

A season of giving, tradition and new beginnings



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Carmen Teremy, Jim Mills, Ken Kemp and Jeff Miller warm up their voices for midnight Mass. They are accompanied by Lillian Karnes, who is only the second organist to serve at the church in 83 years.

Parish celebrations renew communities' Christmas spirit

By Richard A. Kiley

The assortment of parish customs and individual chemistry that give each parish of the diocese its own personality always seem to come to the forefront during the celebration of Advent and Christmas.

And this year is no exception.

Yet when one looks across the spectrum of parish celebrations during this Advent season, three central themes stand out — tradition, new beginnings and an emphasis on helping thy neighbor.

According to Sister Marie Susanne Hoffman of the campus ministry team at the University of Rochester, members of the university's Newman Community have been busily attempting to "Keep Somebody Warm" this Christmas. Students have donated new socks, gloves, mittens and other winterwear to warm the "body and spirits" of those who drop in at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, Bethany House and St. Martin's Place. Sister Marie Susanne added that tithing among community members has also aided shelters for the city's homeless people.

"This is the season we should remember the travelers who were homeless and looking for shelter in Bethlehem when there was no room for them," she said.

"I've been very pleased with the overall response. You hear so much about youths' alienation of values, but these are kids who are saying there is more to it than that, and that's what it's all about."

Other parishes have reached out to their neighbors through more traditional approaches.

In his seven years as pastor of St. Mary's in Auburn, Father Edward Zimmer noted, he has never seen a more thorough and organized handling of the parish giving tree. The process included the old, young and poor of the community, and accumulated approximately 250 gifts for the elderly and 420 for children.

At St. Anne's Church, part of Catholic Communities of St. Gregory and St. Anne, two new parishioners have become active in the parish's Christmas giving campaigns. Ted and Michele Bertot are serving as co-chairmen of the Christmas-basket project at the Palmyra parish. The Bertots, who have been parishioners for only two years, hope the project will provide complete Christmas meals for 15 to 20 area families.

Ted Bertot added that the program will provide neighboring families with more than food. "Most families are asking for clothing, as far as gifts go," he noted.

"Basically we are trying to take care of the



Time stands still for St. Michael's parishioners as they await a part for the oldest clock mechanism in the nation. With luck, the part will arrive in time to fix the clock before Mass on Christmas Eve.

people within the geographic area of the Town of Palmyra, but if somebody knew of a family who moved to, say, Weedsport, we would try to meet their needs also," he said. "In the past, we have collaborated with other parishes or groups to see that everyone's needs are met."

Usually, the Christmas collection at St. Mary's Church in Corning goes to an area food pantry. This year, however, the parish has targeted a different beneficiary. According to Sister Mary Ann Sliwa, pastoral assistant, money raised this season is earmarked for Meals on Wheels in Corning, which recently had to move its operations from All Saints Academy to quarters with a bigger kitchen.

Over in Horseheads, many hands have helped to shape the centerpiece of the Christmas celebration at St. Mary Our Mother, and the resulting tree bears a variety of shapes and symbolism. For example, a camel-shaped ornament signifies that a parishioner is willing to provide transportation to someone who needs to go to the doctor or hospital, noted David Jenkins, the parish's director of music and liturgy. "It shows that people are giving up their time, not just giving gifts," he explained.

In addition, parishioners have also signed a huge greeting card in the church to save the money that would be spent on sending out individual cards. Jenkins said the funds saved could go toward helping others who are not so fortunate.

