Sacred Heart & Our Lady’s Collaborative
Newton, MA

Remembering Our Pastor
Rev. John Edward Sassani

Born October 29, 1954
Ordained a Priest June 14, 1980
Pastor of Our Lady Help of Christians Parish 2006-2019
Pastor of Sacred Heart Parish 2013-2019
Died in Christ April 21, 2019

For it is testified: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”
Hebrews 7:17
Suscipe
St. Ignatius of Loyola

Take, Lord, and receive
all my liberty,
my memory,
my understanding,
and my entire will,
all I have and call my own.

You have given all to me;
to you, Lord, I return it.

Everything is yours;
do with it what you will.

Give me only your love
and your grace;
that is enough for me.

This collection of memories has been assembled by the Sacred Heart and Our Lady Help of Christians Parish Staff, who are indebted to all who shared treasured photos and stories of Fr. John Sassani.

It is presented with love to the family of Fr. John:
We are immeasurably grateful to you for sharing with us your beloved son, brother, nephew, uncle, and friend.

Thank you.
—June 2019—
plus countless Sunday, daily, and Holy Day Masses; funerals, wakes, and burials; Communion calls, anointings, and sick visits; First Communion and Confirmation Masses; RCIA events; Confessions; spiritual direction appointments; coffee hours; staff, Finance Council, Trinity School Board, and Pastoral Council meetings; Spiritual Exercises; days of prayer and retreats; Cursillo events; and so much more!

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Matthew 11:28-30 NRSV
I joined Our Lady's in 2012 when my husband, son, and I moved from England to Newton. I immediately found a welcoming community here and a huge part of that for me was Father John - his calm, thoughtful, welcoming, and engaged presence immediately made me feel at home, and his amazing homilies have so often given me really-needed intellectual food for spiritual thought.

This picture is from my daughter's baptism in 2014 and perfectly captures Father John for me - the way he is a part of our family's joy in the experience! And best of all, off just to the side, my son is accidentally dropping his Cheerios into the baptismal font! We were horrified/amused, and Father John just took it totally in his stride and continued the wonderful celebration - we always refer to them as the "Holy Cheerios"!

I feel deeply fortunate to have been a part of this parish while Father John was here - we have all been blessed by his presence, love, and leadership.

Left: “Father John was a wonderful spiritual leader.”
Baptism, December 2006

Right: Baptism,
January 2008

Best, Catherine Sabatos-Peyton

Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation
Easter Vigil—April 4, 2015
Courtesy of Eileen Duff
Sacred Heart and Our Lady’s Collaborative Remembers Our Pastor, Rev. John E. Sassani

First Communion, May 2011
Courtesy of the Mooradian Family

First Communion, May 2012
Courtesy of the Mont Family

First Communion, May 2013
Courtesy of the Touchette and Semerjian Family

Left: First Communion and Confirmation Day, May 2011
Courtesy of the Cedrone Family

Right: Baptism, November 2015
Courtesy of the Schreier Family

Confirmation Masses
Above left: May 2012, courtesy of the Pasquarosa Family
Above right: May 2012, courtesy of the Ross Family
Far right top: May 2013, courtesy of the Bonyhay Family
Far right bottom: May 2017, courtesy of the Rufo Family
To Fr. John’s family –

Let me begin by saying that John was one of the most kind and deeply spiritual people I have ever known. His gentle and loving manner was a gift to me personally and to my family. I had the good fortune of working with John on the Baptismal ministry, which gave me an opportunity to get to know him as a person, as well as a priest. We also managed to coax him to our home for dinner a few times, and his warmth, sense of humor, and genuine interest in people was self-evident. It’s what made him a wonderful parish priest and friend.

His calm, steady faith was a light in the darkness. He helped a dear friend (and godfather to my oldest daughter) through the most challenging illness of his life; that friend is healthy today and grateful for John’s support during that time. John was also there when my mother-in-law was in the ICU a few years ago and we thought we might lose her. He happened to be on call at the hospital the day my father-in-law asked for a priest, and in walked Fr. John. My father-in-law knew John because he’d been attending Mass with us when he came to visit. I can tell you there was tremendous comfort for my father-in-law seeing a familiar face walk into the room. My mother-in-law survived that particular illness (which was remarkable) but, unfortunately, she has since passed away. John was there to comfort me and my family during that loss too.

It is not an overstatement to say that John saved Our Lady’s Parish. My family and I have been members of Our Lady’s for decades and, when John arrived in 2006, we were a parish in crisis. The Archdiocese had treated our previous pastor unfairly and then replaced him with another priest who was ill-suited for the task. Our Lady’s was a hurt, angry, disillusioned parish that was not in a forgiving mood. My husband and I seriously considered leaving the Church because we had had enough. Fr. John knew he was going to have to earn the trust of guarded and reluctant parishioners one step at a time, and that’s precisely what he did. John’s tremendous kindness and deep faith were the salve for a community that desperately needed healing. Most people could not have accomplished that, and it demonstrates what an extraordinary person John was.

I feel grateful and blessed to have known him. His calm, steady faith was a light in the darkness – now I must try to carry those lessons, and his light, on my own to honor his memory. With prayers and sympathy, Karin Beecher

My first encounter with Fr. John, for a private conversation on Thursday, February 24, 2011, changed the course of my life. For the prior 10 years, I had drifted away from the Church, and a friend of mine suggested that I talk to Fr. John. I was skeptical that anything would come out of it, and honestly, a bit put-off by the idea, so in an email I asked Fr. John what was "his approach" with people that had been away for a while.

He told me: "my thought about people is this - they tell me a little bit of their story - I respond - if I have given them the confidence to go further by my response, they tell me more - little by little we get to all of the stuff that needs to be expressed - and God’s forgiveness does the rest." I thought this answer gave me enough wiggle room to end the conversation short if I wanted, so I went to talk to him. February 24, 2011, at 8:00am.

That first private conversation changed my life. I entered that room skeptical, sad, and aching. Fr. John saw inside me and, with immense gentleness, in that one conversation, made me feel the embrace of God that welcomed me back. I entered his office in darkness; I left with a physical feeling of light...the brightest light, happiness, and peace. Fr. John was a channel of God’s immense outpouring of grace in that one specific moment in time.

That moment, that day, is engraved in my memory. I have gone back to that specific time often over the years, as a tangible confirmation of the love of God for me. Many conversations followed after that...as he told me in that first email, until "we got to all the stuff that needed to be expressed". Fr. John believed what he preached and was a channel for me to feel God’s love and welcoming embrace...over and over and over again. -Anonymous by request

Here is a picture with my Mom, Fr. John and me on Mother’s Day 2017. It was the first Mother’s Day my mom had without my dad since his passing only three months earlier. My mom was giving a bouquet to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and Fr. John came over to speak with us and wish us both a Happy Mother’s Day. He was so kind and caring to my mom as she really took my father’s death so hard. Fr. John prayed with my mom, and then we took a selfie which was actually quite fun!

Fr. John reminded me so much of my dad. He even looked similar to my dad. Fr. John was kind and soft-spoken, but, when he spoke, his words always meant something meaningful. Fr. John always took the time to listen, and that is one of his qualities I most admired in him. He gave so much of himself for others.

