

Life remains active for secretary

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

AUBURN — If you would expect the secretary at St. Mary's rectory to spend part of the day twiddling her thumbs, think again.

"I don't think the general public has the slightest realization of the work that comes with the rectory," remarked 78-year-old Maryrose Barron. "They think more or less of it as a social place where you get a Mass card."

For the past 50 years, Barron has answered the question, "What do you do all day to keep busy?" with the answer, "Would you like to spend a day watching?"

Anyone who took her up on the offer would observe — among other activities — that the septuagenarian's office hours are filled with writing the parish bulletin, making up sacramental records for the parish, answering the phone and, on occasion, keeping track of the money garnered through fundraising drives, one of her favorite duties.

"I always enjoyed working on (fundraisers) because the people in the parish are very cooperative," Barron said.

Barron has known the people of her parish since she was a child, having been baptized at St. Mary's and graduated from the parish grammar school in 1925. But she didn't go to work for the parish until years later, when her secretarial predecessor got married and decided to leave the position.

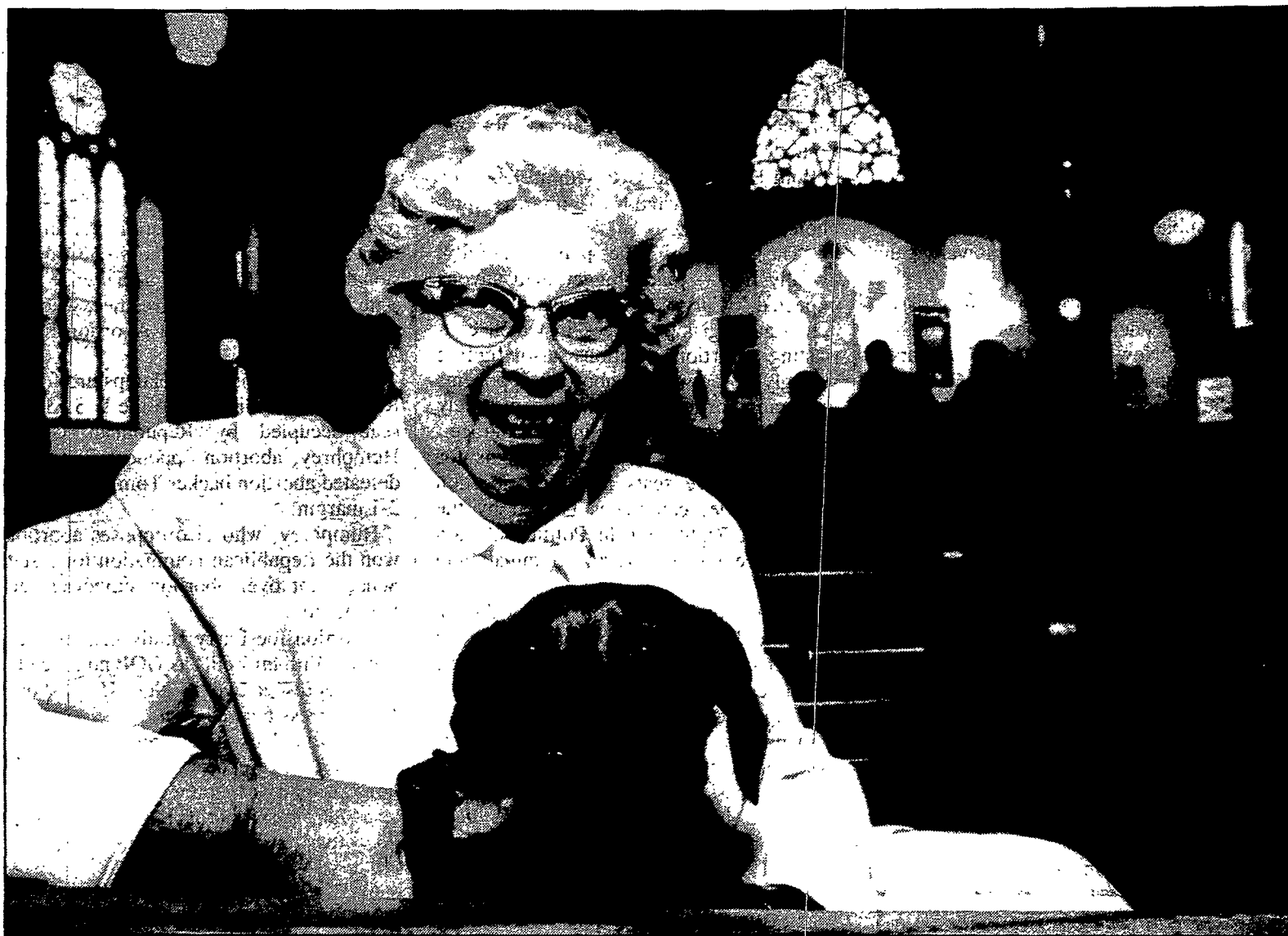
Then-pastor Monsignor William E. Cowen invited the young Barron in for a chat about the soon-to-be-available secretarial spot. At that time, Barron had already chalked up 10 years of work at Dunn and McCarthy Company, a shoe manufacturer. She described her first secretarial job as "mostly typing letters and invoices," and she welcomed the chance to try something different.

