



ST AGNES

PARISH

The Story of Father James Panikulam St. Agnes Parish

Introduction

Father James Panikulam began his 17th year at St. Agnes Parish on July 1, 2020. The blessing of his spiritual leadership has deepened the faith of his congregation. He brings out the best in his parishioners, challenging them to reach personal levels of worship, ministry, discipleship, fellowship and outreach beyond what they thought achievable in service of God. He is both a pastor and a friend to his parishioners. Yet there is much more to know about the person under whose leadership St. Agnes has flourished and has been strengthened for its future. Here is his story.

The Growing up Years

James Panikulam spent his youth in a small village in the southwest India state of Kerala bordered by the Arabian Sea to the west and the Indian Ocean to the south. The second eldest in his family, James has one older brother and three younger sisters. He studied in a convent school located within his village until Grade 7 when he entered regular school; even at that young age, the nuns said he would make a good priest. Most social activities in the village centred around the church and the convent school. The Catholic faith was therefore a significant influence on his life while growing up there. His extended family was also devoutly Catholic, including two aunts who became nuns and his uncle who became a priest.

James' father owned a nutmeg plantation along the tropical Malabar Coast facing the Arabian Sea, and later diversified his crops to include coconuts, rice and spices. The responsibilities associated with a family business employing full time and seasonal workers imparted principles of equality and respect for others that enriched James' perspectives on day-to-day life.

Entering the Priesthood

By Grade 11, James had made the decision to enter the priesthood. Following his Grade 12 graduation, he completed two years of university in India where he studied languages, theology and acquired his philosophy degree. He completed his final year of theology at Saint Paul University, a bilingual and Catholic pontifical university federated with the University of Ottawa.

The circumstances leading James to Canada are most interesting. James met Bishop O'Mara of the Diocese of Thunder Bay in India where the Bishop had been invited to ordain another priest. The Bishop and James met, and from this initial meeting, James was invited to become part of the Diocese of Thunder Bay. Bishop O'Mara placed James at St. Peter's Parish for three months until the Saint Paul University program began in Ottawa. Following graduation, his internship was at Holy Family Parish for one year where he was ordained as Deacon.

Ordination

On November 22, 1992, James was ordained at St. Patrick's Cathedral by Bishop O'Mara. The celebration was attended by James' uncle, who is now Archbishop George Panikulam. Fr. James returned to India with his uncle where, on November 28, 1992, he celebrated his first Mass in his home state.

Journeys in Northwestern Ontario

The first posting for Fr. James was in 1993 where he served as an Associate Pastor at St. Patrick's Cathedral. This was followed by a posting to St. Dominic's Parish in 1995.

Prior to his next posting, Fr. James enrolled in a Liturgy program at Notre Dame, a private Catholic research university in Notre Dame, Indiana.

Afterwards, in March of 1997, Fr. James accepted a posting in the Rainy River area. He was based in a 100-year-old parish in Pinewood where he lived in the rectory. However, he also served Mass every week at parishes in Rainy River, an 18-kilometer drive, and in Emo, a 37-kilometer drive, as well as in a mission in Morson north of Pinewood. His posting was supposed to be an interim measure for three months to resolve several issues that had arisen in that area. The three-month posting lasted eight years.

Life in these small communities offered a solid grounding in his priesthood. This is where he learned the basics of leadership - empowering lay people to make management decisions in his cluster of parishes. His life as a priest and his life with his parishioners became intertwined as he grew closer to his scattered flock of dedicated parishioners.

“There were no pretenses with these people; everyone was real”

Over the years, his congregations grew in number and in ministry. Distances between parishes were no obstacle to the growing unity that parishioners experienced for the first time. Parishes came alive with events and gatherings almost every weekend in which all four congregations often took part. When Fr. James held an open house at the rectory, almost 200 parishioners and their families attended. Most had never seen the inside of the rectory. This social environment became part of the culture of the four congregations.

“Pastoral life became very ‘natural’ as my parishioners became my friends. I felt that I was living a life that was real to them, and one that made my vocation more meaningful to me. It was a blessing from God.”

St. Agnes Parish

Fr. James arrived at St. Agnes Parish on July 1, 2004 and has been with the Parish for 17 years. This has truly been a blessing for the parishioners of this parish. Normal postings are in the range of three years with an opportunity for a three-year renewal and a maximum of nine years. You can see this is an exceptionally long posting. Ultimately, the Bishop has the discretion on every posting and each year this is a complex allocation process.

After his first meeting with more than 60 St. Agnes parish leaders, the first impression Fr. James had about St. Agnes is summed up well in his own words:

“It appeared to be a very well-run, vibrant Parish with many ministries led by lay people who were dedicated and well-organized”

After one year at St. Agnes, his focus turned towards empowering the youth ministries as a building block for future succession. He almost immediately set to work in arranging for the National Evangelization Team (NET) to settle into St. Agnes Parish and develop a solid youth ministry. Today we see the wisdom of this investment, as these young people continue to serve our parish as young families now, bringing the Catholic faith into the next generation.

The management style that Fr. James employs is to set a clear, inspirational vision for the parish, then align, enable and empower leaders to achieve the vision in their own way and with their own autonomy, using their own gifts in the best way possible. He is also a strong advocate for mentoring people so they can grow into their responsibilities with confidence. He is astute enough to recognize that it is not possible for him to have the breadth of skills or the time to lead 43 ministries in his parish. Fr. James also acknowledges the parish secretary who continually carries out her administrative role with outstanding quality, thoroughness and efficiency.