My husband Tim and my three children Julia, Timothy and William adored him. He touched each and every one of us, and we always left church after his homilies with some thing special to carry us through our week. He was a true gem, and my family was so blessed to have him for our Pastor for thirteen years.

I don’t think we’ll ever forget him, and now he is with my dad in Heaven. We are so thankful to Fr. John’s family for sharing their son, brother, uncle and nephew with all of us!

May he rest in peace with our Heavenly Father!

-Marie Callahan
I only met Fr. John once, but he impacted my life in more ways than he ever knew, and I am forever grateful.

Back in Fall 2006, the Young Adults Group at Our Lady’s advertised their fall retreat to a wider audience (on a Facebook group for Catholic Young Adults of New England). My housemate and I were living in Connecticut and decided to come because we both wanted to go on a retreat, and quite frankly, it was the only one that we found within our poor graduate student budgets (it was only $25 for the weekend!). We went on the retreat and had a wonderful time and made some great friends, even though we ended up being the only two people there who were not from Our Lady’s! I still remember being so grateful that Fr. John took the time to come down and celebrate Mass for all of us (the retreat was held down near the Cape).

Life went on as usual for the next five years or so, and, although I made it out to Newton once for a Theology on Tap with my friends from the retreat, work started to get busy, and my housemate who went on the retreat with me entered the Sisters of Life (she celebrated her perpetual vows last summer!). Trying to discern my vocation, I ended up joining Catholic Match. Lo and behold, one of my friends from Our Lady’s and from the retreat showed up as one of my matches! I ended up reconnecting with him, and we were engaged eight months later, and, six months after that, we were married. We’ve always said we didn’t need to date for long because we had known each other for over five years when we started dating, all thanks to Divine Providence and that retreat.

It’s been 12 years since the retreat, and over five years since we married. We have two beautiful children (so far!) and, while we’ve moved from Connecticut to the Boston area, we bought a house a bit further out of the city than Newton is. We kept meaning to come back to Our Lady’s and tell Fr. John how much we appreciated that retreat and everything he did for it, but life always seemed to get in the way and we kept going to more local Masses. I happened to check Our Lady’s website today and saw the news, and I wanted to make it known how incredibly grateful we are to Fr. John for that retreat, and that he will always be in the prayers of our family.

May God Bless Fr. John.

We thank God for the gift of his Priesthood,
Mary Beth O’Connor-Doucette (and Joe Doucette)

Very special friends, who love Fr. John and who were deeply touched by his presence in their lives, distilled many feelings about him into three words:

“God on earth”

-Istvan Bonyhay and Anne Marie David
“Divine Providence.” Those are the words Fr. Sassani used to describe what brought Aung (pronounced “Ow”) and me together five years ago. We are ever thankful to have had Fr. Sassani as our spiritual guide preparing us for the Sacrament of Marriage. With his blessing, he oversaw our wedding ceremony at Our Lady’s on Saturday, May 24, 2014. Aung and I express our sincere gratitude for Father Sassani’s support. He will always have a special place in our hearts.

-Angela and Aung Knox-Pyaesone

We thank Fr. John for celebrating our wedding on August 20, 2016, and we send our prayers to him!

-Mary and Jonathan Yasuda and the Dobies family

Our 50th wedding anniversary and renewal of vows on October 15, 2010.
- Tony and Antonetta Salvucci and Family

Wedding of Sarah & Ed Desmond

June 14, 2008
I love the smile on Father John’s face. He was a special man. We miss him as we know everyone does. We were truly blessed by him celebrating our wedding on April 11, 2015.

-Mimi Hunt & Greg Girard

My husband Ben and I, along with our families, were honored, blessed, and filled with joy to have Fr. John officiate our marriage on November 9, 2013. In the photo on the right, taken while John was giving his homily that evening, I can almost hear his gentle voice through the picture! Ben was raised Jewish, and Fr. John was so gracious in welcoming Ben’s family, as well as the rabbi whom we invited to give a blessing that night. We are so grateful.

I had the privilege of working with John for almost nine years, in what is still, technically, my first ministerial job. What a gift! What a gift to watch and learn from this holy man and priest, what a gift to minister alongside him for these nine years, what a gift to witness his joy and faith in Christ no matter what.

I remember so many things that I learned from John and shared with him, and I will treasure them all and continue to thank God. I share just a few here.

A few years ago, John got an iPad and asked for my help in setting it up. We got to the security question part of setup, and one of the options was “What’s your dream job?” My fingers hovered over the touchscreen as I asked John that question, expecting something like “tour guide in Rome” or “professional pasta-eater”. John answered with no hesitation: “Priest”. Simple as that: being a priest was John’s dream job, and it filled him with such joy.

John’s ministry as priest brought us all joy as well. I remember a time in late 2012 or early 2013, when the collaborative plan had just been announced. The staff at Our Lady’s knew we would soon be pairing with Sacred Heart (good news!), but we had heard that it was very likely that someone else—not John—would be named pastor of the new Collaborative (distressing news!). As Divine Providence would have it, one joyful day, John got a phone call (from the Cardinal or from Clergy Personnel, I’m not sure). As he strolled into Rosemary’s office to share the news that he had been appointed pastor of the Collaborative, I leapt out of my chair and burst through the door of our adjoining offices. Once he told us, I did a happy dance there in the doorway—something I remember so clearly—celebrating the joy and gift of serving with and being with Fr. John Sassani.

-Kristina Preman
During the summer of 2010, I was searching for a new spiritual home. A friend of mine and a parishioner of Our Lady’s said to me, “Why don’t you try Our Lady Help of Christians in Newton?” Living in Waltham, I was a little reluctant to travel to Newton for weekly Mass. But Barbara, my friend, kept saying to me, “You will love it, and the pastor Fr. John Sassani is great.” So I decided to try it. She was absolutely right on both accounts, the parish and Fr. John.

Being at Our Lady’s with the parishioners and especially with Fr. John has been a gift from God to me. Over these past almost-nine years as a parishioner with Fr. John as my shepherd, I found what I was searching for. Through Fr. John’s celebration of the Mass, his homilies, his sharing of his own faith, he taught me how to live out my Christian faith. For me, Fr. John was the perfect example of how I should love God and neighbor. Fr. John’s example of his life is what Christ asks of all of us in following His ways.

Through Fr. John’s teaching, I am able to look at my own spiritual journey. Through his belief and teaching on the Spiritual Exercises, he gave me the courage and the desire to do a 30-day retreat on the Exercises. Through this retreat, I was able to grow in my personal relationship with Jesus Christ and learn different ways of praying in drawing closer to Our Lord. As a pastor and a teacher, Fr. John lived what he taught me.

I was totally surprised by Fr. John when my brother died this past December. Fr. John was supposed to anoint my brother the morning he died, but my brother died an hour before Fr. John arrived. I called to let Fr. John know that my brother had already gone home to God. Fr. John, Rosemary Seibold, and Chris Graf came to the nursing home anyway for prayers and consolation. That was the person Fr. John was, along with how the parish ministers to their parishioners.

I will deeply miss Fr. John. I am eternally grateful to God that I knew him for these nine years. I believe that God puts people in my life at the times that I need them the most; Fr. John was that person. My gratitude and prayers go with him. May God give him peace.

