

St. Mary's parishioners provide helping hands

Parish Profile

St. Mary,
Ontario



By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

ONTARIO — A visitor to St. Mary's of the Lake Parish might first be struck by the unusual church building, with its curved roof rising to a peak like two hands joined in prayer.

But should the visitor enter the church and meet the people gathered there for worship, he or she might soon become even more impressed.

For the people of this "small-town" parish operate a multitude of outreach, support and social ministry programs that would put any suburban or big city church to shame.

The parish has an active Stephen Ministry program, providing support and assistance to people in times of trouble.

The nearly 80 people involved in the Martha Ministry prepare luncheons in the parish hall for those who come to the church for funerals — sometimes serving as many as 250 mourners.

The pastor, Father Robert G. Kreckel, is one of three priests who rotate celebrating a Spanish Mass at Church of the Epiphany in Sodus for migrant farm workers. St. Mary's parishioners provide a coffee hour following Mass every week, no matter which of the priests is celebrating. The parish also hosted a Christmas party last December for migrant workers who have settled in the area on a long-term basis.

Every year through a Christmas sharing program, parishioners supply underprivileged families with food, clothing and gifts.

All year, the Shop-at-Value program enables the poor to purchase food at low cost.

Shut-ins as well as parishioners in hospitals or nursing homes receive monthly newsletters to keep them up to date with what is happening in the parish.

And volunteers are currently preparing a parish handbook detailing parish services and ministries.

Meanwhile, the parish is already in the process of implementing one of the recommendations of the Rochester diocese's recently completed Synod: training leaders to help create small Christian communities. The first of these communities are slated to begin during Lent.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

(Above) Julio Garcia attended a Jan. 9 Spanish Mass celebrated by Father Charles Mulligan of St. Michael's in Newark at The Church of the Epiphany in Sodus. St. Mary's of the Lake Parish works with these parishes to provide migrant ministry. (Below) Juan Castillo reads from a Spanish missal.

In addition, meetings will soon be held to examine ways to expand ministry to families and to youths.

Moreover, these activities and programs complement the work of such groups as the Men's Club and the Rosary-Altar Society, along with parish picnics, banquets, luncheons and other social events.

"I would say that it's a very caring, warm parish," observed Donna Jeffers, the parish's office manager and one of the Stephen Ministry core members. "When visitors come, they feel welcome."

Deacon Gerald Skerrett speculated that part of the reason for this warmth may be the nature of the people who comprise the parish encompassing Ontario, Walworth and Williamson.

"The towns themselves seem to be very socially oriented in terms of neighbor helping neighbor," observed Deacon Skerrett, who is coordinating the small community training and together with his wife, Lee, serves as a Stephen Ministry core member. "That seems to be carried out in the parish."

This active approach to church extends back to 1869 when about 40 Ontario-area Catholics petitioned Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid to establish a mission parish in their community.

These Catholics, most of whom were farmers, had to travel to Webster, Palmyra or Macedon for Mass, according to Gertrude Doyle, author of the parish history. Doyle's family was among those that established the parish.

The wooden church those early parishioners built in 1870 would serve the

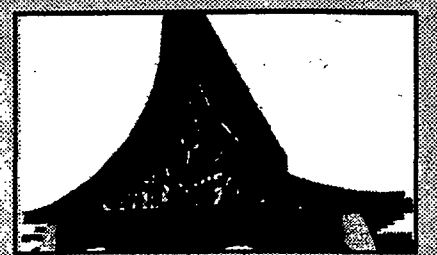


parish until the current edifice was completed in 1966.

In those early years, the parish was a mission church of Holy Trinity in Webster. St. Mary's was served by a series of non-resident pastors, beginning with Father P.C. McGrath (1869-77), then continuing with Fathers Aloysius Weissteiner (1877-79); Joseph Netzel (1879-87); C. Ulrich (1887-93); Joseph Maguin (1893-99); and Joseph Miller (1899-1915).

The parish became independent in 1915 with the appointment of its first resident pastor, Monsignor Michael Krieg. He was succeeded by Monsignor William Byrne (1917-25), who was in turn followed by the parish's longest serving pastor, Father Thomas H. Lochren (1925-54).

Father Ignatius X. Cameron became pastor in 1954, remaining until 1956 when Father James O'Connell was named to head the parish. He was followed by Fathers John S. Maloney (1959-60); William Gaynor (1960-70); Charles G. Langworthy (1970-74); Monsignor



Vital Statistics

Name: St. Mary's of the Lake Church
Location: 5828 Walworth Road, Ontario
Families: 950
Founded: 1869
First church: 1870
First resident pastor: 1915
Current church: 1966

Gerard J. Gefell (1974-76); and Monsignor John E. Maney, who served as pastor from 1976 until Father Kreckel's arrival in 1985.

By the time Father Kreckel arrived, Deacon Skerrett said, the parish had already begun to change from primarily rural to one that included an increasing number of parishioners who lived in Ontario but worked in Webster or Rochester.

Doyle speculated that this transition has helped to spur some of the ministry and outreach programs.

"I think that they have to work to establish community," Doyle observed. "Before, everyone worked together."

Jeffers also credited Father Kreckel with helping to stimulate the parish's social consciousness — then stepping back to let people develop programs.

That was Jean Kiedrowski's experience when about six years ago she approached Father Kreckel with the idea for the Martha Ministry.

"He looked at the facts, and said, 'Go for it,'" Kiedrowski recalled. "He's the leader of the church, but he also let the parishioners step in and lend a hand."

Father Kreckel downplayed his own role, noting that a strong social ministry committee already existed in the parish when he arrived. "The people here are very concerned about people in need," he remarked.

Moreover, the priest continued, when he came, parishioners were calling for more opportunities for lay involvement. Thus they readily accepted Stephen Ministry when he introduced it.

Still, Father Kreckel said, he would like to see even more people get involved. And he is also hoping for increased emphasis on parish life, particularly in the development of family and youth ministry, and the formation of small communities to foster spiritual growth and provide mutual support.

"Even through its going to take years to develop, I think that that's where we need to concentrate," Father Kreckel declared.

Thus it seems likely that the parish will remain a lively place — something Deacon Skerrett welcomes.

"I think one of the things we say to ourselves is, 'If the light's on every night, that's great,'" the deacon concluded.

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