Thomas William 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, Father Tom began his long association with Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) when he was named the Resident Catholic Chaplain, succeeding Monsignor William M. Slavin. In the early 1960s, he spearheaded the movement to establish a permanent home for the Catholic community at RPI, which until that time had been meeting in various borrowed or rented spaces. A petition was filed with the State of New York to incorporate a nonprofit organization to support fundraising for and operation of an independent place of worship. On November 22, 1963, the Regents of the University of the State of the New York chartered the Rensselaer Newman Foundation (RNF) as an educational corporation. The RNF’s founding trustees were Martin F. Davis, William A. Kerrigan, John I. Millet, Monsignor Slavin and Father Tom.

In 1965 and 1966, the RNF trustees, led by Father Tom, began researching and acquiring land to build a standalone facility, eventually settling on a series of parcels on Burdett Avenue between Peoples Avenue and Sherry Road in Troy. Father Tom was instrumental in negotiating and securing the gifts necessary to acquire this land and move forward with constructing the new facility.

The facility Father Tom envisioned, The Chapel + Cultural Center (C+CC) at Rensselaer, opened with a two-week dedication festival in October and November 1968. In September 1970, the University Parish of Christ Sun of Justice was chartered by canonical decree of the Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany. Father Tom was named the first Pastor to this newly chartered faith community, a position he held until 2001.

Father Tom was also named dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (H&SS) in 1972 and served in that capacity until 1994. He 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, Father Tom 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.

Father Tom’s contributions to the community outside of Rensselaer also are numerous. He was 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. He 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.

Father Tom’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 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.