"I am very happy to
On August 1, 2013 Rev. Joseph L. Levesque, C.M., S.T.D. began his first day as Interim President of St. John’s University, succeeding Rev. Donald J. Harrington, C.M. who retired on July 31. Fittingly, Fr. Levesque’s first official act was to celebrate Mass for the University community in St. Thomas More Church. “I begin my presidency at St. John’s University today and can think of no better way to start than to gather together and pray,” he said.
Seeing him on the altar, many would be surprised to learn that his journey to the priesthood, and ultimately to St. John’s, took a few turns along the way.

He grew up in the community of North Tarrytown, NY. He had no desire to enter the field of education, and in fact his father wanted him to pursue a career in business. But God had other plans for this deeply religious young man.

“I was in high school and I wasn’t quite sure where I was going to go to college,” he said. “I asked myself what difference I could make in the world, and what I could do that was really going to please me and have some significance for others. And my answer was that I would become a priest. I made that decision when I was quite young. And I haven’t regretted it for a moment!”

After his 1967 ordination as a Vincentian priest, he was initially assigned to teach religion at St. John’s Preparatory High School in Brooklyn and then at St. Joseph’s Seminary in Princeton, NJ. In 1970 he became a member of the Religious Studies Department of Niagara University. After a few years in the classroom he left to pursue a doctoral degree in Theology at Catholic University, and when he returned to Niagara he was named Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and Director of the College’s graduate division.

“Education was something that was out of my mind until I was ordained,” he said. “I could have been a preacher, I could have been sent to work on the missions in Panama. But the Vincentian community said to me that they would like me to go and start teaching. So that’s what I did. And I liked it, especially the interaction with the students on the college level.”

Not only were his skills in the classroom apparent; equally visible were his abilities as an administrator. In 1986 he was named President of St. Joseph’s Seminary, and four years later he became Provincial Superior of the Eastern Province of the Congregation of the Mission.
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It was as Provincial Superior that Fr. Levesque had his first real introduction to St. John’s. He served as Chairman of the St. John’s Board of Trustees, where he was instrumental in helping to guide the University through a period of unprecedented growth. It was during those years that St. John’s transitioned from a local commuter school to one of the world’s most respected universities with an international reputation for excellence.

He recalled the challenges that faced the Board members as they sought to take St. John’s to the next level.

“At some of the Board meetings we struggled with the question of whether we could really
afford to do this,” he said. “Can we really turn St. John’s into something new and different? Are we committed to making these decisions? Are we committed to following through? It struck me tremendously how strategic this was, and how the Board members sitting in that room had to make important decisions for the future.

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of a lot of people. And now we see the truth that these were wise decisions.”

After serving for nine years as Provincial Superior, Fr. Levesque remained as a St. John’s Trustee even after heading back upstate to his beloved Niagara University. He assumed that he would return to teaching, but just as in his earlier days, God had different plans. In 2000 he was asked by the Vincentian community and the Niagara Board of Trustees to assume the presidency and, after careful thought and prayerful consideration, agreed to take on what he knew would be another significant challenge.

As was the case with nearly every college or university at the beginning of the new century, Niagara was faced with the need to seek additional resources that would allow it to expand its student base, improve its facilities and add new and exciting academic offerings. The new President ultimately decided that a multi-year capital campaign would be the most effective way to generate the financial support needed to accomplish what everyone agreed had to be done. He believed that a goal of $80 million was ambitious but achievable, and was ultimately proved right when the campaign exceeded its goal by $2 million.

“I was ready to commit myself to a lot of work on the capital campaign,” he said. “Our student body was growing, we had more classes and we needed more offices. Our Science building was antediluvian; it was really ancient and we had to get a new one. Our School of Education didn’t have a place to go so we had to get the School of Education some facilities. The School of Business had a place, but it needed refurbishing. And we built apartments for our students, because they didn’t want to live in regular dorms.”

After 13 years as President of Niagara University, Fr. Levesque felt that it was time for him to step away.
He had accomplished the majority of his goals, and looked forward to relaxing in a more sedate retirement lifestyle. But, as had been the case throughout his life, his plans took a different turn when he was asked to become the Interim President of St. John’s.

“I was planning on a sabbatical,” he remarked, “and the request was significant and I needed a little time to think about it. But I gave it some thought and decided that if the St. John’s Board of Trustees and the Vincentian community wanted me to do this, then I was going to do it.”

Although he is no stranger to St. John’s, Fr. Levesque regards his new role as an opportunity to get to know the University community from a different perspective. He is frequently seen riding around campus in an all-weather golf cart, greeting students, faculty and administrators with a warm smile and a welcoming wave. He is especially impressed with the young people he encounters, seeing them as hard-working students who are well aware of the importance of their education while enjoying their time at the University.

“I think that the student body is very alive,” he said. “Whenever I meet the students at St. John’s, they’re happy. All I have to do is wave, and they wave back. I don’t know if they know that I’m the President, but they’re such a friendly group!”

Reflecting on his priorities for the upcoming months, Fr. Levesque acknowledges that furthering St. John’s Vincentian mission of service to others will always be at the top of his list. The Vincentian charism is a defining aspect of his life, and he is pleased to see that it has been woven into every facet of the St. John’s experience.

With that solid foundation already in place, he would like to see even greater opportunities to embrace the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul in the future.

“Students are very focused on the mission,” he observed. “They love the idea that they’re here not only to learn, but to use that learning to serve others. So I don’t think I have to do a whole lot except reinforce what’s happening with the mission. The students have it. The faculty has it. The administration has it. We just have to keep expanding it by finding new and better ways to serve the poor.”

He is equally concerned with enhancing the University’s commitment to global diversity, a reality that he strongly believes is related to the Vincentian commitment to service. The establishment of St. John’s campus in Rome and the creation of the Paris location speak volumes about the need to give students a worldwide perspective and an appreciation of the issues that everyone faces, no matter where they live.

He applauds the fact that students come to St. John’s from all around the world, ensuring that everyone within the University community is exposed to and learns to appreciate the contributions of different cultures to the world-at-large.

“This is one of the most diverse colleges or universities that you’ll find anywhere in the United States,” he noted, “and I think that’s unique. St. John’s knows what global means.

We are reaching out and students are coming here, and we have to continue to do that. We want not only to bring students here but maybe even establish centers in other countries, especially Third World countries.”

Even though he has only been on campus for a few months, Fr. Levesque has already impressed the St. John’s family with his sincerity, genuine humility and deep spirituality. His willingness to adopt an open door policy makes him accessible to everyone, and while he readily acknowledges the challenges that the University confronts on a regular basis, he is convinced that its past achievements will form the basis for even greater accomplishments in the future.

And how does he feel about making the decision to postpone retirement and assume the leadership of St. John’s? Smiling broadly, his answer is as simple as it is profound.

“I love it!”

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To view the video interview with Fr. Levesque, please visit www.stjohns.edu/fall13mag