-Arlene Larsen
Sacred Heart and Our Lady’s Collaborative Remembers Our Pastor, Rev. John E. Sassani

When Fr. John first came to Our Lady's, the parish had been torn apart by the abuse crisis and the handling of the former pastor. Many had left the parish and did not come back. Many too left the Catholic faith. It was difficult for those who stayed on. I had joined Our Lady's and become a Eucharistic Minister and was also involved with the Justice and Peace Committee.

Fr. John could not have been a more perfect pastor for Our Lady's. From the first moment he came, a holiness descended on the parish, and we all felt his peaceful presence there for us. He has truly been a gift from God arriving just at the right time. We all began to grow together and help each other - as John’s spirit guided us.

Fr. John told us he came from Swampscott and a little about his parents and his family. Soon after he was here his mother died. Her wake was on the Lynnway in Swampscott and, after reading the obituary in the paper, I decided to attend the wake. There was something familiar about Fr. John that I couldn't put my finger on! So I drove up the Lynnway and, with many from Our Lady’s, entered the funeral home and knelt at his mother’s casket. Fr. John came over and thanked me for coming “all that way” - and I told him I knew the road backwards and forwards because my sister was a math teacher at Swampscott High School and lived in Swampscott during the week - she went home to Plymouth on the weekends. She taught over 30 years and had retired and died a few years before.

Fr. John looked at me and said, “Would your sister be Mary White?” “Yes, that was her name,” I replied. “Well, she was my math tutor, and she also had my sister in high school and taught her math!” I was shocked! He then introduced me to his aunt, whose husband was my sister's doctor! Such a small world - and they all knew and loved my sister Mary! A gift for me right off the bat! I always felt from that moment on that Fr. John knew me - knew my very complicated family - in a way no one else did. He was a blessing for me. He didn’t have to say a word!

I decided to attend a Cursillo since I had never done one before. Fr. John lead it with Mary Ann McLaughlin, and I have been forever changed by that weekend. It brought Christ into my life in a personal way and He has remained there - through the good and the bad times! Fr. John was incredible - such a spiritual leader in all ways - a truly holy man.

The Justice and Peace Committee had been fraught with the abuse crisis and now with a new pastoral associate and a new pastor, we all met and charted a new course. Soon I became Co-Chair of the Committee and have remained in that position trying to highlight those Social Justice issues so important to the faith. We moved to become a Collaborative with Sacred Heart. Fr. John has been with us all the way - he has supported in whatever way he could - always saying yes when he felt it was important. What I most admired about him - he never tried to ruffle feathers - it sounds odd but he had a way of being helpful but not intrusive, kind and caring without inflicting his will - truly an amazing person!

I continued as a Eucharistic Minister and Maribeth Scott asked if I would be a Principal Minister - so I agreed to that role - especially after seeing Fr. John bringing in the laundry to the sacristy - no job was too small for him ever!

Fr. John listened to our request to engage with Catholic Charities and the Refugee Community - bringing a refugee family here to support. He quickly signed the agreement with Catholic Charities and never once wavered in his support of our efforts. He greeted the Komi family at the annual picnics and at Mass and enthusiastically attended the welcoming party for Baby Ann. We hoped he would be able to join us for the Baptism as he was such a part of our efforts - stopping into our meetings, asking about how everyone is doing, listening to all my many highs and lows with support and encouragement. We could not have done all we have done without knowing he was with us always. When St. Ignatius Parish asked me to speak about what made the difference, it was Fr. John! The same with St. Susanna in Dedham and St. Michael in Medfield, and now Mission Hill in Roxbury - Fr. John always had our back!

When the news of Fr. John’s illness became public, I told him we would all be with him and fight the illness. (We were both half Irish after all!) My sister Mary died of Lewy body dementia, and my sister Katherine also died of dementia, so I have been familiar with neurological diseases and the course they take. I would always talk to Fr. John as if he were the same - but also stressing what he needed to help with recognition and staying with the conversation. I was rewarded always with his knowing me and his genuine care and concern. He was present.

Our last conversation was about a homily he gave at the 6:00 pm Mass - about focusing on staying the course always. I told him he needed to put it in the bulletin, that we all needed to hear about staying the course for our faith - especially these days!

I feel so blessed that he shared so much of my life with me - that he always was a holy presence, that we could laugh about Swampscott and agree we would vote for that “other resident” for governor!

Fr. John had a great sense of humor, a great sense of humility, and a holiness about him. He was so loved and cared for at Our Lady’s and at the Collaborative. He was one-of-a-kind for sure - he was a giant!

-Ann Capoccia

With the Komi family, refugees from South Sudan via Egypt, upon their arrival to the US in August 2017.

Courtesy of Barbara Allaire
Father John had many friends, yet I would like to tell you of Father John’s service to Nick.

Nick Bibbo lived alone in Nonantum and was well supported by his family: his daughters Deb, Beverly, and his grandchildren Stephanie and Nicky.

I was asked by Rosemary Seibold, Pastoral Associate, to visit with Nick weekly for about an hour. We had a good time together, often laughing and storytelling. Stories of the way Nonantum used to be, stories of World War II in the South Pacific. Nick was a proud US Marine who flew the Marine flag on his house.

Now enter Father John who had a special vocation for visiting the homebound. He came to visit Nick regularly. They enjoyed each other and Nick received the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and Communion. Nick mentioned that he missed being able to go to Mass at Church.

Father John said that he could celebrate Mass in Nick’s house. So we set up tables and chairs in the living room and those family members who could attend did. Afterward Nick thanked Father John who then said we will do this again. And indeed Father celebrated Mass there four times.

When Nick and the family accepted Hospice care, Father John was present as often as he was called or as Nick’s condition showed that he was on his journey to see the Lord face-to-face. Father John’s loving presence was an example to all of us.

Following the death of Nick’s wife Irene, he donated a pyx (container for transporting the consecrated hosts to the homebound) in her name. That pyx still transports Communion to the homebound of Nonantum as I continue to visit those who, until very recently, were privileged to receive home visits from Father John.

One of my wonderful memories of Father John Sassani.

-Marie Clory, Parish Volunteer

Christ Encounters

One of the things I learned when I lived Cursillo was that “there are no coincidences.” So imagine my great surprise when I made this statement to Fr. John in the last year, and he replied “I don’t believe in that.” Dumbfounded, I replied, “So if you don’t believe in coincidence, in what do you believe?”

He smiled, and anyone reading this who knew John knows exactly what I mean about the smile. He looked me straight in the eye and said, “I believe in Divine Providence.” Because of John, I can now attest to that in my own life.

I always believed it existed, but I did not know or recognize Divine Providence, or Christ, active in my own life. I thought Christ had forgotten me...until John, Cursillo, and the Spiritual Exercises. It was not instant awareness, but a joyful evolution over time.

When I came to Our Lady’s at the end of 2006 for a Funeral Mass, I was very much moved by the Liturgy and the care with which it was celebrated by Fr. John, who I knew from St Jean’s. I had not encountered him in years but quickly remembered his help with a difficult parish situation. A good memory for me.

I came back to a few Sunday Liturgies over a year perhaps, one better than the last, but I never encountered John again. I realized I wanted to belong to Our Lady’s but felt it was not easily doable. At that time, I was approaching retirement and trying to cope with the spiritual and personal fall out from the “Crisis” and, knowing what I now know, I believe I was experiencing desolation.

