

For Immediate Release  
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## Statement from President Shirley Ann Jackson on the Death of Reverend Thomas Phelan

To: The Rensselaer Community  
From: Shirley Ann Jackson, Ph.D.

It is with deep sorrow that I announce the passing of the Reverend Thomas Phelan, who devoted more than four decades of his life to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute as chaplain and dean of humanities and social sciences. Rev. Phelan most recently was the Institute Dean, Institute Historian, and Professor Emeritus.

Dean Phelan was an extraordinary person. He was a professor, dean, historian, and wise counselor. Above all, he was a builder of community who also realized the value of understanding and documenting our rich history. The legacy he has left behind is as grand as the life he lived.

Thomas Phelan was born April 11, 1925, the eldest of seven children of a Rensselaer, N.Y., family physician. Phelan attended area parochial schools and received an A.B. in English from the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. Following service as a tactical radar officer with the U.S. Navy in the Pacific during World War II, he entered the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where he earned the S.T.L. in theology in 1951. Ordination later that year was followed by assignments in the Albany Diocese; doctoral work in England came a few years later.

In 1959 he began his long association with Rensselaer when he was named the resident Catholic chaplain. Rev. Phelan's legacy to Rensselaer includes building the Chapel + Cultural Center. Opened in 1968, the award-winning Chapel + Cultural Center hosts exhibitions and performances, foreign student gatherings, weddings of every denomination, and is home to Christ Sun of Justice University Parish. Rev. Phelan began his tenure as pastor of the parish in 1971, and retired as pastor in 2001. He also served as treasurer of the Newman Foundation.

Phelan, who was named dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (H&SS) in 1972 and served in that capacity until 1994, is credited with overseeing the renovation of the Russell Sage Laboratory to bring the School of Humanities and Social Sciences onto the main campus, and developing a strong faculty focused on bridging the humanities and technology.

In 1983 Dean Phelan launched a five-year effort to revamp the H&SS Core Program, the courses required of all Rensselaer graduates. Unveiled in 1988, the new curriculum sought to "contribute to the realization of student potential as leaders in the professions and in society at large." Teaching would rely heavily on small groups and collaborative work by students. Dr. Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, called it "one of the most creative and exciting curricular reform efforts" he had seen.

In 2005 the Institute honored his efforts by creating the Thomas Phelan Endowed Chair in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The chair was created to recognize an outstanding scholar who has contributed significantly to the study and understanding of the relationship of material culture to the history and development of society. Professor Langdon Winner was appointed to the Phelan Chair in July 2005.

Dean Phelan's contributions to the community outside of Rensselaer also are numerous. He is known as the founding president of the Hudson Mohawk Industrial Gateway, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and fostering pride in the local communities that played a major role in the Industrial Revolution. Phelan also has served as chairman of WMHT Educational Telecommunications, chair of the Architecture and Building Commission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany, president of the Catholic Art Association, and leader or member of a host of ecumenical, mental health, historic, and educational groups.

He also wrote extensively, on historical theology, American material culture (especially as it reflects our industrial heritage), and higher education. He is perhaps best known for his writings on the American Industrial Revolution, using the Troy area as a model for understanding the implications of industrialization in U.S. history. He wrote a landmark piece on the evolution of Christian liturgical garb and a significant piece on the making of Windsor chairs.

Dean Phelan's work through the years earned him numerous honors. He was elected a fellow of the Society for the Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture (a prestigious group that includes Robert Penn Warren, Yehudi Menuhin, and Erich Fromm) in 1972. He was awarded the Albany League of Arts Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Arts, the Albert Fox Demers Medal for

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distinguished service to Rensselaer in 1986, the first Community Service Award from the Hudson-Mohawk Consortium of Colleges and Universities in 1987, and the Academic Citizens Laureate Award from the State University of New York Foundation at Albany in 1988.

A portrait of Dean Phelan, by artist Langdon Quin, hangs in tribute to him in the Russell Sage Laboratory on the Rensselaer campus.

As Rensselaer Trustee Neal Barton '58 has said, "Few among us, in the history of this school, have so powerfully demonstrated what it means to love and to serve with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

Our thoughts and best wishes are with the Phelan family and friends.

Information about services and other arrangements

#### **About Rensselaer**

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, founded in 1824, is the nation's oldest technological university. The university offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in engineering, the sciences, information technology, architecture, management, and the humanities and social sciences. Institute programs serve undergraduates, graduate students, and working professionals around the world. Rensselaer faculty are known for pre-eminence in research conducted in a wide range of fields, with particular emphasis in biotechnology, nanotechnology, information technology, and the media arts and technology. The Institute is well known for its success in the transfer of technology from the laboratory to the marketplace so that new discoveries and inventions benefit human life, protect the environment, and strengthen economic development.

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