



NEWS & VIEWS

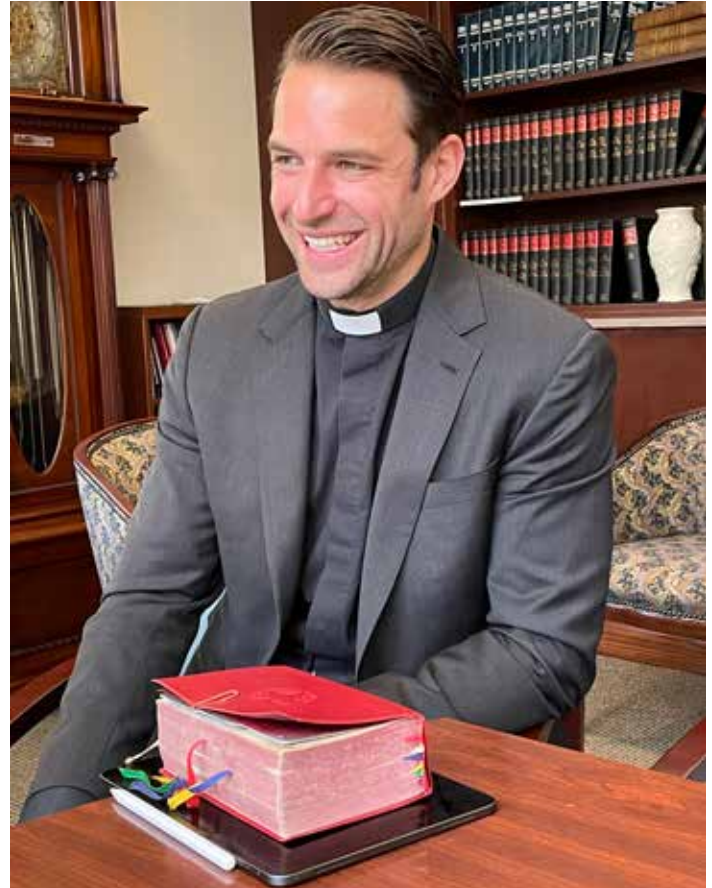
Special Edition

GESU ANTICIPATES THE ARRIVAL OF NEXT PASTOR, FR. LUKAS LANIAUSKAS

By John Betchkal

He has crisscrossed the United States from the East Coast to Hawaii. He has been to Lithuania more times than he can remember. He has seen much of Europe, spent a semester in Rome, and most recently seven months in Ireland. His passport stampings reflect travels to China, Japan, South Korea, Mexico and Israel.

Since the day Fr. Lukas Marius Romero Laniauskas, SJ, was born 37 years ago in Euclid, Ohio, he has traveled the world, sharing the gift of our Catholic faith and Ignatian spirituality. Fast forward to June 1, 2021. On that day, still marveling at the grace and God's providence which has led him to this, Fr. Laniauskas will become Pastor of Gesu Parish, just eight miles from where he grew up in Euclid. Following all the miles and years traveling the world, he is now answering the call to come home to Cleveland. Fr. Laniauskas explains receiving the mission: "I had just completed my 30 day silent retreat in Dublin, Ireland, when I received a text message from the Provincial. Fr. Paulson wrote that he wanted to speak with me, and I thought he might want to talk about my next mission. I assumed it would be at one of our high schools. We set up a Zoom conversation, and we talked for about half an hour. He asked about my



family and my studies, and I kept thinking okay, there must be more.

"Then he said: 'I would like to mission you to be pastor of the Church of the Gesu in University Heights.' His words hit me like a waterfall gushing into my heart. Wow! Pastor in Cleveland, my hometown! I left Cleveland at 18 years old and would now return 18+ years later. When we finished our conversation, I ran to the Chapel at the Jesuit Tertianship Retreat House and got down on my knees with tears in my eyes. In that moment, I prayed for the people of Gesu and for God to guide our way together. I was overwhelmed with joy.

"The day I first came to Gesu after having accepted the call to be pastor mirrored that day in Dublin. I was scheduled to meet with my Jesuit brothers and

various parish staff members on Monday, April 19th. I arrived early on Sunday afternoon. The parking lot was empty. I was moved to go straight to church, where I found myself completely alone. A peaceful feeling enveloped me. I was home. I went straight to the Sacred Heart statue, lit a candle, knelt down, and said the same prayer that I said in Dublin for the people of Gesu and our future together."

Fr. Laniauskas, the boy who grew up playing with friends on Chatworth Drive in Euclid, is now preparing to settle in at Schell House as he begins his new mission at Gesu. His family members share his joy. His dad, a dentist, and his mom, who stayed home to raise the family, are now retired and live in Mentor. His family includes two older brothers and a younger sister. Fr. Laniauskas is quick to also mention his eight nieces and nephews. "They call me Uncle Amen, because one day when I walked into my sister's house, one of my nieces started screaming 'Amen, Amen, Amen'. From that day on, I have been called Uncle Amen."

