

Sun & Balance

VOL 60, NO. 1 – SPRING 2025 THE RENSSELAER NEWMAN FOUNDATION

Fr. Tom Phelan Remembered – A Legacy of Humanism & Faith

Father Thomas Phelan passed away on March 31, 2006. He was instrumental in the building of the Chapel + Cultural Center on the RPI Campus, and in the growth of the Rensselaer Newman Foundation. What follows is a remembrance of Fr. Phelan, written by Matt Ezovski '06, titled, 'Phelan Leaves a Legacy of Faith,' and published in the Poly in April, 2006.

When you walk into the fifth-floor atrium of the Russell Sage Laboratory, the first thing that strikes you is a large portrait of a contemplative older man on the far wall. A closer inspection reveals that the humble but confident figure is that of Thomas Phelan, dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences from 1972 to 1994. The portrait shows Phelan the teacher, but he was much more than this; as told through the countless number of individuals whose lives he touched, he was a leader, friend, caregiver, historian, renaissance man, art connoisseur, Catholic clergyman, cook, gardener, and even a student himself. When Reverend Phelan died on Friday, RPI and the entire Capital Region said goodbye to one of its greatest leaders.

Educated at Oxford and a native of Rensselaer, Phelan, also known as Father Tom, joined RPI as resident chaplain in 1959. From that time on, he never stopped pushing the boundaries of the Institute's academic, extracurricular, and enrichment activities. He established a Festival of Religion and the Arts to expand students' world view. After several relocations of the Catholic student gathering place, Phelan led the Rensselaer Newman Foundation in the construction of the Chapel and Cultural Center, the foundation's current home. Through the C+CC, Phelan made a daring foray into the crossover of arts and religion, inviting people of all backgrounds and tendencies to take in its sights and sounds.



According to Director of the Union Rick Hartt, an early director of the C+CC, "Tom linked the arts to spiritual and intellectual growth."

Reverend Phelan's tenure as dean of Humanities and Social Sciences was marked by the school's rapid growth, increased prominence, varied curricula, and relocation to newly renovated Sage Lab. Vice President for Student Life Eddie Ade Knowles identifies him

as the "trailblazer" who gained support for holistic education, spurring the formation of the Science and Technology Studies and Arts departments. As a student of history, Phelan advocated tirelessly for the preservation of Troy's historical architecture, founding the Hudson Mohawk Industrial Gateway in the face of destructive urban development projects.

Phelan's own story prior to his arrival at RPI was one from which much could be learned. Born in 1925, he saw some of the most difficult years in American history in an area extremely dependent on industry and trade. During World War II, he received a purple heart after a shrapnel wound during a kamikaze attack on the U.S.S. Boyd destroyer. He went on to earn the S.T.L. in theology from the Catholic University of America.

These might seem to be extraordinary achievements for any person but making them even more extraordinary was Phelan's responsibilities to the priesthood. According to David Haviland, recently retired Vice President for Institute Advancement and a member of



(continued on page 4)

The Legacy of the Wiberleys



Spring is also the time of year we remember, and honor, the legacies of Steve and Betty Wiberley, who along with Fr. Phelan, embodied the spirit of service, faith,

and intellectual curiosity that the Newman Foundation has fostered within the RPI community for generations.

Both passed away in March, Betty in 1998 and Steve in 2007. Together, they formed a team deeply invested in the mission of the Rensselaer Newman Foundation and the University Parish of Christ Sun of Justice.

The Wiberleys were champions of the Foundation's core

mission: to integrate faith, learning, and service into the Rensselaer experience. Steve's connection with the university fostered the growth of the Foundation, while Betty made all feel welcome at the many events she planned and hosted.

Their shared belief in the importance of a Catholic presence on a secular campus directly contributed to the success of the RNF. They understood that faith is not separate from education, but a strength that enriches and deepens the academic journey.

As the Rensselaer Newman Foundation continues to grow and evolve in its service to the RPI student community, it does so standing on the shoulders of these faithful stewards, whose love of faith, learning, and service helped shape a community where all are welcome, and every question is worth exploring.



Alumni Corner

Newman Fellow and KOC alumni lead Emmaus Retreat 2025

Congratulations to Megan Adam, RPI '23, and Andy Bouffard, '22, for their leadership roles in this year's Emmaus Retreat, held in February at the Dominican House in Schenectady, NY. Megan is a former Newman Catholic Fellowship President, and Andy a former Grand Knight of the Knights of Columbus.

The Emmaus retreat program is a diocesan-approved retreat weekend that takes place three times a year. It's open to all men and women ages 20 or older seeking to grow in their relationship with Christ regardless of their present level of faith and practice. The purpose of the weekend is to give adults the opportunity to reflect upon themselves, their relationship with God and their community.



Ms. Adam says, "The Emmaus community truly holds a special place in my heart, as it taught me firsthand the deep impacts of a community of faith. When I was needing God the most, this retreat was able to lift me up and introduce me to His unlimited peace and goodness. I'm proud to return to the retreat team and offer a space for students and young

adults to experience God's love and truth."

