



Wedding Guide 1986

Steuben County parishes revel in century-old, small-town spirit

By Teresa A. Parsons

Before there was a Catholic church in the village of Liberty, residents used to walk nearly 20 miles to Church of the Assumption in Perkinsville for Sunday Mass.

In 1861, Liberty's Catholics built their own church and called it St. Pius V.

Since then, Liberty has become Cohocton, and Perkinsville's church has been renamed after the Sacred Heart of Jesus. But a distinctive spirit has survived in both places, which Sacred Heart parishioner Dan Wensel calls "family."

Each small community has its share of lifetime residents and relative newcomers, potato farmers and Kodak employees, young and old. They linger together at each church long after Mass, whether or not coffee and doughnuts are served.

"There's just nothing like a small community church," said Pat McCarthy, parish council president at St. Pius V. "You're known by people. You take part in the liturgy. You feel that your presence in the church is important and you're missed when you're not there, which is nice."

As both parishes celebrate more than a century-of-service this year, they share more than a neighborly spirit. For the past six years, they have also shared a single pastor, who follows the route Cohocton's pioneers once trod between parishes.

Even minor changes are a little like earthquakes in a small town. Since their pastor resides in Cohocton, Perkinsville has felt the greater sense of loss. "It hasn't affected us that much," said Betty Engel, a Sacred Heart parishioner. "But at first you really felt his absence."

In Cohocton, they understand. Even when a pastor is transferred, Loree Dispenza said, "it breaks your heart."

Both communities have become accustomed to the arrangement and many now feel fortunate to have a priest at all.

"It's kind of a cycle really," Engel said. "At first, when there was no church, the priests visited only occasionally and you saw them about once a month. Back then the community was all scattered, but now it's more centralized. It just takes some getting used to."

Gradually, the parishes have begun to share in programs and activities, from a joint bulletin to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) to fundraisers.

Continued growth in that direction is among the dreams of the current pastor, Father Ronald P. Harley. "I'd like to see Perkinsville and Cohocton share more cooperative ministry," he said. "It's happening slowly, and in some cases painfully."

"The task of calling forth good leadership is one of the biggest tasks for pastors in rural areas," Father Harley added. "I'm not the only minister here. Ministry is just as much (the parishioners') responsibility as it is mine. We need to begin to understand our common ministry better."



Teresa A. Parsons/Courier-Journal
Sharing her neighbors' joys and sorrows is just part of small-town life, according to Loree Dispenza, a parishioner at St. Pius V in Cohocton. Both St. Pius and Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in nearby Perkinsville celebrate more than a century of history this year.

Sacred Heart. Back in 1952, Engel noticed that her mother and other parish seniors were often lonely. So she started inviting them to a First Friday service, serving lunch afterward on card tables in the back of the church.

Now close to 100 seniors gather from the surrounding towns every First Friday to socialize and enjoy "a good hot meal."

Parishioners hope that next month's outreach to young people will be equally successful. All couples married at the church during the last 10 years have been invited to a social in November.

"We're trying to get that age group back together and hopefully get them involved. It's not unusual for any parish to lose that bracket of people," Wensel said. "What has emerged... is a concern that with the young people leaving and the old people dying, we need to have some kind of involvement and outreach to these people."

Although the parish's intimate size is what attracted him to Sacred Heart, Wensel noted that becoming too small could be a problem. "I'd like to see it (the parish) stay as vital as it is now and I'd like to see us bring back the younger ones and keep them," he said.

Sharing good times and bad at 125

Parishioners will celebrate St. Pius V's 125th anniversary Sunday, October 19. Bishop Matthew H. Clark will celebrate an anniversary Mass at 11 a.m. in the church, followed by a reception back in the parish hall.

Then at 1:30 p.m., parishioners will gather at Wayland Central School cafeteria for a Harvest Dinner prepared and served by a group of women from the Lutheran church. "That's so we ladies can sit back and enjoy ourselves," Loree Dispenza explained.

That's typical of the strong ecumenical spirit in Cohocton. "We know each other, and whether you're Protestant or Catholic, there's a genuine concern for each other," said Ruth Sprague, parish secretary.

In addition to an anniversary, the community is also celebrating the blessing of a new memorial carillon which once again peals messages of joy and sadness throughout the town.

"We used to have a bell, but it cracked or something. Then we had a carillon, which went kerphlooyey," Sprague said. "We missed the bells."

But it wasn't easy to raise the money for new ones. "We are not a wealthy community," she explained. Many people are retired and living on fixed incomes. Some have suffered from recent layoffs at Foster Wheeler, a local manufacturer. Those who farm for their livelihood are also struggling.

But the loyalty and determination of their predecessors, who walked 20 miles to Mass, remains a characteristic.

"We're a little congregation, but any time something is planned or something is needed, the people come through," Dispenza said.

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