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## SAINT OF STEEL!!

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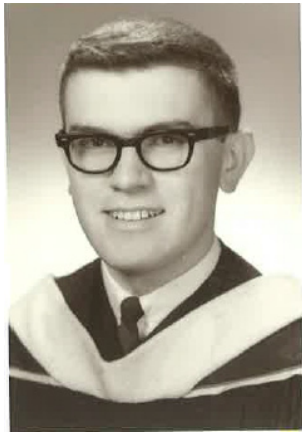
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# SAINT OF STEEL!!

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"At the conclusion of each episode of the 50s TV western 'The Lone Ranger,' one of the characters would ask: 'Who is that masked man?' The viewers, of course, knew the identity of the hero, as he raced off, with the famous cry to his faithful steed, 'HiYo Silver, Away!!!'"



**Dr. G. Thomas Crombach**  
Class of '65  
Biology Department: 1967-2011

## SAINT OF STEEL!!

At the conclusion of each episode of the 50s TV western “The Lone Ranger,” one of the characters would ask: “Who is that masked man?” The viewers, of course, knew the identity of the hero, as he raced off, with the famous cry to his faithful steed, “HiYo Silver, Away!!!”

And then there was the “Man of Steel,” Superman, “more powerful than a locomotive, faster than a speeding bullet, able to leap tall buildings with a single bound,” and so on and so forth. “Who is he?” the newsroom colleagues of his alter-ego, Clark Kent, at The Daily Planet, would wonder.

And who is represented by that life-size steel statue that stands at the top of the stairwell in the new Integrated Science and Health Science Building, where did it come from, and how did it come to be there? Interesting questions that perhaps have been pondered by the St. John Fisher College community. Well, here’s its story!!



Yours truly is an emeritus (retired) professor of the Fisher biology faculty, and also a Fisher alumnus; last year (2015) was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my graduation class (1965), and as one who never really departed, except for grad schools, I was invited a year ago to become a member of my classmates' reunion committee. At our first meeting, I reminded them of our class gift, this very same steel statue of the College's patron, St. John Fisher (1469 – 1535). For many years it had stood in a variety of locations on campus: in the lobby of Haffey Hall, against the windows between what is now Wilson Lounge and the Safety/Security Offices; also, on the patio which once stood at the south end of St. Basil Hall, where once there also existed a shallow pool with fountain, the area now partly occupied by the Golisano Gateway building. In more recent years (at least for the last 20-25 years, perhaps longer) it had been relegated to a dark corner on the upper-most floor of Lavery Library; however, without its original base that had identified what it was and who had sculpted it, for many people it became a mystery. I knew what it was and once tried to track down its base and identifying plaque, to no avail. With the many renovations and reconstructions of the Fisher buildings over the past 50 years, it got moved around, mostly "out of the way," it seemed, and it was inevitable that the mystery surrounding it would deepen for most people, if they wondered about it at all. This prompted me, with the reunion committee's encouragement, to see to its restoration and make it again a more visible object from the College's history.



My first job was to identify the person who had designed and sculpted it. Having seen it for many of its early years, the name “Jack Popham” had stuck in my mind, but I needed to confirm that. I contacted Nancy Greco, one of the College’s librarians who has assumed the role of archivist at Fisher. I suggested that she check files from the business office that may indicate the original commission, as well as issues of the campus newspaper (then called *The Pioneer*), for the months that followed the 1965 commencement. After an initial search of about a month’s time had turned up nothing, we talked again, and Nancy thought that perhaps she could find something about the name I recalled in the records of the Rochester Historical Society, of which she was a member, and, sure enough there had been an article in the Society’s journal a few years back where the name Jack Popham was mentioned – it dealt with famous Rochesterians who were buried at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery on Lake Avenue. That same day, she also mentioned that she had come across some “scrap books” that included clippings about various events that had occurred at Fisher during the 50s and 60s; there was no indication about who had kept these (she thought perhaps some of the Basilian Fathers or librarians who served the College during those first decades of its existence). There she found a couple of news articles, from days following the 1965 Fisher commencement, in both the Rochester Times-Union newspaper (an afternoon daily, no longer published) and in the Rochester Catholic Courier, the diocesan weekly, featuring this class gift, including information about its sculptor, Jack Popham – my memory was in good shape!!

I checked the website of Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, and found that Mr. Popham had died in 1979, but there was no information about his date of birth, so early last summer I drove out to the cemetery, and, with his plot information from the website, found his grave. He had been born in 1925, so he was 40 years old at the time he did the statue, and a young 54 when he died. The news articles about the gift reported that he was a field engineer with Rochester Gas and Electric, so apparently his artistic talents were an avocation. They further report that the statue is made from steel plates which he then fused with an acetylene torch before adding a polyethylene coating; the work took 10 weeks, and weighs 150 pounds.

St. John Fisher, as we associated with the College bearing his name (should) know was the bishop of Rochester in County Kent, England, during the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, and also chancellor of Cambridge University, both offices assumed in 1504. One of his most supportive patrons was Lady Margaret Beaufort, who was mother to King Henry VII and thus grandmother of King Henry VIII. After Henry VIII became the king in 1509, Fisher became his confessor and a respected confidant; he helped Henry compose an effective defense of Catholicism in the face of Martin Luther's reformist movement, and as a result Henry was named by Pope Leo X as a "Defender of the Faith" in 1521. All those close ties between the Tudors would change some 10 years later when Henry, having been rebuffed by the pope in his effort to have his marriage to Queen Katherine of Aragon annulled, because she had not borne him a surviving male heir, so he could marry Anne Boleyn, took a fatal step. As a consequence of the pope's refusal, Henry had the Parliament proclaim him as Head of the Church in England, a move that Fisher (and also Sir Thomas More, until 1532 the Lord High Chancellor of England) refused to acknowledge. As a result both were convicted for treason, and were executed by beheading on June 22 and July 6, respectively, 1535. As martyrs for their faith, Fisher and More were declared saints of the Roman Catholic Church in 1935, four hundred years after their deaths. In popular culture, the story of Bishop Fisher in the context of Henry VIII's "Great Matter," has been featured in movies and television series, including "A Man for All Seasons" and "Wolf Hall," among others.

A look at the steel statue presented as a gift to the College by the class of 1965 will reveal several features that represent the different aspects of John Fisher's legacy: as Bishop of Rochester, England -- the pectoral cross on his chest; as educator, Chancellor of Cambridge University -- the book in his left hand, and as martyr -- the palm leaves in his right hand, a traditional symbol of martyrdom.

A new base was constructed for the statue by staff in the Physical Plant Department at the College, new identifying plaques were obtained, and the location was approved by President Rooney, all during this past summer, in time for the reunion weekend in September 2015. My classmates were very pleased!

So, now you know the story of the "Saint of Steel."

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**Acknowledgements:** I would like to thank the assistance I received for this effort from Nancy Greco, librarian; Larry Jacobson and staff, especially the carpenters, in the College's Physical Plant Department; President Rooney for approving the statue's placement in the new ISHS Building; Dr. Michael Boller (Associate Professor of Biology) for assisting with the mounting of the plaques to the new base; Dan Fagan (fellow classmate, and a class officer), who provided added information about working with Jack Popham on the development of the statue in the weeks preceding our graduation; the late Rev. John R. Cavanaugh, CSB, Professor of English at Fisher, who knew and shared much about Bishop Fisher and Thomas More with many of us over many years; and the Rev. Michael Costanzo (Religious Studies, and editor of VERBUM) for suggesting that I write this piece.



