**DRAFT**

**SEAN JAMES EXPERIENCING UNEXPECTED JOYS at GESU**

By M.B. Dillon

If you happen to be outside Gesu School and notice a dark-haired young man tossing a football to a 4th-grader at dismissal -- or see the same fellow visiting with Gesu dads who help during morning drop-off -- you can say hello to Sean James.

Gesu’s new middle-school religion and social studies teacher hails from the Washington D.C. suburb of Olney, MD., and came to Detroit with the University of Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education, or ACE. ACE is a two-year master’s degree program in education that serves under-resourced Catholic schools.

ACE teachers may express their academic interests but have no say in where they’re assigned. From the get-go, James received a warm Gesu welcome. “The first day I was on the Notre Dame campus, Fr. Joe Carey (a Holy Cross priest) walked in and introduced himself,” said James. “Fr. Carey has been with the ACE program for a long time and is a Gesu grad, along with all his siblings. He grew up in the neighborhood and loves it,” said James. “He was thrilled to hear I was going to be teaching here. He handed me the latest Gesu newsletter with a photo of the school on the cover and told me that as soon as the pandemic is over, he wants to get back over here.”

James graduated from Xavier University in Cincinnati in 2018, earning a bachelor’s degree in history with minors in Spanish and peace and justice studies. “My first exposure to the Jesuits was in college,” said James, who attended Our Lady of Good Counsel High School in Maryland. “The Jesuits exposed me to a new way of understanding my relationship with God. Now I get to do that as a teacher with students here at Gesu, so that’s an exciting part.”

James recalled the day he first saw Gesu. “My initial thoughts were, ‘it’s an enormous building with clearly a lot of history.’ You see the sign out front and it says 1920-something. So you know a lot of people have gone through this building. This school has such a rich community; that was apparent from day one. And I was real appreciative, knowing that I was going to be at a Jesuit elementary school. You don't hear of too many Jesuit grade schools,” said James, who has two siblings; an older sister and a younger sister who still live in Maryland, as do his parents.

“It’s nice to come up here for Mass and see Fr. Phil and Fr. Peter,” James said. “I actually got up for my first Mass last week and it was First Communion for all the kids who missed it back in May. It was a beautiful little Mass and I got to see all that, which was fun. I think Gesu represents a lot of what the Catholic Church is moving towards today in terms of education and mission, of being a really universal church.”

After college graduation, James did a year of service with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest. “It was a fantastic experience,” he said. “I was placed in Portland, OR where I worked at a homeless day-space where we provided basic services such as showers and hot meals to anyone who came to our doors that day. It was a tiring experience, but at the same time, it taught me more than anything else. Being there every day you really learned how to connect with people,” James said. ”Being exposed to people who have so many similar traits to you, but you would never know that until you have a conversation with them -- it sort of really just changed your perspective on how you view people.

“I lived in community with five other Jesuit volunteers from all over the U.S.,” James said, “and even one from El Salvador.” James enjoyed meeting the Salvadoran, having done a service project in El Salvador while in high school. “After my year, I went back to Cincinnati where I worked as a campus minister in an all-boys high school. I knew I wanted to be in education, and not having studied education, I wanted to be exposed to being in a school every day before I was able to be in a classroom,” he said.

“It was a great opportunity. I was focusing on the service and justice side of campus ministry. I had a counterpart who did the faith and ministry work,” said James. “With that, I got to expose high school students to a lot of what is going on in the world right there in the greater- Cincinnati area.”

**ACE**

”I had thought about applying to ACE’s American-Indian Catholic Schools Network, and talked to someone during my first year of service,” James said. “I guess one way or another, I got onto their email list, and I got reached out to last October. It struck me that, ‘now is the time; I’m enjoying being in a school and working with students every day.’ I submitted an application and by December I found out I’d gotten in early, and I knew I was going to be heading off to grad school.”

Due to the coronavirus, James’ time on ND’s campus was curtailed last summer. “But we got to practice teach a little bit in some of the local schools in the South Bend area,” he said. “It set the tone that ‘hey, this is going to be an uncomfortable year, but we have a group of people who are all going through the same thing right now as first-year teachers and that makes a huge difference.’ I learned more in two weeks of teaching in South Bend this summer than I think I could have anywhere else,” James said. ”To be able to do it in person, in a pandemic, to experience what it was like to talk to students about keeping the masks on all day, keeping our distance and staying safe -- that set the tone for being able to come into a school and do it full time now.”

James lives with three fellow ACE teachers assigned to other schools in the St. Josephat rectory in Detroit. “That part has been fantastic,” he said. “It’s been a blessing to have St. Josephat let us live there. Being from D.C., we have a lot of old churches, but getting to see some of the restoration projects that have gone into some of the churches in Detroit; it’s beautiful,” added James.

On the bulletin board in James’ classroom are the words “Cura Personalis.”   
“It’s a Latin phrase I was exposed to at Xavier with the Jesuits,” he said. “It means ‘care for the whole person.’ I don’t have many students who are Catholic. So this presents an opportunity to really teach about ‘what does the Catholic Church say?’ How do we make it applicable to young people who might not necessarily have any background in the Catholic faith? That has been one of my favorite parts of teaching here so far.

“What does the Catholic Church teach us about how to serve each other out in the world right now? The universality of it can apply to anything we’re talking about. Students have jumped on some great ideas. We’ve talked about social media usage. We’ve talked about how to stay safe in a pandemic. Anita Sevier, Walter and others are working on a garden project. It looks beautiful. How do we turn that into an opportunity to teach our students about caring for the earth?

“To know that I am in a Jesuit school and I get to take some of those principles that informed my faith and now share those with students, that has been an unexpected surprise and a joy,” James said. Like his colleagues, James has had the challenge of dealing with a dual platform; using technology to simultaneously teach students in class and students at home. With COVID, James, Mr. Totten and Mrs. Thebault have devised new practices to maximize health and safety in the classroom.

**OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM**

“I try to take advantage of the 10-15 minutes at the end of each day when all the students are outside and are getting picked up. I enjoy bringing out the football or just having a conversation,” said James. “It gives me a chance to get to know a lot more students in the community, which is one of the reasons I am here. It’s fun to see how the students are doing. I met a dad a couple weeks ago,” he added. “He had gone to Gesu. Now his kids are here. You don’t necessarily see that at other schools. To be a part of that is both an honor and an opportunity.

“I want to add how wonderful it has been to be supported by the other teachers here; to be a first-year faculty staff member and having people say, ‘Hey, you are doing a good job.’ When you take on an extra role, they say, ‘Hey, we notice you’re doing that; thank you for that. Here’s how we’re going to support you.’ To have Mr. Friday and Mr. Timmis leading our school and directing us in a new way has been fantastic,” James said. ” Having those two to go to to ask questions, for guidance and support, and for needed critiques at times is exactly where I should be as a first-year teacher in the ACE program. I am a product of Catholic education. And now, to be back in that setting is really good, really enjoyable.”