One Saturday I came to the 4 o’clock Mass by way of the front door and found John greeting the people. Not wanting to intrude, I moved past but soon heard, “Eileen, how are you?” I went over and responded, “I’m OK,” and went on to tell him how much I appreciated the Liturgies, the homilies, the music, and a sense of being drawn to the community. He said, “You can come here if you want.” As I moved into the church on the verge of tears, I thought, here is a priest you can trust. So I walked back and told him, “Actually, John I am not fine; would you be willing to talk to me?” He asked for an email, and the rest is history. It was a 3-sentence email explaining what was on my mind and giving him the freedom to decline if it was something that would be problematic for him. He replied, “Eileen, I would not be the priest I want to be if I could not talk to you.” We met. Reconciliation happened (best ever). He offered and I accepted Spiritual Direction. I asked a friend about Spiritual Direction, and she said you speak to the director as if you were speaking to Christ himself and you listen to the director as you would listen to Christ Himself. I never met for Spiritual Direction with John when that was not in my mind and heart.

Today I remain bereft but not desolate, and I await Christ’s next consolation, which I know will come in His time. Gratitude to Christ for John fills my heart.

-Eileen Duff
When I made my Cursillo 11 years ago, Fr. John was saying Mass in the chapel. We gathered around the altar for the Eucharistic prayer. As he raised the chalice, transforming wine into the blood of Christ, I looked up. Reflected in the chalice was the group of people surrounding the altar. “Community of faith” were the words that I thought at that moment…and they have stayed with me ever since.

In his quiet and understated way, Fr. John has helped us to see what it means to be a “community of faith”. He was a healer in the early days when our community was broken. His homilies guided us, encouraging us to say “yes” to Christ’s voice in our hearts, calling us to get involved. He was our priest in the happiest and saddest times of our lives, when we look to this faith community for support. He was our teacher who modeled for us the values of St. Ignatius. He was our friend who readily used his wonderful laugh to connect with our community. Our greatest tribute to Fr. John would be for us to work together to see that our faith community continues to grow and flourish.

-Ginny Arpino

Although I did not realize it at the time, I was blessed in a huge way when John Sassani was assigned as my spiritual director in February 1999. I had started in the diaconate formation program in the Fall of 1998, and spiritual direction was part of the deal. This was new to me, but monthly meetings with Fr. John soon became much-anticipated. As many people know, John was a superb listener. Even better, though, was his ability to help me see where Christ was moving in my own faith life. John has helped me to see and experience Christ’s presence in many ways.

In 2008, John gave me another huge gift when he invited me to serve with him as a deacon at Our Lady’s Parish. The only downside to this was that I then had to give him up as my spiritual director. But that did not limit my ability to continue to grow in faith under John’s direction. Now I experienced John’s gentle and joyful wisdom together with others through his homilies, at Cursillos, through the Nineteenth Annotation, at parish meetings, and in social gatherings. Other than my parents and my wife, no other individual has had a greater impact on my life than Fr. John Sassani. His passing came too soon, but I look forward to the day when we will meet again in Christ.

-Deacon Bill Koffel
When I think of John, I immediately hear his terrific laugh – that laugh that we all recognize so well – and how it always made me feel like I had just said the wittiest thing ever. But come to think of it, most of my time spent with John left me always feeling better about myself in one way or another – more at peace with my shortcomings and insecurities, more aware and thankful of the gifts that God has given me, and more confident in myself as a man and as a priest.

From our initial conversation – on the day that I first met and sat down with John in 2013, hoping that Sacred Heart & Our Lady’s would be my next assignment and home – John’s warmth, compassion, and genuine care evidenced themselves right off the bat. In his typical pose (leaning back in his chair, one leg folded on his other, arms folded behind his head), John inquired and wanted to hear about my life and of my journey into the priesthood, and he listened to me talk about all of its particular joys, disappointments, and challenges. Then he openly shared with me some stories of his own. It was during this first talk with John that I realized I was witnessing in front of me the kind of man that I wanted to become.

Over the four years of living with John (including making Cursillo with him) and the years beyond, there were innumerable conversations and experiences – some serious, some funny, some outrageous (one in particular: the night a bat made its way into my 3rd floor bedroom at 1:30 in the morning and I ran hysterically down the stairs to wake John up. And as I was swinging a pillow at the nefarious intruder like a little fool, John calmly observed the whole episode – amused, laughing, and at peace).

In his humility, leadership, friendship, spirituality, humor, and simplicity, John loved us – whether in the tempest or the calm. John loved us into the now and into the beyond.

As Jesus is One with the Father and the Father is One with the Son, may we – like John Sassani – help to carry one another in the manner of the Cyrene.

- Fr. Bob Blaney
Former Parochial Vicar
of Sacred Heart & Our Lady’s Collaborative

Right: Festa 2013, courtesy of Fr. Bob Blaney.
Left and center: Fr. Bob Blaney’s thank you party at his farewell from the Collaborative, May 21, 2017, courtesy of Paula Gannon.

John Sassani was, to me, and to many who knew him, a treasure.
In his simple life style and his obvious demeanor of goodness, gentleness and contentment, he prioritized prayer, serving, teaching and caring for others, celebrating the Eucharist, and preaching and living the gospel in a singlehearted way.

As a person of great wisdom, peace and joy, he put Christ first in his life, and what followed was an incredible generosity of spirit, and an amazing trust and faith in the promises of his God.

He enjoyed life, loved his family, and lived as a person of hope, trusting in God’s faithfulness, even amidst his greatest challenges.

He was an incredible gift as a colleague, mentor and friend, and I shall always be abundantly grateful for the gift of his presence in my life.

It occurs to me that the greatest tribute I can offer to or for him, would be to follow his example and try to be the good and faithful servant disciple that he was to all.

-Rosemary Seibold
My first experience of Fr. John was in July 2010, the first time Jim and I came to Our Lady’s. We had just moved here from Minnesota, were missing our community there, and were longing to find a church that felt like home. In addition to our feelings of dislocation, there were some very distressing family circumstances that had me in quite an anxious, unhappy state.

We entered the church before the 10am Mass to find a grand assembly of parishioners, talking and sharing excitedly about what was going on. There was a huge choir of about 80 people! I asked someone in the pew next to me (Carolyn Dobies, of course!) what was going on, that we were new and didn’t understand what major event this must be. She said it was the pastor Father John’s thirtieth anniversary as a priest, and of course she gave me a huge welcome.

Jim and I settled in to the scene. Father John gave such a touching homily that really moved me, that seemed to address everything I was going through at the time. Then the choir sang a song I had never heard, “These Alone Are Enough,” the sentiments of St. Ignatius’ Suscipe prayer. The tears started streaming down my face with the words:

Take my heart, O Lord, take my hopes and dreams.
Take my mind with all its plans and schemes.
Give me nothing more than your love and grace.
    These alone, O God, are enough for me.

Take my thoughts, O Lord, and my memory.
Take my tears, my joys, my liberty.
Give me nothing more than your love and grace.
    These alone, O God, are enough for me.

