

Journey of Discovery

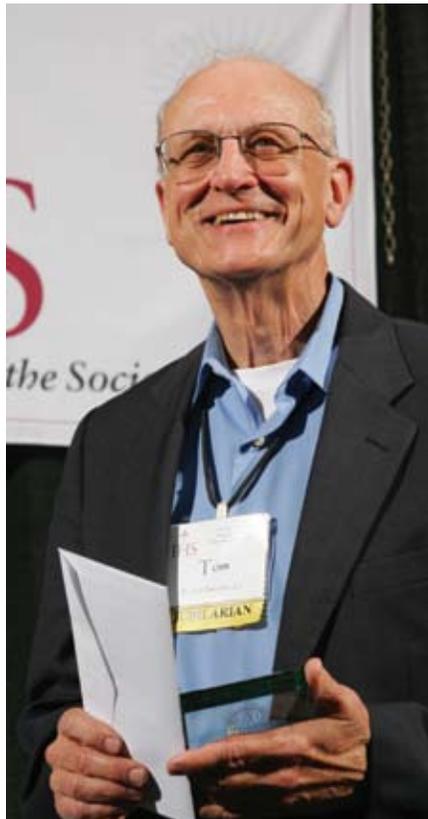
The launching of Sputnik – the first artificial satellite to orbit the earth – 50 years ago by what was then the Soviet Union and more commonly called “The Russians” ushered the world into a new age. There was the space race, walks on the moon, huge jumps in technology that allow everything from exploring the universe to watching sports live on TV when they are halfway around the globe.

About that same time a half decade ago, Fr. Tom Sweetser, SJ (*right*) was departing De La Salle High School in Minneapolis and jumping into his own journey of discovery by entering the Society of Jesus. He was bitten by the birth of the space age and followed his path through achieving his bachelor of science in physics at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Ala. and was a physics teacher at Marquette University High School from 1964-67.

It was that physics structure that led him into a career of working to improve parishes since 1973.

“I wanted to be a physicist,” Fr. Sweetser said, “it was fun to be a physicist in those days.” With masters degrees in sociology and theology and working on his doctorate in theology/sociology, Fr. Sweetser made a discovery.

“I was doing my doctoral dissertation



Fr. Tom Sweetser, SJ

at Chicago U and we were doing survey work about parishes. I was working with about 22 priests and seven or eight parishes and the answers to changes and challenges were not quite the same.” It seemed that the parish wanted more active people in the pews and the folks

in the pews wanted more active parish leaders.

“Physics is working with systems and systems can change,” Fr. Sweetser said. “The parish is a system and you have to get the system right for the people and the pastor.”

Rather than working on helping pioneers reach Mars, Fr. Sweetser is charting a journey right here on earth to make your life – faith life better. And he has dedicated his work to where it hits you most, in the parish and in the pews.

As the founder and director of the Parish Evaluation Project (PEP), which has been serving needs and fulfilling the goals of parishes around the country, Fr. Sweetser also has authored or co-authored seven books on making parishes more active and responsive.

His latest book, “Keeping the Covenant: Taking Parish to the Next Level,” discusses all aspects of the parish and follows Fr. Sweetser’s 2001 book “The Parish As Covenant: A Call To Pastoral Partnership.”

“Keeping the Covenant” takes parish leaders through every aspect of parish life from creating a mission that moves people into action, to the formation of a structure that links all aspects of parish life together, along with a style of leadership that brings out the

SWEETSER’S BOOKS

Fr. Tom Sweetser has made a life of helping others enjoy their parish life. He founded the Parish Evaluation Project in 1973 and still is the director. Here are his books on working with parishes.

Keeping the Covenant: Taking Parish to the Next Level, Thomas P. Sweetser, SJ, New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007.

The Parish As Covenant: A Call To Pastoral Partnership, Thomas P. Sweetser, SJ, Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001.

Changing Pastors: A Resource for Pastoral Transitions, Thomas P. Sweetser, SJ and Mary Benet McKinney, OSB, Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 1998.

Recreating the Parish: Reproducible Resources for Pastoral Ministers, Carol M. Holden, D.Min, Thomas P. Sweetser, SJ and Mary Beth Vogel, MPS, Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 1996.

Transforming the Parish: Models for the Future, Patricia M. Forster, OSF and Thomas P. Sweetser, SJ, Franklin, WI: Sheed and

Ward, 1993, Second Edition, 1999. First Place Winner of the 1994 Catholic Press Association Book Award.

