

# Festival substitute succeeds in Geneva parish

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

GENEVA — Every summer, parish festivals sprout up across the diocese. And like annual flowers, once they first appear, they seem destined to resurface again and again.

But this year, parishioners at St. Francis de Sales Parish in Geneva did away with their festival. And chances are that they may not have one again in the near future.

Instead, parishioners substituted a contest and a chicken barbecue on June 17, and raised \$13,600 — more money than they had netted in any of their previous three festivals. In 1988, for example, the festival produced only \$10,500 in profits.

In addition, noted Ed Balsley, finance committee president and organizer of the parish's festivals from 1986-88, the parish raised the money this year with far fewer headaches and less work.

"Once you've run a festival, you realize it's a year-long thing," Balsley said. The work involves finding sponsors and prizes, deciding what booths to have, setting up, operating and cleaning up after the event, and, most difficult of all, enlisting people to do the work.

"Very few people were trying to do all the preliminary work," Balsley said of the festivals he chaired. "Along with that, was the problem of never knowing until the day of the event if we would have enough people to operate the booths."

The small number of people involved with running the festivals and the declining revenue from them were two problems that became immediately evident to Father Ronald Harley, who arrived as the parish's new pastor just before the 1988 festival. He cited other reasons, however, for doing away with the annual event.

"Coming in as the new pastor, I saw a lot of polarization among people working on the festival," Father Harley said. "There was arguing over what we would have, what we wouldn't have. A festival should be a community builder, not something that caused factions."

At the 1988 festival, Father Harley was also dismayed to see that a number of people — people he perceived as being poor — appeared to have come to the festival simply to gamble. "The church should be

serving the poor, not ripping off from them," he said.

In September, the pastor raised his concerns about the festival at a meeting of the parish finance committee, and committee members decided to survey parishioners about their wishes. Balsley said the survey was distributed to approximately 900 parishioners, and the committee made it clear that non-responses would be counted against continuing the festival. Only 40 surveys were returned, and of those, only 13 indicated support of the festival.

Rachel Plano, the parish council president, said the decision to do away with the festival was thus based on parishioners' input. "This was their decision," she said. "I'm sure a lot of people missed the festival, but a lot of people came down (for the chicken barbecue)."

Father Harley said he was pleased with the response to this year's event, not only in terms of the money raised, but also be-

cause of the sense of community it engendered.

"What I saw was a whole lot of parishioners sitting down and eating their dinner together and enjoying each others' company," he said. "From where I stand, this is the way to go: a much more streamlined approach."

But Balsley, for one, missed the festival. "The chicken barbecue did well, but it was a transient kind of thing," he said. A number of people stopped by to pick up their dinners, then left. At the festivals, he noted, people were more likely to remain and visit with friends. Some of the sense of community was lost, he said.

He acknowledged, however, that few parishioners had expressed displeasure at the cancellation of the festival. And he isn't certain if the parish will have one again. "We will have a festival when parishioners indicate to us that they would like to have a festival again," he said.

"Where we go in the future isn't clear yet, but if I had my way we wouldn't have a festival," Father Harley asserted. If parishioners indicated strongly that they wanted another festival, the parish would have one, he said. But so far he has received no indication that they want one, and the success of this year's fundraiser argues against a return of the festival.

In addition, Father Harley said the direction the Catholic church in the United States is taking appears to be away from using festival-type events to raise money for church ministries.

"As a priest, I listen to what the American Catholic bishops are saying, and I'm beginning to hear a message that gambling is not a way to raise money for a church," Father Harley said. "It's almost as if the Spirit is guiding us to new ways to raise money for the church — ways that are more appropriate, more Christian, more life-giving to the community itself."

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