I surrender, Lord, all I have and hold.
I return to you your gifts untold.
Give me nothing more than your love and grace.
    These alone, O God, are enough for me.

When the darkness falls on my final days,
Take the very breath that sang your praise.
Give me nothing more than your love and grace.
    These alone, O God, are enough for me.

When I asked someone about the song later, she said it was Father John’s favorite. I felt then that I had come home. We would be okay in our new location, in spite of the distressing circumstances we were going through. Father John understood, and that was what we needed.

Every time I hear “Take my heart, O Lord, take my hopes and dreams,” it brings me to tears. That’s been especially so in the two years that we knew about Father John’s illness, recognizing how closely these words followed his own experience of surrendering his memory, dreams, thoughts, liberty into God’s love and grace. Father John has been a living, breathing icon of giving oneself over to God, as we all must do, especially “when the darkness falls on our final days.”

Thank you, Father John, for showing us the way.
- Barbara Allaire

In an impromptu conversation with Fr John in Our Lady’s parking lot in the summer of 2010, just prior to our first trip to Honduras, Fr. John told Jen Suehs-Vassel (former pastoral associate) and me that one of the great highlights of his trip to Honduras in 2006 or 2007 was meeting the coffee growers. He had experienced personally their tremendous gratitude for the great impact that our coffee project was having on the wellbeing of their families and particularly on the education of their children. Fr. John also shared how terrified he was when Fr. Ray drove him around on roller-coaster-style, bumpy and dirty roads! :)

After 15 years of having involvement with the Honduras project, I often go back to this conversation for inspiration and renewal of my commitment, remembering how Fr. John, our pastor, had emphasized how important it was for Our Lady’s to continue supporting San Marcos.

-Dulce Soler Ferran

We still can’t believe that Fr. John is gone. But we were very fortunate to have him in our lives... and in spirit I believe he is still with us... Some days lately that I have encountered difficult moments... my mind flies and I question myself before making any quick decision: what would be Father John’s advice about this?... I give it some thought and then I smile with, I think, the right answer on what to do...

After my returns from vacation, I always had something to share with him either at the end of the Mass or during the time of spiritual guidance... Now that he is not around anymore, I feel I should have looked for more times to get together with him, but he had so many people to take care of that I wanted to give space to others...

There is so much to share... but he left us with the best teaching lesson: up to the end, he followed Jesus and accepted with happiness and zero complaints what he had to go through. It was really amazing and again a beautiful connection of the love he had for Jesus. As I always told him, he taught me who Jesus is and how to love him.

We were given the most beautiful gift by having the opportunity to visit him and share a great time with him just a few weeks before he passed... what a great memory to keep in our hearts forever... As he always used to say at the end of any message: “PEACE” be with all... in our hearts and memories forever!

-Cecilia Matos and Felipe Lopez
We miss "The Good Father", Fr. John; he is in our thoughts and prayers. One good thought - back when Fr. John lived at St. Jean’s, he shoveled us out one morning. So we always joked about getting him a shovel so he could do it again. How could we ever forget Saint Sassani!

Love you and God bless you,
Sis and Fergie Ferguson

We are thankful to Fr. John for all his religious support and guidance. He helped us to discover our faith. His help and commitment has really had a huge impact on the church community. We are thankful for everything he did for us, our families and friends, and the whole community. He helped us to grow in our belief.

-Theresa and Ella, Grade 8

I am Ed Desmond’s (Our Lady’s Administrative Assistant) oldest nephew and wanted to share a memory about the kindness of Father John, who has been a good friend to our family. He came to Brockton when my father passed away as a kind gesture to a member of the parish staff’s family.

-Chris Desmond

I remember so well, when I was serving at funerals, and Fr. John was the celebrant—that he would speak to the family in the homily about 1 Thessalonians 4:14, “We do not grieve like those who have no hope.” I felt this was a great comfort to the family and to me. May God bless Fr. John.

-Barbara Norton

Grateful to Fr. John for his service and counsel.

Fr. John was tremendously helpful to me as I was going through my marital separation and ultimate divorce. During the 2012 to 2015 time frame, my wife and I were separated, and I was trying to figure out, from a Catholic/Christian/spiritual perspective, what all this meant and how to proceed. During that stretch, I met with Fr. John 1-2 times per month for spiritual direction and confession. I never felt judged by him and always felt like he cared. He even asked me to be part of the Men’s Cursillo team in 2014. Fr. John was a true friend and helped me make sense of my faith and my life as well as helping me understand what is a true marriage. I was able to proceed with getting a divorce in 2015 and proceed with my life in part as a result of our time together. I will forever be grateful to Fr. John for his help. That’s my Fr. John story and I am sticking with that :)

-David Poles

I am thankful for Fr. John for all his hard work and commitment to the church. He truly made this church a welcoming and happy place for everyone. Church was always an enjoyable experience when he preached. I am so grateful to have known him.

-Sophia, Grade 8

Fr. John was such a kind and gentle person and a welcoming priest! He is in our prayers, always.

-Kevin and Sazi Marden

I feel fortunate that Fr. John was my pastor for the few years that my family has been part of Our Lady’s Parish.

-Bernard Bunner

Above: Bereavement Ministry potluck dinner and celebration of Annie Gaudet’s birthday, 2010 or 2011. Courtesy of Katherine Curran.
As I try to reflect on Fr John’s impact on my life, I can’t summarize it with specific stories or anecdotes. It is a bounty of gifts over many years. He has been God’s instrument to help me know and love Christ and to discover the beauty and treasure of the Catholic Faith. The journey of faith is a life-long—and slow—but fascinating one. Ever deeper experiences and discoveries never cease. Special gifts for me from Fr John have been his prayerful and spiritual presence in life and during the many celebrations of the Eucharist; his beautiful homilies; gentle, humble, authentic, from the heart, filled with the Holy Spirit; Cursillo, the Spiritual Exercises, imaginative prayer, retreats, spiritual guidance; and, above all, his love of Christ, his peace, and deep faith. I also loved to hear his laughter frequently, after the 7am daily Mass. Who has ready laughter at that time in the morning? In one of his last daily homilies in February I heard, “having the image of Christ imprinted in our heart”. I think this summarizes what he was about as a Christ-like priest who wanted to bring others in close union with Christ and to experience the bounty of the love and grace of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, so that in turn, we could give this love and grace to others.

**The gift of imaginative prayer. A lesson on sorrow and love**

Guided imaginative prayer was one of the gifts of Fr John that has had a deep and long-lasting effect on me. Placing myself at the scene of the Gospel has helped me to know and love Christ while he lived on earth and to experience the loving presence and action of the Risen and Living Christ in the midst of my life. Memories of imaginative prayer following Fr John’s gentle guided meditations are still evoked in my mind whenever I hear or read those Gospel stories.

I was recently invited by a friend to a workshop on Ignatian spirituality over four Thursday nights during Lent at a Wellesley parish. A Jesuit priest from Zimbabwe showed us how to pray in the Ignatian style and led us into a guided meditation on John 13:1-15. From faith-sharing afterwards, it seemed that this way of praying was new to many people attending the workshop. It was déjà vu for me, and I was filled with gratitude to my teacher of prayer, Fr John. I could jump into the prayer right away, let the Holy Spirit pray in me, and accept whatever graces God had in store for me.