Inspiration

Fr. James credits parishioners for inspiring him every day. Their endless loyalty and support are clearly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The trusting relationships Fr. James has formed with each parishioner enable the parish to run smoothly. Along with the Holy Spirit guiding their actions, parishioners exercise their unique skills and talents for the betterment of all.

***“Most of my time is spent on worship and Sacraments.
Everything else is entrusted to our lay people.”***

Balanced Life-style

A pastor’s work is never done, and demands for his time are ever increasing. Yet he enjoys a balanced lifestyle, making time for his physical, mental, and social well-being.

He acknowledges that his balanced lifestyle has been formed through the influence of his parishioners. There were a few parishioners who invited him to begin running as a means of keeping fit. When he made it known that he would like to run a full marathon, they set out a plan to prepare him for the challenge and supported him along the way. He achieved his goal in 2018 when he completed the Twin City Marathon in Minneapolis.

It was a few parishioners who also introduced Fr. James to mountain climbing. He loved the personal challenge and the inspiration for achievements he never thought possible. He has reached the top of Mount Kilimanjaro and climbed the Himalayas.

His passion for cooking began as a youth where he was self-taught, observing and assisting both his father and sister who were excellent cooks. Parishioners who partake of his repertoire are always delighted with his flavourful dishes. The love of cooking also opens the door to entertaining, which he enjoys as a social event, but also as a special opportunity to get to know and understand his parishioners.

Building relationships is one of Fr. James’ outstanding attributes:

“My interwoven lifestyle with parishioners feels like a life and vocation together. It is the people here who motivate me; the wisdom they have shared has changed where I am now from where I was 16 years ago. I love this lifestyle”

Life-long Learning

Two years ago, Fr. James returned to India for a one-year sabbatical to acquire his Masters in Pastoral Management. This increased his understanding of financial management, reinforced many best practices he was already using, and strengthened his organizational skills.

It was his participation in the Divine Renovation conference in Halifax several years ago that inspired his new vision for St. Agnes Parish. Divine Renovation is a globally recognized program for the entire parish community. Its focus is: (1) the Holy Spirit (2) Evangelization, and (3) Leadership.

Since that conference, Fr. James has engaged hundreds and led parishioners in developing a 5-to-10-year vision for the Parish. His vision is now validated by Parish Council, the Senior Leadership Team, and all parish ministries. The Parish is now rebalancing the five key pillars of a healthy church, revitalizing and strengthening the pillars that are strong at St. Agnes and placing greater emphasis and significant new effort on mission.

Milestones

Throughout his 16 plus years at St. Agnes, there have been a few milestones that required special fundraising. Each was accomplished successfully. These include a complete renovation of the rectory basement for use by the National Evangelization Team and youth groups, a new piano, a new kitchen, a new altar and chapel, and most recently, a new roof.

“These milestones were possible through many individuals working collaboratively. More than what I give to others, others give to me; I’m so inspired by many”

Looking Ahead

Although the restrictions on gathering have forced St. Agnes into the digital, virtual world, it is turning out to be beneficial for the long-term growth of St. Agnes. Technology has opened the door to reach thousands of more people through social media platforms, a form of outreach that the parish had not used before. Now, St. Agnes has both the talent and technology to share God’s Word with those outside the parish, inviting them to find fulfillment through God.

For Fr. James, the future brings with it hope that his vision will be shared by all parishioners as they each unite together and move towards their shared goal. He hopes, too, that a new communication plan reaches out to those seeking spirituality in their lives and those who need help in coping with life itself. This will bring the St. Agnes vision as well as its promise to life - *to make every day brighter for one another.*

“I am so blessed with the people I have met who have changed who I am. Every time someone in our parish passes away, I think of the wisdom that person brought to me. I am eternally grateful to all those who walked my path with me”

*The Story of Father James Panikulam
Courtesy of the Senior Leadership Team
December 2020*

The Journey from Maintenance to Mission

Our Vision

The Vision for St. Agnes Parish is a clear picture of what our destination will look like in 5 to 10 years. Our vision focuses on a future that creates positive changes while keeping everything we have now that contributes to a healthy, balanced parish.

In 5 to 10 years, we will be...

Stronger through Worship

We build distinct character into each of our four weekend worship services to meet varying spiritual needs among parishioners and visitors.

Larger through Evangelization

Parishioners have a deeper understanding of what evangelization is, and accept their responsibility to evangelize according to their individual gifts.

Warmer through Fellowship

- We are an inclusive community, fostering many avenues of outreach.
- We invite members of all ages, and families, to be involved in parish activities.
- We encourage innovation in all that we do.

Broader through Ministry

- Ministries are aligned with our vision. They focus first on quality, then quantity.
- Cross-ministry collaboration occurs on a regular basis.
- Mentorship and leadership succession form part of each ministry's annual plan.

Deeper through Discipleship

Parishioners engage in planned, systematic learning and teaching, framed in the Catholic faith. They do this because they accept accountability for making a difference in the lives of others.

St. Agnes Supports its Parishioners

- We provide opportunities for individuals to experience their faith to the optimum.
- We offer parish resources and support for all pillars.
- We recognize and honour those who rejuvenate parish fellowship, and who become models in our ministries.

Make every day brighter for one another

