

Parish celebrates 75 years of lay activity



By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Marion — If Margaret Stevens feels a twinge of pride every time she passes St. Gregory's rectory in Marion, she is entitled.

After all, she was one of the mainstays of the festivals and bake sales that raised the money to buy the rectory in 1952.

"I was one of the organizers," Stevens acknowledged. "I think I was the one who started it all."

Stevens, a member of St. Gregory's for 70 of the 75 years the parish has existed, is one of the many lay people who have made the parish what it is today.

And those lay people give the parish staff hope for the community's future.

"I think (the lay people) have always owned the parish," said Sister Mary Marvin, RSM, a pastoral assistant for the cluster parish, which is officially known as the Catholic Communities of St. Gregory/St. Anne.

In fact, Sister Marvin said, St. Gregory's could very easily survive outside the cluster — even without a resident priest. "I think this parish could be strong by itself," she said, "because of the lay involvement and because people are so intent on saving their parish. I think that this has often been a mission parish, so they've gotten used to doing things."

The parish has had a resident priest for just 32 of its 75 years. And for 38 of those 75 years, the parish has either been a mission parish, or part of a cluster.

Yet the people of the parish have a strong sense of themselves as a parish community — a sense nurtured by this year's jubilee celebration.

"This jubilee year is pulling people together," said Barrie Fleegel, a parishioner for 35 years. The parish had experienced some fears and doubts at the time of the clustering, he said.

"People were afraid that their parish would be closed," Fleegel said. "I guess it was fear of the unknown. I think we're

through that now."

St. Gregory's has endured hard times in the past. The parish's roots date back to 1908, when weekly Masses were held in various halls around Marion. In 1912, a lot was purchased for building a church. The cornerstone of St. Gregory's Church was blessed June 28, 1914.

Stevens arrived at St. Gregory's in 1919. She remembers the early days of the parish very well.

"If you got \$20 (in the collection) you were lucky in those days," Stevens said. The community was small, but the members worked hard to keep the church alive and growing. "We wanted to get ahead," Stevens said. "We wanted to build a community."

For the first 35 years, the community was a mission parish. Priests would come in from neighboring towns to celebrate Masses on Sundays. Ironically, the first parish to have St. Gregory's as a mission was St. Anne's.

In October, 1949, St. Gregory's became an independent parish, but it still had no resident priest. Father Edward Lintz, professor of philosophy at Nazareth College, was appointed administrator.

Stevens said that parishioners realized they would not have a resident priest until the parish had a rectory. She organized bake sales and parish festivals to raise the necessary funds.

Helen Fleegel, Stevens' daughter, recalled those hectic days. "I remember my mother always going to meetings," she said. "Every time she went to something, she took along something she made. A lot of ladies worked hard to buy the rectory."

After purchasing the rectory in 1952, the parish received its first resident pastor, Father Francis Christianelli, in 1954. Better known as Father "Chris," he started a number of youth activities and groups. The priest hosted weekly gatherings for parishioners at a cottage he and his brothers owned in Ontario, N.Y.



Altar boy C.J. Hall greets Bishop Fulton J. Sheen during his visit to St. Gregory's Parish in 1969.



Parishioners of St. Gregory's prepare to march down Main Street in Marion, N.Y., during the Jubilee Day celebration held in June.

Father Christianelli was followed in rapid succession by Fathers John Maxwell (1955), James B. Lane (1957), Walter Caron (1958), Stuart Hogan (1961), and Charles Connell (1965).

In 1967, Father C. Richard Nangle was appointed pastor, a post he held until 1981.

During Father Nangle's tenure, the parish experienced changes fostered by Vatican II; a parish council was created; ecumenical activities became more popular; and the church and rectory were renovated.

In addition, the parish began to tith a portion of its collection. Five percent was sent to a parish in Kentucky, and another five percent was set aside to provide loans to needy parishioners.

Father John Morgan, who served as pastor from 1981-86, said that he was always struck by the parish's generosity during tithing.

"There was always that spirit of helping each other," the priest said. "They were a caring group of people."

Part of that caring spirit may be due to the small size of the parish, speculated Fred Lammers, a parishioner since 1984.

"It's a small rural parish," Lammers said. But the community's small size "provides some unity and closeness."

The current pastor, Father Lou Vasile, said that St. Gregory's "is a vibrant, interactive community where support is natural." He noted a recent example when a family, whose home had burned down, asked for help.

"The response was immediate," Father

Vasile said.

The parish is still growing. In the early 1980s, approximately 150 families were registered at St. Gregory's. The most recent figure is 356 families.

"We're a bedroom community of Monroe County," Father Vasile explained. In fact, the parish is growing so rapidly that the church is now filled on Sundays, and parishioners are talking about either expanding the current church, or building a new one.

And after initial trepidation about becoming part of a cluster, the parish has responded well to the change, Lammers observed. "We have more people active in the parish today than we did when we were a single parish," he said.

That spirit of involvement has shown through this jubilee year, in which at least one event has taken place each month. The year-long celebration included a Jubilee Mass June 25, which was attended by approximately 400 people. Bishop Matthew H. Clark celebrated the Mass.

Jubilee festivities will culminate with a dinner dance on Nov. 18, at the Sheraton in Newark.

In addition, Father Vasile has asked the parish Jubilee Committee to become the Life Committee when jubilee events conclude.

Stevens said that after what she has seen the past few years, she is optimistic about the future of the parish, even if it never has another resident priest. "It's very much alive," Stevens said. The lack of a resident priest, she added, "is no sign that we should give up."

"We should work harder to make a strong church community," Stevens said.

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