Prior to the imaginative guided meditation, I asked for the grace to have a deep understanding of Christ’s sorrow as well as Christ’s love at the Last Supper.

As Fr. Isaac was leading us into prayer, I ran into a problem: I wanted to place myself at the scene as a woman, and as I had no desire for a sex change, I decided I could not be one of the 12 apostles—who were, in any case, too busy arguing among themselves who would be first, totally oblivious to what would be happening in the next three days. I decided to observe the scene as a servant, baking bread in the oven, savoring the smell of it, creating a cozy candle-light environment. To my surprise, and the apostles’ astonishment, Jesus decided to teach his distracted disciples a lesson of service and love by washing the feet of the servant first. He became a servant to the servant. He was loving, big smile, looking into my eyes. This was my personal—and surprising—beautiful encounter. Then he proceeded to wash, one by one, the apostles’ feet. As I was attentively observing the scene and listening to the exchange between Peter and Jesus, my heart and mind became full of admiration for Jesus. How in his last moments of his earthly life, he was not concerned about his own impending suffering, anguish, and death but was totally focused on teaching them a final lesson of selfless service and self-giving love.

As I was deep in my imagination contemplating in awe this scene and my own deep understanding of Jesus’ ignoring of his own sorrow and of his deep love for the apostles, my mind said, “Oh wow, that is exactly what Fr. John has been doing these last two years,” and simultaneously with this thought, an abstract image of Fr. John flew in from the left side and superimposed itself in front of the image of Christ. I can still see these superimposed images in my mind as I write this. Not side-by-side as in the Unison picture, but Fr. John in front and Christ behind. The best way I can describe this is that that image flew in by itself, as in PowerPoint slides when you fly-in the next slide from a particular place. I was now full of admiration for Fr John, by the way he handled his disease, as if nothing was going on, how he was still so keen on teaching us with his homilies, with his peace, his laughter, his joy, his compassion and love to those in any need. Like Jesus, he was not concerned about his own cross, but focused on loving all. Like Jesus, he taught us with his words and deeds. Like Jesus, he loved his disciples and loved them to the end.

As the prayer wound down, I realized that I had received a double grace; not only had I received the grace of a deeper understanding of Jesus’ generosity of spirit, ignoring and transforming his sorrow into love, but I was also given the grace to understand the same for Fr John. I realized that Christ’s final lesson of love at the Last Supper had not gone to waste, because Fr. John, one of His modern-day priests, had learned that lesson from him.

This was Thursday, March 14. About a week later, I realized, “Oh wow! The Last Supper is the institution of the Priesthood,” and that superimposed image of Fr. John and Jesus had a new meaning for me. About a week later (I am a little slow of mind), it also dawned on me, “Oh wow! The Last Supper is the institution of the Eucharist,” and I remembered how Fr. John’s last homily at Our Lady’s on Tuesday, February 26, had been on the Mystery of the Eucharist and how he had mentioned “the Mystery of the Last Supper”. By the time Holy Thursday came, I saw even more clearly the parallel between Jesus’ life and Fr. John’s life. Like Fr. Dennis says, I am not a believer in coincidence here.

Prayer is sometimes deeply personal, a way of connecting, conversing, uniting ourselves with God, but, because prayer is also a gift from God, I thought I would share this gift of prayer as a testimony of what was revealed to me in prayer about how Fr. John has been in his life as a priest. Fr. John was a gift from God to so many through his parents Nicholas and Natalie. And for that gift, we give thanks to God and to his parents.

**With love and gratitude,**

Dulce Soler Ferran
Sacred Heart and Our Lady’s Collaborative Remembers Our Pastor, Rev. John E. Sassani

Nani and I (and Zoey!) are honored to have had what we consider to be a very special bond with Fr. John. We started our journey at Our Lady’s in the fall of 2014. He, along with Susan Yule and Jennifer Bader, guided Nani in her RCIA Journey in 2015. When Nani was confirmed, we also had our marriage convalidated as well by Fr. John.

In 2016, we were blessed with finding a house in Waltham, after a long search. Our first criteria when searching was that we would love to live close to Our Lady's if possible, and we currently live less than 10 minutes away by car! We were so overjoyed, it was natural that we wanted to have our new house blessed by Fr. John as well. We arranged a surprise birthday party for my mother, to coincide with the blessing. The picture with Fr. John smiling and clapping is one that we will treasure and cherish forever.

In summer 2017, we found out that we were expecting a baby. We immediately went to Fr. John during the summer that year to ask if he would do us the honor of baptizing the baby. We remember Nani specifically asking Fr. John to stay healthy, so that “Grandpa John” could baptize Zoey. We remember Fr. John's smile, with his childlike reddish face, as he said, “Yes, I certainly will.”

In 2018, after Zoey was born, I asked Rosemary whether we could have Fr. John do the baptism. At first, she was not optimistic, but as it turned out, Deacon Bill was able to help Fr. John on the date that we requested. Thinking back, Nani and I recently realized that Fr. John did keep his promise to us! And after asking Rosemary, we think that Zoey may very well be the last person to be baptized by Fr. John...We will definitely tell the story to Zoey when she's older. What an honor!

We will always remember his greeting for us, whenever we met. It was always with a big hug, and, if one of us isn't with the other, he would always ask, “And where is your other half?” with a smile. Even as his disease worsened, the last time we met him early this year, he still greeted us the same way, which we found incredibly touching.

With his going home to Our Father, Nani and I believe that we gained a saint, and Heaven gained an angel. To us, he will always be our guardian angel :) 

Love, Zoey, Nani, and Billy

Clockwise from above:
Zoey's Baptism, May 19, 2018
Birthday party and house blessing, 2016
After the Easter Vigil April 4, 2015
Marriage convalidation April 4, 2015
We are thankful to Fr. John for all he did for us. We pray that he knows God’s peace and that he knows that we miss him dearly. Love and strength, Larissa and Marcus

When my husband was very ill, Fr. Sassani came to the Lasell Rehab to see him. Each time he came, he said prayers.

In the meantime, my daughter who lives in New Jersey was very upset that her dad was dying and that she was not able to say the prayers with us. I asked Fr. Sassani if he would call her in New Jersey to console her. He did call her and comforted her.

When the day came that my husband was to receive the last rites, I called my daughter and held the phone next to Fr. Sassani so that she too could participate.

I will be forever grateful to Fr. Sassani for what he did to ease my daughter’s mind. He subsequently said the funeral Mass for my husband.

Fr. Sassani always said to me, “If there is anything I can ever do for you, please don’t hesitate to ask.” I did ask him, and he was true to his word!