The path to priesthood for Fr. Laniauskas included a year at St. Ignatius High School. "I have fond memories of my time there. My older brothers had carved out the path before me and I can still remember that first pep rally, feeling goose bumps on my neck as I screamed, 'Here come the Wildcats!' It was also in my freshman year that I was impressed and moved by great Jesuits – Frs. Bob Welsh, Larry Ober, Bernie Stricker, and our very own Mike Vincent. After that first year at St. Ignatius, my family moved to Mentor, and with Lake Catholic High School in our backyard, it made great sense to transfer schools. My high school years served as the soil to grow my vocation. Great mentors and role models, such as the Ursuline sisters and Fr. Dave Woost, encouraged the seedling of faith to grow and my love for the Lord to blossom."

The first of his immediate family to leave Cleveland, Fr. Laniauskas attended Loyola University of Chicago, where the discernment process for a vocation to religious life took root. As he reflected on his future, "It was undeniable that something was pulling at my heart. It was obvious to me that I had to consider a religious life. I had conversations with a diocesan vocation team, the Dominicans, the Franciscans, as well as members of other orders. But it was a short conversation I had with the Jesuit Provincial from Lithuania that steered me to the path my life would take.



Fr. Laniauskas, known to his nieces and nephews as "Uncle Amen," with members of his family.

"It is important to keep in mind my family's Lithuanian heritage. We spoke Lithuanian at home. It actually is my first language, and I am grateful to my parents for that. As an important part of that heritage, we attended Lithuanian Masses and took part in cultural activities. While I was home in Cleveland on a visit from Loyola, as I mentioned earlier, the Provincial of the Jesuits in Lithuania was visiting Cleveland. He and I arranged a short visit. As we

sat in the dimly lit living room of the parish rectory, I was prepared for a sales pitch, a list of all that I could be as a Jesuit, of all that the Society could do for me or I for it. That pitch never came. He leaned forward in his chair and simply asked: 'What does God want for you?' That was my first big dose of Ignatian spirituality! It is in finding the will of God, helping people find God in their lives, deepening one's relationship with Jesus. I was hooked.

"Shortly after the visit with the Lithuanian Jesuit Provincial, I went back to Loyola where I went to the campus chapel on the shores of Lake Michigan, and I prayed before the mural of Jesus crowning Mary, the Queen of the Society of Jesus. In the quiet of the chapel, I heard Jesus ask: 'Will you stand with these (Jesuit) men?' I kept that close to my heart. Less than a year later, in 2004, I applied to join the Jesuits in Lithuania."

From then to now, the miles and the experiences have been many. Fr. Laniauskas believes the best is yet to come. He is excited about praying with the community, especially at liturgies, as his recently completed doctorate is a study on the fusion between liturgy and catechesis. He is also very excited about Gesu School, its students, faculty and administration. "Gesu School has a great heritage and an exciting future. It is so important these days for young people to have a faith-based education. We as Jesuits are committed to making that happen. I am eager to spend time in the school and share my love for Jesus, Ignatian Spirituality, and results-driven education practices with the students and faculty.

On a personal note, Fr. Laniauskas hopes to complement his commitment to the parish and school duties along with his love for exercise and fishing. "I plead guilty to being conscientious about spending time in the gym, and three of my favorite words are 'let's go fishing.' Though I love to fish, I can't eat them because I'm allergic. I suppose lucky fish!"

When Fr. Laniauskas arrives at Gesu, you will likely notice a large, well-worn leather covered breviary (prayer book) ubiquitously present in his hand. "It is a very special part of my life. This prayer book



belonged to my now deceased companion, Fr. Jim Riley, SJ. As Jesuits and priests, we are called to pray the liturgy of the hours daily. Praying through the pages that Fr. Riley prayed before me is a powerful reminder of the many men and women of faith who have graced this life.

"I keep a lot of small pieces of paper in the breviary. They have names of and notes from people who have touched my life. I think of them as a beautiful array of witnesses, helping guide me on my way. I even have a photo of my Baptism between the breviary covers. It reminds me of God's Family into which I have been welcomed, and the mission to welcome others into that same family!"

As he is welcomed into the Gesu family, Fr. Laniauskas knows he will have a very challenging and exhilarating assignment, blessed with love for the Lord and His people. "Jesus said, 'I will make you fishers of men and women,' something that I hope to do and be. I pray to be the best pastor I can be, and serve the people of this parish and school with a shepherd's heart. I am grateful beyond words for your prayers and assistance, and I look forward to seeing you soon."

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