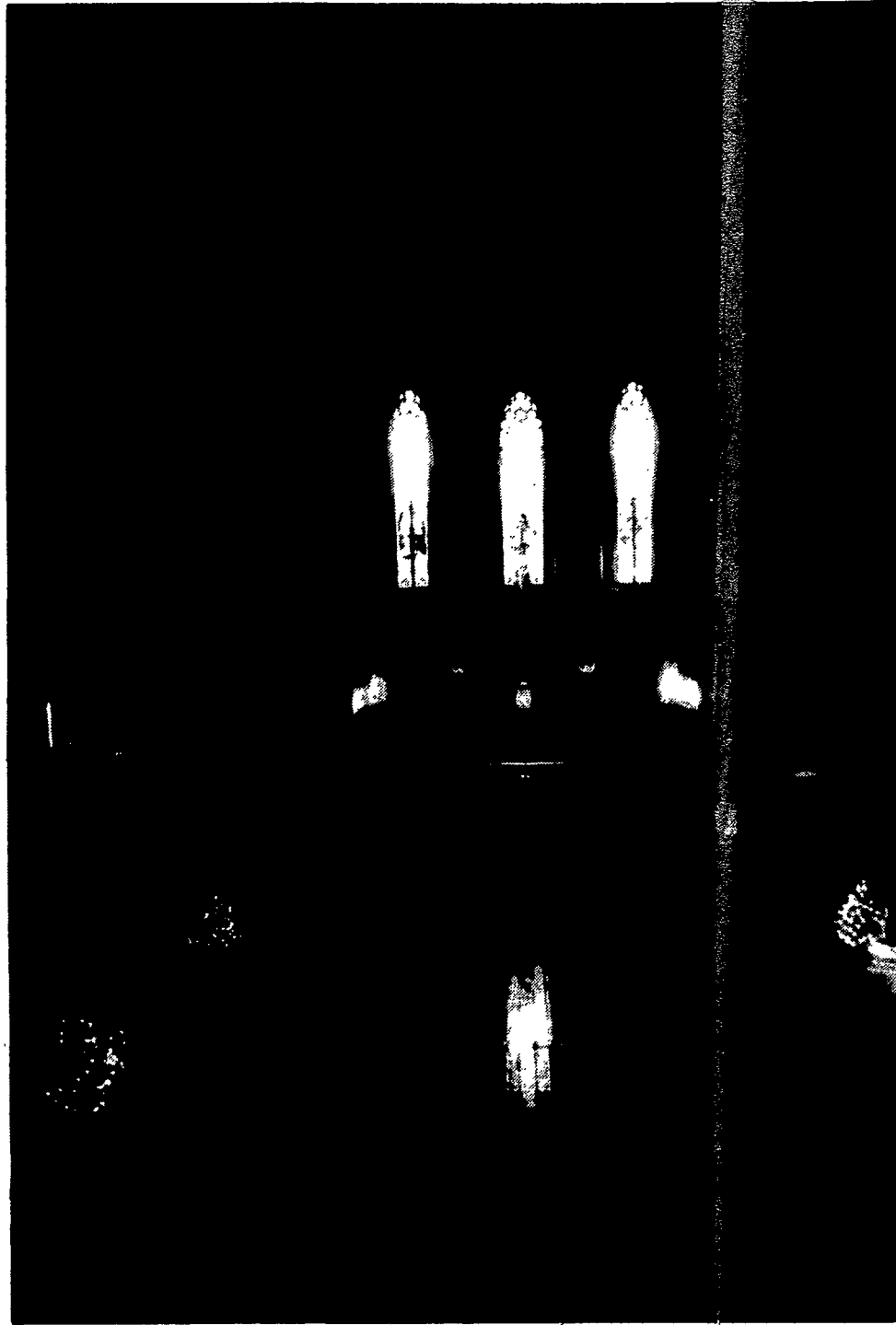
Parishioners at Rochester's Sacred Heart Cathedral have targeted their efforts to assist the staff of St. Bridget's Parish Shelter, according to Father Robert J. Miller, rector. Parishioners have compiled gifts for the shelter and plan to distribute them on Christmas morning.

While some parishes have centered their Advent activities on charitable endeavors, other communities have focused attention on the liturgical aspects of the Christmas season.

At St. Catherine of Siena in Ithaca, the parish liturgy committee came up with a new twist to the tradition of Advent wreaths. They decided to encircle the entire sanctuary of the church with Advent candles, "to expand the wreath and make it all-encompassing; instead of making it a small unit on top of the altar," said Jo-line DiGiacamo, business administrator of the parish.