My prayers and thoughts are with him, Rose Casieri

When we moved to Newton from Denver 11 years ago, we met with Fr. John to talk about our son Brendan receiving Communion. He was used to sharing a piece of bread with our priest in Denver, as he did not like the taste/texture of the wafer. Fr. John promised to work with us to find a solution for Brendan to receive the Eucharist. His desire to make it work was a blessing to our family and made us decide to join Our Lady’s Parish. Sincerely, Ann Bersani, Michael Durkin, and Brendan Durkin

Fr. John visited my uncle when he was sick and dying. He came often to the home and stayed longer than most relatives did. He spoke to me about grief in a way I had never thought of. He brought peace and healing just by being in the room. Meeting him in this way made me decide to join Our Lady’s Parish. Because of this experience, Fr. John is the reason my children come here for sacraments and Religious Education, etc. His visits to my dying uncle helped so many other lives. We continue to pray for him. Love, Maria Rosen

Father John was always a solid presence in our lives, but what I remember most is when my mother died in 2014. Although she had been a parishioner of St. Paul in Wellesley, our family did not have a personal connection to any parish priest there, so we asked Father John if he’d be willing to lead the funeral Mass at St. Paul’s. Not only was Father John happy to help, but he made time to meet with my family for hours to hear stories and learn about what made my mom so special to us. He gave a touching eulogy as part of a beautiful service and we couldn’t be more thankful. God bless Father John. -Rachael McCarthy

Last summer, I ran into Fr. John at Whole Foods with a fig tree, which he blessed for me. This past February, my mother’s pipes froze, and all the plants died in the house except for the fig tree, the one blessed by Fr. John. May God bless him and may he be in peace! Our love, Rita, Tom, and Isabella Dugan & Donata Visco

One of my favorite things about Fr. Sassani was that you could talk to him as “one of the guys”. Not Fr. John or Fr. Sassani, but John. You could talk to him about anything, good or not so good. He was always there to help you and to give good advice. Among all the great things he did for me, as well as the parishes, I will always honor him as just “one of the guys”. An outstanding person, pastor, and good friend to me and everyone who knew him. A truly great human being and a gift from God.

Thank you, John. Your friend, George Healy

When we think about Fr. John, we feel very sad that he is no longer here with us at Our Lady’s but blessed that we had the privilege of having him as our pastor for the past several years. We believe in our hearts that John was the holiest and best person we have ever known. In addition, he was so pleasant to be with, kind and generous in spirit to all.

John celebrated our 25th Anniversary with us at Our Lady’s in June 2012, and we kidded about him having to come to the nursing home to celebrate our 40th with us, since we were considerably older than most couples at their 25th!

We so enjoyed everything about Father John, and we were always so happy when he was the celebrant at the 8:00 Mass, our Mass of choice. The extra bonus was on the Sundays that he joined us for breakfast at Cabot’s with our little group.

We know that John is at peace, having joined his mother and his God. We will always remember him and keep him and his family in our prayers.

Fondly, Pat and Charlie Quinn

I have been a parishioner of Our Lady’s for five years. From the very first time I attended Mass here, I have felt so welcome. Fr. John always walked around the pews before Mass with an infectious smile and a handshake. The pastor sets the tone of the parish. It trickles down to the staff and all of the ministries. I got involved in parish life because of this. I feel so blessed to be living here. Fr. John will always be in my prayers.

-Nicole Benecasa

The first time I spoke to Fr. Sassani was shortly after we started going to Our Lady’s, quite a few years ago. My mother had fallen and needed to have surgery, and I was far away. I was very upset, and after Mass I asked him to say a prayer for her. He listened very carefully and asked her name. It was a brief interaction, but I felt reassured. My mother recovered from the surgery and lived for several more years.

-Anonymous by request
Father John was a companion in the service to the homebound. Each visit that I had the honor of being with him as he visited in Nonantum was an example of gentle loving presence. The people often mention his smile.

For myself, what a surprise when I was hospitalized to see him enter the room. I would think, “How did he even know that I was here?” and yet his presence brought joy and healing. He also brought Communion and the Anointing of the Sick which I appreciated.

He was extraordinarily responsive any time I asked if he could visit someone that I thought needed him, and I thank Fr. John for this.

-Marie Clory, Ministry of Care

I am a former member of Our Lady’s Parish. I say former only because I moved to Virginia and then to North Carolina. However, every time I come home to visit my parents, I attend Mass at Our Lady’s.

My mom told me about this project, and I wanted to tell a little bit about Fr. John. There was a point a couple of years ago where there were some issues. I didn’t know how to help out, so I went to talk with him. We sat and talked for over an hour, and he helped me really connect and strengthen my faith. I was able to get stronger and talk with the people involved in the issues. I don’t know how much it helped out others, but it greatly helped me out.

Father John has been so important to Our Lady’s Parish. He came in when there was a lot of turmoil and anger. He helped get rid of that and bring everyone closer together.

-Anonymous by request

Celebration of Msgr. Dennis Sheehan’s 50th Anniversary of Ordination to the Priesthood
December 1, 2013

Left: with Msgr. Dennis and Bishop Bob Deeley at the reception
Right: listening with fellow clergy to Bishop Deeley during the Mass

Courtesy of Eileen Duff
Dear Fr. John,

Everywhere I go, it seems that people whose lives have been touched by you pop up out of nowhere. It is so wonderful and comforting to see how much gratitude towards you they have and how much you are loved. My heart expands with pride and love for you when I hear nice stories about our wonderful pastor.

At the Theological Institute, one of my classmates, who is visually-impaired, tells me of a talk you gave last fall at the institute and how you took the time to describe to her the Unison picture of Simon of Cyrene. She in turn described the picture to me perfectly 6 months later!

At an Ignatian prayer workshop, I met a woman, who told me how much you had helped her and her husband after they suddenly lost their amazing 18-year-old daughter.

At the Tuesday faith-sharing group at Our Lady’s, one person told us how much you helped her when her mom died. With a heart filled with love, emotion and gratitude for you, Luzmila told us that it was the Eucharist that sustained her through the ordeal of tragically and unexpectedly losing her son, Franco Garcia – the BC student who died in 2012. After hours of spiritual guidance from you, her long-held and deep desire to receive the Eucharist occurred, for the first time, just one month before her son’s disappearance. Being able to frequently receive the Eucharist during the two agonizing months of searching for their son, she says, saved her from despair, changed her life, and profoundly deepened her faith. She has a deep desire to transmit the faith to her children and the rest of her big family. Luzmila wanted me to tell you this.

In 2015, a very dear parishioner told me a few days before her passing that you had visited her and given her the peace that she did not have. She also said, “Fr. John is so sweet and loves Jesus so much.”

These are just a few examples of the thousands of grieving, sick, and dying people or in need of spiritual guidance, to whom you brought Christ and comforted and consoled through your sweet, loving and compassionate nature.

Way of St. James Pilgrimage, 25 km from Santiago de Compostela, Spain. June 14, 2018

The thousands of flowers in this picture represent the thousands of souls you’ve touched with your beautiful homilies, Cursillo, the Spiritual Exercises, retreats, your gentle and humble advice, confessions, spiritual direction, baptisms, marriages, selfless service, and generous self-gift to all. You treated us all with the same love, care, and concern. Thousands of us – like flowers in the spring – sprang up as friends of Christ thanks to your Christ-like priesthood. Your gift of faith will continue flourishing and will always remind us of you. We are broken-hearted. We will always miss the gentle ways in which you brought us closer to Christ as well as your laughter, joy, smile, peace, gentleness and kindness. No words are good enough to express our deep gratitude to God and to your parents, Natalie and Nicholas, for the gift of you.

Pilgrims on the Way to St. James used to greet each other this way: ULTREIA! (ONWARDS!), and the response was: SUSEIA! (UPWARDS!)

