused on increasing awareness of how we support the school. Our efforts have centered around meeting the financial needs of students and families, providing operational funding to strengthen the school's infrastructure, and enhancing educational programming for students of all learning styles and abilities.



Father Stephen's sister and family who attend Saint Thomas school.

This school year we will be implementing that strategic plan under the guidance of our volunteer board, striving to serve the Foundation's mission with care and integrity. With your continued support, no matter the amount, we will enter our 43rd year stronger than ever!



Please accept the enclosed gift of:

☐ \$50 ☐ \$100 ☐ \$250 ☐ \$500 ☐ \$1000 ☐ \$2500 ☐ \$5000 ☐ Other _____

Please direct this gift to:

☐ Where it's needed most ☐ Education Foundation Endowment ☐ Other _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State & _____

Zip: _____ Email: _____

Phone: _____

☐ I have included the Education Foundation in my estate plans.

☐ I would like to learn more about including the Education Foundation in my estate plans.

Thank You!



Cut along the dotted line and return in enclosed envelope OR scan the QR code to donate online!
Gifts to the Saint Thomas Educational Foundation, a 501 (c) (3), are tax deductible