"I think maybe it was the challenge that Monsignor Cowen gave me," she said of her decision to work at St. Mary's. She noted that her boss at Dunn and McCarthy "envied me the opportunity of the association of a great man (Monsignor Cowen)."

That "great man," who went by his academic title, "Doctor," was described favorably in St. Mary's centennial history, which was published in 1968:

"Dr. Cowen labored zealously ... organizing parish societies, planning a program for the school and a program of devotions suited to the needs of his people."

Barron described Monsignor Cowen as a



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Maryrose Barron and her 'co-author,' Schotze, keep the parishioners of St. Mary's in Auburn up on all of the parish news through a 'gossip' column in the parish's monthly newsletter 'Off The Cuff.' Schotze, a miniature dachshund, belonged to the newsletter's founder and namesake, Monsignor Cuffney, until the priest's death in 1989. Though she now lives with a Rochester family, Schotze stops in frequently at St. Mary's to visit her old friend. Barron, who is celebrating her 50th year as parish secretary, served as ghost writer for previous rectory mascots as well.

scholarly man whom she credits for opening her soul to the spirit of ecumenism later fostered by Vatican II.

"Monsignor Cowen ... was very ecumenical, and he was known to be ahead of our time," she recalled, adding that her late boss used to send her to participate in various United Way drives where she met local non-Catholics.

"He would send me out to the United Way, and in the beginning I was the only Catholic," Barron remembered, pointing out that her experiences taught her that "the stories of (non-Catholics) being bigoted ... were not true."

Indeed, she credited Monsignor Owen's successor, Monsignor James D. Cuffney — "a great administrator" — and the current pastor, Father Edward A. Zimmer — "he belongs to everything" — for continuing Monsignor Cowen's outreach efforts to Auburn's non-Catholic community.

"I've had three pastors ... all very ecumenical, much more so than any other place," she continued, adding that St. Mary's openness to change enabled it to adapt to Vatican II's reforms more than many Catholic parishes did.

"St. Mary's started many years ago at the beginning of Vatican II (getting ready) for the changes, so when the changes came along, we were prepared," she said.

Since Vatican II, Barron has observed that each new generation to visit the rectory has become more eager to participate in parish liturgies, and said today's parishioners would not accept the liturgical practices of yesteryear.

"(Young people) are more anxious to participate. Years ago, they wouldn't even attempt to participate."

And when they do participate, Barron emphasized, she stays out of their way.

"I have so much to do with the drives," she said. "I have not participated in liturgies and things because I feel (the parishioners) should. I feel it would be better to draw from the parish rather than hearing me."

Consciously choosing the role of part-time observer of parish life has led Barron to record its memories. A photography buff, she noted that she has "an almost complete history of the church on slides."

Undoubtedly, some of the slides contain the faces of the many parishioners who

have come to Barron over the years to arrange occasions ranging from baptisms to funerals. It's when she envisions those moments of intimate conversation with parishioners that she fondly looks back at her decision to leave her secretarial job in the business world.

"I think in working for the church you see more, and you kind of become more compassionate, whereas in the secular world, you kind of take the world for granted," she said. Working for the church has enabled her to see "how the other half lives," she continued, explaining that she has listened to people grieve over their dead relatives and mourn their broken marriages.

"I became more sympathetic and realized that people have not been treated as well by life," she said. "You think, 'Maybe I'm not so bad off after all.'"

For those hoping that Barron will continue to offer a consoling ear during office hours, the "unusually healthy" secretary noted said she has no plans for retirement.

"I guess I enjoy the work, and if I did retire, I'd have to take up some volunteer work," she said.

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