Ultreya (Ultra-Eia) (Mas allá), a term used in Cursillo, means affirmation of one’s eternal destiny. We are pilgrims on the way. We come from God and go back to God. May you rest in the peace of Christ in the Heavenly Kingdom.

Love, Dulce Soler Ferran
When Fr. John came to Our Lady’s on Easter Tuesday in 2006, we were a community in turmoil, filled with sadness and anger, division and distress. He came among us and little by little brought us to healing. He often spoke about the Cardinal’s calling him (while John was hunting down tuna fish in the grocery store) to ask him to take this assignment. He acquiesced, not only in obedience to his bishop, but also out of his desire to do whatever Christ asked of him. And he always ended by saying what a great gift this assignment was to him.

He came as part of a team ministry—an experiment within the archdiocese—but within a short time, the other person left and Fr. John was pastor. He was offered the opportunity to bring on yet another priest, but he declined. This parish, he said, has already had too many changes in too short a time. So for the next year, he ministered to us alone and gave us time to mend.

In one of my first meetings with Fr. John, we talked about what had happened in the parish. I’m not Walter, he said. I can’t do what he did. What I can do is bring people to Christ. This is what he did for me, as he did for so many others.

Over the years, Fr. John became the guide for my own growth in intimate relationship with Jesus our Lord. First it was a gentle, almost casual, invitation to live Cursillo—a life-changing experience for me, as he knew it would be. After the weekend, he suggested that we might meet on some regular basis to continue to talk about how Christ was working in my life—and I was in spiritual direction. Then came the opportunity for the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius...recommendations for further study... support in exploring ways of sharing my faith and serving our community. In all of this, as Christ does, Fr. John met me where I was and helped me to progress in discipleship—again, as he did for so many others.

Fr. John moved us by the way he lived his life and his priestly ministry—always available and attentive, desiring only to help each of us come closer to Christ. He was the tangible presence of Jesus in our midst—in the wisdom of his preaching and teaching, in the prayerful celebration of the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, in his care and concern for each person he encountered. He lived his life and ministry with love and faith, with joy and gratitude, always walking with Christ and always pointing us to Christ. He spoke often of generosity of spirit and modeled it in his own life. We are all beneficiaries of his generosity of spirit.

In these last years, Fr. John also taught us how to live with illness and diminishment. I was particularly touched by his graciousness in letting go and accepting help as the disease took more and more from him. To the end, he lived what he preached and prayed—Take, Lord, and receive all that I have and hold...give me only Your love and grace, and it is enough for me.

-Chris Graf

This picture is my son Alex at the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This was such a poignant picture for my mother whose strong sense of faith has never wavered, and she has suffered such great loss in her lifetime. She has it framed and in her living room.

Father Sassani helped me tremendously at a time in my life that I had great anxiety. I was so afraid and didn’t think I would get through it. I went to see Father Sassani and, in his calming way, he spoke and prayed over me, and I was able to get through all that was ahead of me. I will always be grateful for that gift that he gave to me.

-Marisa Rufo

Sacrament of Reconciliation, December 2014
Sacred Heart and Our Lady’s Collaborative Remembers Our Pastor, Rev. John E. Sassani

Above: Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Group 2017-2018

The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in Every Day Life
(19th Annotation Retreat)

2017-2018

Father John Sassani

Above: Each member of the Ignatian Spirituality Group 2017-2018 sent in a word or a phrase that expressed their experience of the retreat. We gathered these words and phrases and created a cover for a binder of individual gratitude letters for Fr. John. Courtesy of Susan DeCaluwe

Above: Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Group 2017-2018

Courtesy of Susan DeCaluwe
Msgr. Dennis Sheehan’s Homily Given at Fr. John's Memorial Mass on April 24, 2019

To craft a homily at a Memorial Mass for Father John Edward Sassani, a preacher should have four hands. The first hand should hold the Word of God from Genesis to Revelation, every sacred syllable. A second hand needs to grasp the mystery of the priesthood, where God calls, in the words of John Newman, “men, not angels, ministers of the Gospel”. For John Sassani, the preacher’s third hand must hold the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, that classic text that has led so many to friendship with Jesus Christ their Lord. Finally, a fourth hand must hold the cross of Jesus Christ, itself so present in John Sassani’s faith and life.

John left his earthly life in the wee dark hours of Easter Sunday morning. I am not here a believer in coincidence. John loved the Easter feast more than most I know. Decades ago, he and I served together at St. John the Evangelist here in Nonantum. We prepared an Easter fire so brilliant, it attracted two of Newton’s ladder trucks screaming down Adams Street. When the Vigil ended (no, we didn’t use Easter water to put out the fire!), John had an idea. Leave all the church lights on, he mused. Let the light of Easter shine through the wall of colored glass until the light of Easter morning. I thought of that light right away when I heard of John’s death early Easter morning. The light of Easter shone in his darkness and in ours.

We gather this evening around his earthly remains to celebrate the Eucharist. This sacrament, where God’s people, sinners and saints, gather to be fed by Word and sacrament, was at the heart of John’s life and ministry as a priest. John was no ordinary preacher. Having him give a homily, one knew that he was speaking from his heart and life. He didn’t need theatrics and oratory. He spoke directly and powerfully from a mind and heart embedded deeply in the Word of God and the life of the Catholic faith. From John’s preaching, we learned more than the treasure of Scripture. He made life very concrete with stories of his friends and family. He was alive with God’s Word and made that Word alive for us.

John’s special gift as a priest was taking Catholics on a journey from membership to discipleship. He did this through the Cursillo retreat weekends. The experience for many of you here was life-changing and lasting. John never came back after a Cursillo event tired or down. Gathering men or women, opening up hitherto undiscovered depths of faith, leading retreatants into prayer - it was life-giving for John and life-changing for us.

Fr. John relished leading retreats, using his treasured Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius as a roadmap. He led so many of us into the riches of imaginative prayer, the unique gift of St. Ignatius’ teaching on indifference, the discovery of discernment in consolations and desolations.

I watched John at work over the years. He worked hard with the members of his parishes. But always he was on the prowl for what he called “the real deal”. It described many of you. He spotted a Catholic ready in faith to go deeper, to take the road from being a member to being a disciple. If you made a Cursillo, it took for you. If you did the weekly long “19th Annotation”, it changed you. It gifted you. But it was John Sassani’s gift as a priest to be God’s instrument leading you to Jesus Christ in friendship.

St. Ignatius teaches that prayer before the cross is the test of a real disciple’s maturity. For over two years, John Sassani lived the experience of the cross he discovered in prayer. As his memory failed and his self-awareness became compromised by disease, we all watched helplessly with heavy heart. Living with him day-by-day, I never heard him complain, never saw him get angry or frustrated. When I pause to reflect, I realized he was the model of St. Ignatius’ practice of indifference. Here, more agonizing, was the sharing of the Cross at the heart of his faith and ours. “Take Lord, receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding...give me your love and your grace. This is sufficient for me.”

Good friends of Father John Edward Sassani’s: we have been privileged all of us to know a disciple, a priest, a soul-friend. He lived with joy, generosity of spirit, and great serenity. He was filled with gifts of God’s granting and gifted all of us in turn. He loved and lived in the Easter light. May that same light fill him now in God’s presence with the life of Christ Risen. Alleluia.