

Jack Witkowski: Man of many talents is veteran educator, musician, choir director

By Pat Morrison

Jack Witkowski is a man who has worn, and still wears, many “hats.” A retired educator with principalships (spanning more than 25 years) at three area schools to his credit, he’s also an accomplished musician and is longtime choir director at Holy Cross Church.

He’s also an alumnus of Holy Cross School. And proud of it.

Today Witkowski and his wife, Lauren, make their home in Morris. But the young Jack Witkowski and his five brothers and sisters all attended Holy Cross School. Jack, the youngest of the troop, was baptized there—in the church where he still directs the choir today.

The family lived just three blocks from the church and school, at 823 Vine Street. “The church and school were as much a part of our growing up as our home was,” Jack said. His mother, Regina Plewa Witkowski, was born in Poland, and she loved living in the Holy Cross neighborhood so rich in Polish heritage and tradition.

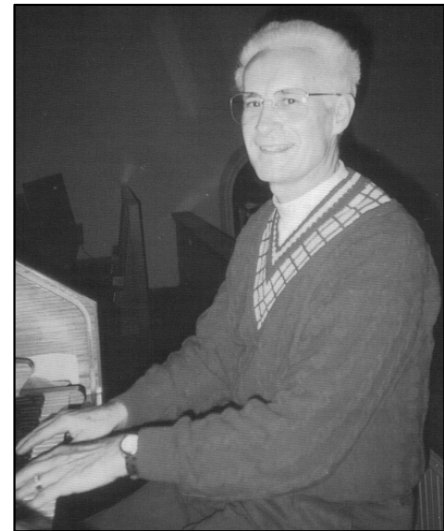
Jack has great memories of Holy Cross, from the Felician Sisters and Joliet Franciscan Sisters who taught him in the school, to the late Father Maximilian Warkocki. “Father Max was a hero to the people,” laughs Jack, “because he’s the one who personally installed cushioned kneelers in the church.”

Holy Cross was a “no frills” parish complex when Jack attended. There was no restroom in the church, nor one in the school. The restroom was in a separate building outside, between the school and the church. Understandably, for students looking for a break in classroom monotony, Jack said, “having to go on this ‘field trip’ to the bathroom was actually a treat. We got to be outside!”

He remembers being “drafted” to be in a play in eighth-grade – a play that was in Polish, which he didn’t speak much. “It was about the invention of the telephone. I still remember some of the lines....” and he proceeds to say them in Polish --- at a distance of 58 years!

He also recalls a small school, with three grades to a room. His eighth-grade graduating class in 1950 consisted of six students: three girls and three boys.

But for Witkowski, it’s more than anecdotes about school days. His Catholic education at Holy Cross planted the seed of his own future life’s work in education.



Jack Witkowski (HC '50)
Photo courtesy of Holy Cross Church

He said that even as a junior high student in a three-grade classroom of sixth, seventh and eighth graders, he admired the way his teacher, Sister Coletta, could handle all the kids and juggle different subjects with different age groups at the same time.

“I was impressed with how she was in control of the situation,” Jack says. “And I treasured that experience because I learned a lot. If you were done with your own work, you could listen in on what was being taught to the other grades. It was a great learning experience.”

In that class with Sister Coletta, Jack said, “that’s when I decided to become a teacher.”

After graduating from Holy Cross, Jack’s Catholic education continued at Joliet Catholic High School and Lewis College (today University). He then went on to military service in the U.S. Army.

When he wasn’t in a classroom learning, he was teaching. During his Army service at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., he taught religious education (“we called it CCD then,” Jack says—for the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine.) He later taught religious education for 10 years at his home parish, from 1969 to 1979, while holding a full-time “day job” as a public school principal.

Jack began his career teaching 7th and 8th grades—Social Studies, Civics, Geography and U.S. History-- at Fairmont School in Lockport, which at the time numbered 900 students. He went on to serve as principal of the ethnically diverse school for 22 years, from 1970 to 1992.

“Then I thought it was time to retire,” he says. But God had other plans. At that time, St. Raymond Cathedral School was looking for a principal, and Jack’s talent and experience were tapped for that post. He served at the cathedral school for five years, until 1997. Retirement proved elusive again when St. Mary Magdalene School in Joliet needed a principal to complete a term. Jack served in that role for half of the academic year, from January to June.

“Education is in my blood,” Jack says, “so I was happy to be asked to meet new challenges, even for a little while. Nothing energizes me like being with kids in an educational setting. And all of these were great schools to work in, with good faculty. That made a big difference.”

And after a lifetime in education, Jack finds real joy when he learns his own commitment paid off. Recently in a grocery store, “this big guy came up to me and reminded me that I had been his teacher at Fairmont, and now he’s a grandfather. He just wanted to say thank you... I was there so many years that I ended up teaching my students’ kids... and now they’re grandparents. So the learning goes on, the values get passed on. That’s fantastic!”

Another thing that’s obviously in Jack’s blood in addition to education is music and love of sharing it. He recalls that he first got “roped into” playing the organ at Holy Cross Church. “Just do it until Christmas,” he was begged, to fill in for a missing organist. That was “umpteen” years ago, he laughs, “and I’m still there.”

Jack plays for the Sunday 9 a.m. English Mass at Holy Cross and directs the choir; another person directs the choir and is organist for the 10:30 Mass, which is in Polish.

But besides Holy Cross, he takes his show on the road – literally, helping out as organist at several other area parishes. The parishes where he offers his musical services are a veritable litany: St. Mary Nativity and St. Jude in Joliet, St. Ambrose in Crest Hill, St. Ann in Channahon, St. Joseph in Manhattan – as far as Assumption in Coal City!

As if that's not a full enough plate, Jack is also involved, since 2003 in the diocesan training program, "Protecting God's Children," which is mandatory for all employees and volunteers who work with children: teachers, parish staff, parents who volunteer with children, and others.

He is a teacher in the program at St. Mary Nativity and has also offered a similar program to the Joliet Police Department.

Even though Holy Cross School is now closed, Jack says the training and values the school imparted live on in the former students and their families.

Also, the Holy Cross families have the opportunity to send their children to St. Mary Nativity School or to attend the parish's pre-school, kindergarten and religious education.

Holy Cross today serves a new growing Polish population of young professionals, and a popular new program is a Polish School that teaches religion, history, geography and culture to children in Polish on Friday nights at St. Mary Nativity.

He brought the values he learned at Holy Cross, especially love for the Catholic faith, to his own work as an educator. At one school, the weekly student Mass had been on a Friday—until Jack realized that some students—and their families-- weren't attending church on Sunday because, they'd say, "we just went on Friday."

"I moved the school Mass to Wednesday," he said, hoping to convince parents of the importance of Sunday Eucharist for their families. "I'm not sure it made that much of a difference in the Sunday attendance, but I wanted to do what I could" to instill the importance of the Catholic faith in school families, Jack said.

Catholic education has always been considered "expensive," he says – noting that when he attended Holy Cross tuition was raised from 75 cents per month to a dollar!

"But it's certainly worth it, and parents traditionally have recognized that. I don't think you can ever go wrong with a Catholic education," Jack says. "Training in the Catholic faith, discipline, the learning environment – those are unparalleled in Catholic schools, there's nothing around to match that."