

Pastor of St. John the Evangelist:

Parish has history of outreach to the poor

By LOU BALDWIN
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PHILADELPHIA — When Capuchin Franciscan Father Frank Yacobi arrived at St. John the Evangelist Parish on south 13th street five years ago, he found himself pastor of one of Philadelphia's most dynamic faith communities.

As he quotes one of his confreres, Brother James, "You can find many things here. Boredom is not one of them."

"It's part of the glue that holds Center City together," Father Yacobi said. "The church itself was built when what is now Center City was mostly open fields, and [it] may be the oldest building in continuous use in the area," he said.

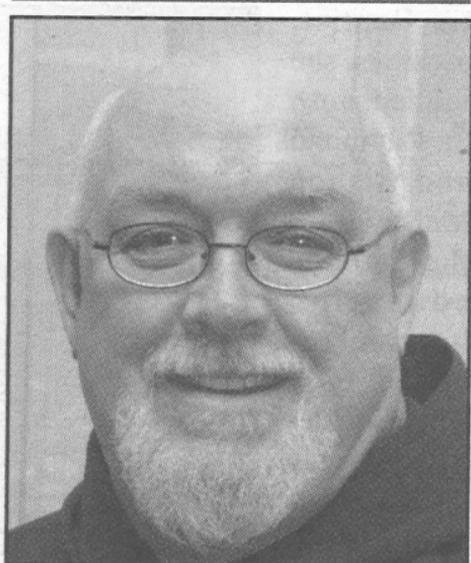
"We have our residential parish community, and we have a big hospital ministry and we have Holy Redeemer (Chinese) Church. It's like three parishes in one," he said.

Father Yacobi, 60, was born in South Bend, Ind., the eldest of the eight children of Francis X. and Anne Yacobi. He attended parish schools in Indiana and Illinois and Marian Catholic High School in Chicago, then went on to Northern Illinois University, where he first majored in art then switched to marketing. After college and military service he began a career in the restaurant industry.

"I was a touch-and-go Catholic and I had a profound adult conversion," Father Yacobi recalls. By the time he began to seriously consider the priesthood he was working in the Wheeling, W. Va., area. He came upon the Capuchin Franciscans through a weekend retreat. Their Franciscan empathy for the poor and marginalized appealed to him because in restaurants he came to know many people working every day for little money.

But there was something more. The Capuchins place a great deal of emphasis on community, which also appealed to him. "We intentionally live community life day by day; it is an ongoing call to holiness," Father Yacobi said.

He entered the order in 1982 at age 33, and after studies in Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Washington, he was ordained in 1990. The next three years were spent in Papua, New Guinea, where in succession he was in parochial ministry in a remote area and served



(Sarah Webb)

Franciscan Father
Frank Yacobi

as a spiritual director and parish administrator. This was followed by assignments in York, Pa., and Washington, D.C., where he was ultimately formation director and house superior.

He came to St. John's just as the parish was about to celebrate its 175th anniversary.

Sacramental ministry is a big part of the parish, and with the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament six days a week in the chapel, "it's an important stop for many people," he said. "We are a quiet place of prayer."

Social outreach was always part of St. John's tradition. St. John's Hospice, which feeds hundreds daily, began as a parish ministry. To this day, Father Yacobi noted, poor people come to the door with various needs, and they are assisted through the donation boxes in the church and chapel. Regular donations are given from these funds to other local charities as well.

The latest example of outreach is the planned St. John the Evangelist House located on parish property. The process began shortly after Father Yacobi's arrival, when he noticed parish buildings no longer in use. He wondered if they could somehow be put to use to serve the poor. The end result, after extensive negotiations and planning, is a transitional housing program for former homeless people; it will be conducted by Project H.O.M.E. and Bethesda Project, two of the city's leading outreach programs to the homeless.

"Our parish was such a match for this project," Father Yacobi said. "It's one of those things you say, 'Why didn't we think of this before?'"