DiGiacamo explained that the large "wreath" was designed so that the entire church community could feel a part of the Advent season.

Rather than designing new Christmas traditions St. Michael's Parish in Rochester opted to use scholarly research on the birth of Christ for the basis of its Advent festivities.



Christmas trees and colored lights adorn the century-old columns at St. Michael's Church on Clinton Avenue in Rochester.

Last year, the parish — which over the years has evolved from a predominately German community into a blend of Hispanics, blacks, Cambodians, Ethiopians and Native Americans — celebrated Midnight Mass for the first time in 20 years. This year, according to Father Vincent Panepinto, pastor, the church is basing its Christmas commemorations on the writings of Scripture scholar William Barclay.

Barclay was renowned for popularizing the Bible through a two-volume revision of the New Testament written for the average lay person. This work sets the framework for St. Michael's celebration of "Christmas in the City."

"Barclay's commentary on the Scripture stated that the Lord was most probably born in the hustle-bustle of the inner city. He came to all human beings," Father Panepinto said. "We've just been drawing on that analogy ... The celebration symbolizes His desire to be liberated and to free all human beings, wherever they may live."

After the Spanish Mass on Christmas Eve, Father Panepinto and Deacon Elisio Melendez will distribute little plastic cribs to the children of the parish. "We wanted it to be a Jesus gift from the church, not just another toy for Christmas," Father Panepinto said.

Moving away from the hectic pace of the city, Holy Trinity in West Webster has taken a more contemplative approach to Advent. The parish celebration of Lessons and Carols on Sunday, December 21, recalled the Christmas prayers and songs that originated several centuries ago in European monasteries.

The service consisted of nine psalms and lessons that the monks practiced during the early morning hours of Christmas Day. According to Father William H. Hart, pastor, members of the parish choir dramatized the event with music and prayer in an attempt to capture the essence of monastic celebration.

"It's a good way to get a spiritual posture and to get into the spirit of Christmas," he said.

Meanwhile, at St. Joseph's Church in Wayland, parishioners were treated to a lighthearted celebration. Father Paul R. Schnacky, pastor, invited all relatives, neighbors and friends of the parish community to a one-hour

musical program appropriately entitled, "Pastor's Christmas Present to the Parish and Community."

For the children, the 5 p.m. Mass on Christmas Eve featured ringing bells and lights shining on the ceiling like stars. The festival of readings and carols at the Wayland parish comprised nine carolings from the Old and New Testaments, followed by traditional Christmas carols.

In a similar spirit, members of the Cayuga Team Ministry — which encompasses St. Joseph's, Cayuga, St. Michael's, Union Springs, St. Patrick's, Adora, and Our Lady of the Lake, King Ferry — witnessed "The Shepherd's Play," a dramatization of the birth of Christ according to the Gospel of St. Luke. The story was told through drama and songs, taken from original folk melodies.

According to Father William V. Spilly, pastor of the team ministry, the group has been performing the play since 1978. This year's production took place at Our Lady of the Lake Church, with a second showing at the Friends' Meeting House in Poplar Ridge.

During the days before Christmas, children at St. Stanislaus Church in Rochester made ornaments and placed them on the Christmas tree in the church. According to the principal, Sister Sheila Lubber, SSJ, the kindergarten class threw a birthday party for Jesus and collected canned foods for families in the neighborhood.

"Every grade is doing something for the poor, either through prayer, toys or food," she said.

But according to St. Stanislaus' pastor, Father Andrew Grzela, the predominately Polish parish is still preparing for its biggest celebration, the January 10 celebration of *Opłatek*, a ritual passing of blessed wafers. At St. Teresa's, the celebration of *Opłatek* will be on January 3.

"With the breaking of the bread, we forget everything that has been done in the past, and we start a new life," Father Grzela said.

Beginning anew seems to be the philosophy behind many parish celebrations this Christmas season, as parishioners renew their faith in the Church and do their best to make their neighbors' lives more hopeful.