Leadership In A Successful Parish, Thomas P. Sweetser, SJ and Carol M. Holden, D.Min, Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 1987, Second Edition, 1992.

Successful Parishes: How They Meet the Challenges of Change, Thomas P. Sweetser, SJ, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983.

best in the pastor, staff, leaders and parishioners. The book is based on practical, common-sense experiences that can be repeated in a variety of settings. Each chapter is short and to the point with questions for discussion and problem-solving. The book concludes with sample goals and actions steps in the five key areas of parish life: worship, community-building, formation, outreach and administration.

Fr. Sweetser along with co-director Peg Bishop, OSF immerse themselves when a parish requests their help through the Parish Assessment and Renewal program. The pair stay at a parish night and day for 2½ weeks and conduct intense town hall meetings along with surveying the staff and members of the parish. The Parish Evaluation Project has worked with nearly 200 parishes since Fr. Sweetser began the program in 1973.

One of the first steps for renewal in a parish is to find a partner for the pastor. “Priests are just not trained for administration,” Fr. Sweetser said. “We work at finding the partner that the pastor can just speak to and who can take on many of the tasks. A pastor can’t spend all his time on personnel issues; they are just not equipped for that. The pastor has to realize the most effective use of his time and how to enable the lay leaders.”

It is a tough time for parishes as many in urban areas are being combined and others are battling to stay relevant and in step with generational changes.

“We may think that a parish is sick,” Fr. Sweetser said. “But the parish isn’t sick it just doesn’t have the right structures in place. A parish has to be engaging and the pastor has to be open to change.”

Change often begins with little things making great changes. The PEP team has been working with St.

Joseph’s parish in Lebanon, Ind. and the pastor now greets and welcomes everyone to the service.

“You have to work on relationships building,” Fr. Sweetser said. “Inactive Catholics are mostly people who just fell out of the habit. One time they didn’t show up and nobody cared, so they stopped coming. These are the people falling through the cracks every year.”

All the work isn’t done by the parish, the folks in the community have obligations. Fr. Sweetser talks about a “Call to Conversion” with three steps which will make everyone more committed to a successful faith life.

- 1 Pray every day for six minutes
- 2 Get involved in one thing
- 3 Give financially – two hours of the work week.

“People respond when they make the commitment,” Fr. Sweetser said. “Once you get people praying, they will want to be involved. People also respond to stewardship.

“Give to God the pay from the first two hours of your work week,” Fr. Sweetser explained simply. “If you make \$6 an hour, you take the first two hours of your job on Monday and give it back to God. \$12. You have to make a plan of giving.”

Coming to or back to the community of the parish follows any one who has a life that includes prayer.

“If you pray every day, prayer will move you,” Fr. Sweetser said. “You will go to Mass. If you are not being moved right away, God will find a way. People that are moved, need a framework that they can go to.

“Having a vibrant parish is not just the work of the pastor and the staff. It is everybody’s work. Once the renewal starts it just gets better and better.”

It’s not a life of rocket science, it’s better. **||** – Rory Gillespie

PEW MINISTRY

Job Description of a Parishioner

Pastors, ministers and leaders have defined tasks, you as a parishioner also have a job to do. Here is a partial list of what we are called to do.

SIGN UP Become a member, be counted, belong, choose to stand up and be part of the parish. This may appear obvious but there are many who stay on the margins and never make a commitment. Take this step or if you are active make a personal invitation, a gentle nudge, to others to join you.

ATTEND Being a member means showing up. Parishes have liturgy that suits many needs. For instance, some might like the quiet Mass on Sunday morning that has no singing, only instrumental music to set the tone. For others it could be a family Mass for children and parents together, or a more formal liturgy with choir and special rituals. Whatever your preference, worship as part of the parish community.

JOIN IN Take an active part. If you sit at the end of the pew, become welcoming to those who come looking for a seat. Joining in also means picking up a hymnal and even if you don’t sing, follow along and show interest. It also means connecting with people for the greeting of peace, making a genuine gesture of openness.

One priest asked people to do an S.O.S. when there were people standing in the back and along the aisles. “Slide Over Sweetie,” was his plea and amazingly it works.

CONTRIBUTE Giving of one’s time and livelihood are the hallmarks of belonging. Bottom line: everyone needs to work on at least one project, join one committee or serve in one ministry in a given year. Each parishioner needs to give back to God a portion of what they have received. This contribution shows you belong to the faith community and want to see it succeed.

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