

# PARISH FEATURE

## Vital statistics

**Name:** Catholic Communities of St. Mary of the Lake and St. Benedict

**Locations:**

St. Mary of the Lake, 901 N. Decatur St., Watkins Glen  
St. Benedict, 304 Speedway St., Odessa

**Dates founded:**

St. Mary of the Lake, 1846  
St. Benedict, 1948

**Number of families:** 850

**Significant dates:**

1868 - Dedication of St. Mary of the Lake at its current location; 1896 - St. Mary of the Lake joins the Diocese of Rochester; 1956 - Basement church built at St. Benedict; addition made in 1964; 1989 - The diocese designates St. Mary of the Lake and St. Benedict churches a cluster.

## Cluster

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was known as Jefferson. The original St. Mary of the Lake Church was located on First Street, where it remained for 22 years before moving to its current location at the corner of Decatur and Ninth streets. That church was dedicated on Dec. 13, 1868. In 1896, the parish - which was at first under the jurisdiction of the Buffalo diocese - became a member of the Diocese of Rochester.

In its early years, St. Mary of the Lake served a large number of Irish families who immigrated to the Southern Tier during the great potato famine. By the turn of the century, Italians were the main ethnic group flowing into Schuyler County. This heavy influx is evident even today: Father Bonin estimated that 50 percent of his parishioners are of Italian heritage.

In 1936, the arrival of Filippini Sisters helped absorb the workload of this quickly growing parish. St. Mary of the Lake was noted as being the only diocesan parish where women religious of the Filippini order were stationed. The sisters continued to serve in Watkins Glen right up until two years ago, when the community was reassigned to New Jersey.

For St. Benedict of Odessa, its origins in 1948 were marked by religious-education instruction for children in a cleaned-up chicken coop. A basement church was built in 1956, and Masses were held there until 1964 when an upper church was completed.

St. Mary of the Lake also expanded during this period, adding a parish-center building.

Today, St. Mary of the Lake has approximately 750 families while St. Benedict serves 100 families. Those numbers increase sharply on summer weekends, when auto-racing enthusiasts flock to nearby Watkins Glen International Speedway.

"I've gotten to recognize some of the faces. It's fun to catch up with them every year," said Shafer.

Yet for the most part, St. Mary of the Lake/St. Benedict serves residents of a small, close-knit community.

"You can go to the supermarket to the post office, and see six people you can chit-chat with," acknowledged Sister Catherine Paul Theiss, CSJ, who serves as St. Mary's director of religious education.

"I think you're blessed being in a small town, because everybody's a part of each other," added Father Bonin.

Yet parishioner Glenn Larison noted that bringing the villages of Watkins Glen and Odessa together initially proved to be a challenge when clustering was implemented five years ago.

"There was this coolness," said Larison.

However, activities such as the re-institution of an annual parish mission have helped break down any barriers. The 1994 mission, in fact, will be held next Monday through Thursday, March 14-17.

"By bringing back these missions, there was a warmth that grew between the communities," Larison commented.



Some of the St. Mary of the Lake/St. Benedict youth-group members include (left to right) David Seither, Lisa Elliot and James Robertson. Last summer, the cluster hosted the first-ever Southern Tier Teen Cruise on Seneca Lake.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

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