

PARISH FEATURE

'Trinity' of parishes prepare for next century

Parish Profile

Catholic Community of the Blessed Trinity



By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

In 1985, when parishioners of St. Mary Magdalene Church in Wolcott, St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Red Creek and St. Jude's Chapel in Fair Haven were trying to decide a name for their newly formed cluster, the idea that they were three churches in one community suggested a name with classic Catholic roots.

So parishioners voted to name their cluster The Catholic Community of the Blessed Trinity.

In the nine years since its formation the idea of "trinity" has played a key part in many of the cluster's groups and activities.

The Trinity Activities Society oversees social and some spiritual activities in the cluster, which also features a Trinity Liturgy Committee, Trinity Parish Council, Trinity Building Committee and Trinity Social Ministry Committee.

Parishes also work together on such activities as an annual summer picnic at Fair Haven State Park, tithing 10 percent of their collections for the social ministry committee, a food closet, and a spaghetti supper in the fall.

Despite this emphasis on unity, however, Father John V. Forni, the cluster's pastor since 1993, said the two largest parishes — St. Mary Magdalene and St. Thomas — "maintain their own traditions and their own character and their own identity."

Those separate identities exist, in part, because St. Thomas is an older church which includes parishioners who can trace their families' parish involvement back to the 19th century, the pastor explained. St. Mary Magdalene, on the other hand, is a younger parish located in a traditionally non-Catholic area.

Still, Father Forni said he sees a common identity to the two parishes — one that he, as someone who grew up in a small town, appreciates.

"It's kind of a low-key community," Father Forni said. "There isn't a lot of rushing about or high pressure."

Moreover, he added, "Both communities are neighborly, with people who are regulars, and people who are not."

One of the ways in which neighborliness is encouraged is through coffee hours after Mass — a practice started by Father Robert Smith, pastor of St. Mary Magdalene from 1984-85, and of the cluster from 1985-93.

"It's really brought us together more," noted Joseph Albano, a former member of the parish council and a parishioner at St. Thomas since 1950. "Before, everybody went to Mass, then went home, that's it. Now you get to know the other parishioners better."

Coffee hours also help to make new-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Members of the Catholic Community of the Blessed Trinity gathered for a July 17 picnic and pig roast at Fair Haven Beach State Park. The cluster consists of St. Mary Magdalene, St. Thomas the Apostle and St. Jude's Chapel.

comers feel welcome, observed Irene Bidwell, a parishioner of St. Mary Magdalene Parish since 1950.

"You're greeted at the door," said Bidwell, who also wrote the parish's history. "You're told, 'Come down to have coffee.' There's a friendliness here."

Still, it wasn't always smooth sailing when the parishes clustered, acknowledged Joan Dates, a parishioner at St. Thomas since 1970.

"It was very painful," Dates said. In particular, she observed, the process was very difficult for St. Thomas parishioners because for much of its history St. Thomas had been associated with St. Patrick's Church in Cato.

"When they split St. Thomas and St. Patrick's — which were joined at the hip for 100 years — there were some bad feelings," noted Helen Borden, the cluster's secretary, a parishioner at St. Thomas since 1957, and author of histories on St. Thomas and — along with Bidwell — on the cluster. In the nine years since the cluster's formation, she added, "I think things are going very well. Everybody seems to enjoy this arrangement."

The three churches' histories actually intersected long before the cluster was formed.

St. Thomas is the oldest of the three parishes. Established in 1875, the parish dedicated its first church in 1876. The first resident pastor, Father Henry Koenig, arrived the same year, but only remained at St. Thomas until 1877.

Beginning in 1878, the parish was paired up with St. Patrick's Church in Cato, a relationship that continued until 1985.

The current edifice was built after the original church building — struck by lightning — burned down on June 17,

1943. Bishop James E. Kearney dedicated the new church on Nov. 28, 1943. The new church included a basement, which in 1980 was dedicated as the Monsignor John M. Duffy Parish Center in honor of the late priest and parishioner.

The parish also includes a cemetery incorporated in 1898.

St. Mary Magdalene Church was the second of the three Trinity parishes established.

Land for the church was purchased in 1940. A loan for the creation of the parish was obtained on July 22 — the feast of St. Mary Magdalene, hence the parish's name.

Bishop Kearney dedicated the church on Nov. 3, 1940. For two years, it was together with St. Thomas and St. Patrick's. Then, in 1942, it became a mission of Church of the Epiphany in Sodus. In 1954, the parish split from Church of the Epiphany. It was also given oversight of St. John Fisher Chapel in East Bay which had been opened in 1935 to serve summer residents. The chapel closed in 1985.

Father Alfred Horr, who served as St. Mary Magdalene's pastor from 1965-84, oversaw extensive renovations to the church completed in 1966. Those renovations included adding two wings, doubling the church's size.

St. Jude's Chapel was the last to be established. By 1962, the number of summer vacationers attending St. Thomas forced Father Heindl to consider either expanding the church or purchasing another building.

The parish decided to purchase a Fair Haven building owned by the Rebekah's Hall of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Temple. The first Mass was celebrated on July 29, 1962. Now each summer St. Thomas is closed from late June

Vital statistics

Catholic Community of the Blessed Trinity:
St. Mary Magdalene, Wolcott
St. Thomas the Apostle, Red Creek
St. Jude's Chapel, Fair Haven
Significant dates: Cluster established July 1, 1985; St. Mary Magdalene (1940); St. Thomas (1875); St. Jude's (1962). Attendance: 300 parishioners (winter), 550 (summer).

until early September when Masses are celebrated at St. Jude's.

The decision to cluster the parishes in 1985 followed months of discussions concerning the clustering of parishes in eastern Wayne County and northern Cayuga County. Father Smith, who had already been serving as St. Mary Magdalene's pastor since 1984, became pastor of the cluster created out of two Wayne County parishes and the chapel.

Clustering was a relatively new concept in the diocese at that time, making parishioners of the Catholic Community of the Blessed Trinity among the first to experience this new arrangement.

In January, 1993, they also briefly experienced yet another solution to the priest shortage.

Father Smith left the parish in December, 1992, to become full-time chaplain at the Butler Shock Incarceration Facility. But the new pastor, Father Forni, was on sabbatical until June of 1993. Consequently, Gloria Ulterino was named the cluster's administrator, handling the parishes' day-to-day operations while visiting priests provided sacramental ministry.

"It was generally a very positive experience," Dates recalled. "So if down the road there is no priest available, we know having an administrator can be good."

Moreover, the changes of the past few years have helped to ready the parishes for whatever awaits over the horizon, Dates speculated.

"We are moving along to the 21st century," she observed. "Who knows — for all churches — where that is going to lead us."

Upcoming Profiles

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- Aug. 28: St. Gabriel, Hammondsport
- Sept. 11: St. Bernard, Scipio Center
- Sept. 25: St. Agnes, Avon

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