To date, over 3000 men and women have begun, renewed or deepened their faith in Jesus Christ through the Emmaus retreat program.



ESTEEM (Engaging Students to Enliven the Ecclesial Mission)

Five RPI students are participating in the ESTEEM (Engaging Students to Enliven the Ecclesial Mission) program at RPI this semester. The students (accompanied by Kathryn Dannemann, retired engineering professor) have just returned from Capstone events at the ESTEEM National Conference in Washington, DC where they shared and learned from other ESTEEM participants from other universities.

The ESTEEM program was welcomed to RPI during the 2023-24 academic year. The program commenced at Yale University fifteen years ago. It is designed to help Catholic students become leaders in their careers

as well as their post-college faith communities. The ESTEEM program also promotes intergenerational connections as each student is paired with a mentor from the Christ Sun of Justice community.



Spring Semester at the C+CC: A Hub of Activity at Rensselaer and Troy

Pictures from just a few of the many student events at the C+CC this semester....

RPI Players –

Evening of Performance:
Shakespeare Comedy
of Errors



Pączki Coffee Hour



Ash Wednesday –

Imposition of the Ashes
(including the RPI Men's
Lacrosse Team)



Unity House Domestic Violence Awareness event



Tuesday Nite Newman

Submitted by Tracy Watson, MDiv, Associate Catholic Chaplain

This year our student leaders (Riley, Toby and Cam) and I have been working to incorporate a "faith in action" component into the rhythm of Tuesday Nite Newman. A number of these were centered around food insecurity, and we learned that hunger reaches even here on our RPI campus. These actions have served to remind us that it's one thing to grow individually in our Catholic faith, and an entirely different movement to live that faith beyond the walls of church, of Mass. To be disciples of Christ is an all-day, every-day venture!

When asked for "faith in action" ideas for this semester, one of our students, Anthony, suggested we make "Thinking of You" cards for veterans. We have added nursing home residents and homebound/ill parishioners as well. CSJ parishioners Christine Relyea and Sister Chris Partisano have graciously donated card making supplies!

Creating additional opportunities for students to deepen their faith lives is my ministry hope and goal in all that we do. A few ways that I see us cultivating this in our students



is by offering programs like ESTEEM at RPI: that we have six mentors from the University Parish, Christ Sun of Justice ready to go speaks volumes for the faith community commitment needed to nurture our faith lives!

Finally... Student centered: at the beginning of the Fall semester, Newman created two committees that shape our weekly meetings as well as social get togethers. Both committees have been Godsend, and allow Newman to function much more responsively, intuitively, and smoothly.



Phelan's parish since the early 1970s, "The fact that Tom was a priest was at the center of everything he did." The current RPI chaplain, Rev. Edward Kacerguis, said, "Every single thing he did must be viewed in that sense. It was the cement of his life." He founded the University Parish of Christ Sun of Justice at the C+CC concurrently with the building's construction; reframing a statement from the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras, he established the parish's motto: "God is the measure of all things."

At Phelan's funeral services on Tuesday, Bishop Howard Hubbard noted, "He wore a wide variety of hats." To many, the most influential of his roles was that of mentor. Reverend Winston Bath learned from him that "what we say and what we profess had to be integrated the way we lived our lives." His communication, always concise but never shallow in meaning, respected the intelligence of those he taught and advised. Haviland found that "he thought high thoughts, but he never had to dumb them down for others." He would treat people at any level of society with the same level of respect.

What seemed to strike those he touched more than any accomplishment was his sense of humanism and respect. "The city of God, city of Troy, city of RPI... He saw all of this as human endeavor," noted Haviland. Kacerguis shared that in Phelan's work as both a professor and priest, "He learned, he taught, he shared, he challenged." No person had a story that he couldn't learn from.


Rev. Gary Gelfenbien, an RPI alumnus who was convinced

to pursue his Ph.D. at RPI by Phelan, said when it came to being involved in his community and surroundings, "I don't think he could help himself." He tried to integrate history and culture into all aspects of life. "Everything applied, whether ancient or Judeo-Christian," Gelfenbien said.




After Phelan left his position in H&SS in 1994, he was appointed as institute dean, institute historian, and senior advisor to the president. Late in Phelan's life, he was afflicted with a degenerative disorder of the central nervous system, impacting both mind and body and limiting his ability to minister and teach. He continued to preach as his health allowed, and he remained a frequent fixture at Christ Sun of Justice services until recent months.

In a statement issued Friday, Rensselaer President Shirley Ann Jackson said, "[Phelan] was a builder of community who also realized the value of understanding and documenting our rich history. The legacy he has left behind is as grand as the life he lived." At the close of Tuesday's ceremony, Bishop Hubbard cited Reverend Phelan as "truly the epitome of John Cardinal Newman's definition" of a university chaplain and mentor—perhaps the greatest compliment which he could have delivered that day—and applauded his accomplishments as a "social justice activist and promoter of humanism."

Though his burial took place on Tuesday, Father Tom's final lesson to his community was delivered true to form by Reverend Kacerguis at the celebration of his life on Monday night: "I have tried to empower you to live in the freedom of the resurrection...Go. Go and do likewise." 

Saint of Engineers

Mass on Sunday, March 16th honored the graduating members of our community who will be receiving their undergraduate degrees next month.

This Mass provided a moment of prayer and blessing for the Rensselaer Class of 2025 as they embark on the next chapter of their journey. Each senior was presented with a St. Patrick medal, blessed during the Mass, as a symbol of their enduring connection to this community—something that will remain with them as alumni. Following Mass, a traditional Irish meal of Shepherd's Pie was served. 



Advancement Corner

Thank You!!

Many thanks for your support in 2024. Your financial gifts make it possible to serve the RPI students and help grow the impact of all that we do. You are truly our partner in this very important work!

If you haven't made your gift for 2025 yet, you can send it back in the enclosed envelope or give online at rensselaernewman.org/give.

Leave a Legacy – Join the Phelan-Wiberley Society

Consider including The Rensselaer Newman Foundation in your estate plans and help sustain our mission for generations to come.

The Phelan-Wiberley Society is a community of people who share the vision of our early leaders, Fr. Thomas Phelan and Steve & Betty Wiberley, and who have made a commitment to extend their legacies by furthering the work of the Foundation.

Legacy gifts have the potential to be forever transformative in growing our mission and supporting our students, ethically, morally, and spiritually. To discuss further, or if you have already included the RNF in your estate plans, contact George Hauenstein, Director of Advancement, at haueng@rpi.edu, or at (518) 276-3138.

Donating Stocks:

You may be able to increase the impact of your donation and reduce your tax liability by donating appreciated stock. If you have held the stock for more than a year, you may be able to avoid long-term capital gains taxes and deduct the fair market value of the stock on your taxes while allowing a non-profit (such as the Rensselaer Newman Foundation) to receive the full pre-tax value of those appreciated assets.

Please speak with your financial or tax advisor to determine which of these gift options might be right for you.

New Ways to Give Online

The Rensselaer Newman Foundation and the University Parish of Christ Sun of Justice have a new online giving platform which makes it easier for you to support these entities, and to set up a recurring giving (weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly, etc) – which is the most cost-effective way to contribute. Take a look at: rensselaernewman.org/give.

Coming soon:

RPI Catholic Giving Day – Sunday, June 8

As the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost, let us come together to uplift and strengthen our Catholic ministry at RPI. Details to come...



The Chapel + Cultural Center Student Staff

The C+CC is more than just a space for religious services; it's a cultural and community hub that supports a range of activities, from the spiritual to the artistic. What makes this space truly unique is the dedicated student staff who manage the day-to-day operations. These students are responsible for the facility's maintenance, security, and the successful execution of a variety of programs and events. In future issues, we'll spotlight more of our students and let each tell us what working at the C+CC means to them.



"Working at the C+CC was a great way to get immersed in the Religious and Cultural Side of RPI, it provided a balance from the academic rigor of the institute and in many ways enabled me to perform better academically... During my time at the C+CC, I thoroughly enjoyed interacting

and helping the piano instructors, as they setup their recitals and shows, enabling them to materialize their exact vision." –Ethson '25



"Working at the C+CC is an absolute blessing. It allows me to get off campus, dive into hands-on projects that clear my mind, as well as enjoy breaks playing the beautiful grand piano—a refreshing escape from life at RPI."

–Reid '26



"What I enjoy most about working at the C+CC is the opportunity to spend time in a space as serene and reverent as our church. In an environment like this, even a task as mundane as stacking chairs can become contemplative. I also love being around many of the multipurpose functions that

the C+CC hosts, whether that be potlucks or evening a capella practices." –Paul '25

The Rensselaer Newman Foundation
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
The Student Union, Room 3514
110 Eighth Street
Troy, NY 12180

NON PROFIT Org.
US Postage
PAID
Permit No. 203
Albany, NY



Phone: (518) 276-6518 Chaplains Office
Phone: (518) 274-7793 Chapel + Cultural Center
Email: rnf@rpi.edu
rensselaernewman.org



Please visit our website or follow us on Facebook to view a full list of upcoming events.

If you're getting this newsletter, you have been connected to the Rensselaer Newman Foundation and our mission at RPI, and you understand how important our work is, bringing together faith, humanities, science and engineering. Please consider making a gift to the Foundation to continue our work; know also that we're praying for you at every Mass at the Chapel + Cultural Center.

April 17-20	Easter Triduum
April 26	African Student Cookout with Goat
April 28 – May 2	Final Exams - Pray for our students!
May 18	Piano Recital
May 24	Suzuki Strings Recital
June 1	Chinese Community Chorus
June 8	RPI Catholic Giving Day

Please refer to rensselaernewman.org for event times.



A New Look for the Sun & Balance

Let us know your feedback on the 'new look,' Sun & Balance Newsletter. Our goal is to make it easier to read, and easier to include more photographs of students and of activities in and around the C+CC.

To see all our events, visit: rensselaernewman.org/all-events/