

# Avon parish expands its outreach to members

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

AVON — Potential visitors to St. Agnes Church's rectory should be forewarned that a vicious, snarling, saber-toothed canine named "Zeke" will greet their arrival and let them know who's boss.

At least that's what the pastor, Father James C. Burke, would like to have visitors believe.

"We got him to be a watchdog," the priest said as the dog playfully bounded about the rectory, 108 Prospect St. "But he hasn't turned out to be."

Having philosophically accepted Zeke's lack of hostility toward strangers, Father Burke noted that the dog now occupies the position of public-relations representative on behalf of St. Agnes and its more than 2,200 parishioners.

St. Agnes has existed as a parish since 1845 when it belonged to the Diocese of Buffalo. At that time, Father Mark Murphy of Greece first celebrated Mass in a local Catholic's home, a practice continued in several other homes and town buildings until 1853.

St. Agnes' current church building, constructed in 1869, replaced a wooden structure that served St. Agnes' parishioners from 1853-69, according to a parish history. Every morning at least 30 parishioners attend Mass in the current church, Father Burke said.

He added that several parishioners stay after Mass every other week on Wednesdays for an open question-and-answer forum hosted by Deacon Owen F. Bowers. The forum alternates with an open Bible study class, he added.

Deacon Bowers noted that many of the questions voiced by parishioners at the forum focus on church teachings regarding contemporary issues.

"They might be some of the topics they've read in the paper," he said. "Others are closer to home."

Members of St. Agnes Church are looking for spiritual guidance in the ever-changing social climate marking today's world, noted Christine Coniglio, religious education coordinator.

"Many are struggling to raise their children in the faith," she said. "The world keeps them moving so much. When they come to Mass, they're looking to be fed and inspired."

To that end, Coniglio said she has attempted to make the parish's religious education programs "family-friendly."

St. Agnes has a library for parishioners, and offers a program called "Sunday Special," which uses readings from Sunday Mass as the basis for family religious education, she said. Catechetical classes for children ranging



St. Agnes folk group members sing during a Sept. 11 Mass at the Avon parish.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

from age 3 all the way through high school are also available, she said.

Children form an important part of St. Agnes' musical life, too, according to Charles T. House, director of the 12-member folk group. Seven of the members are grade-school children, House said, noting that these children have been singing with adult group members at weekend Masses for two years now.

Some of the parish's children attend St. Agnes School, which also serves non-parishioner youths. Whether the school is a financial burden on the parish has concerned St. Agnes for years, but Joanne Cole, a school board member, believes that parishioners want the school to continue.

"I think there are some who maybe think the school is a drain on the parish, but, for the most part, I think most people support the school," she said.

She added that parents provide most of the school's funding through tuition and fundraising, and that their dedication shows how important the school is to parish life.

Young people at St. Agnes are increasingly more visible, noted Coniglio, who also coordinates youth ministry in addition to religious education for the parish's public-school children.

The parish has made youth ministry a priority since discussions preceding the 1993 Diocesan Synod made it apparent that St. Agnes' teenagers needed a regular program, both Father Burke and Coniglio asserted.

Since its formation, the youth group has distinguished itself by its monthly

## SNAPSHOTS

### Ministerial staff:

**Pastor:** Father James C. Burke  
**Deacon:** Owen F. Bowers  
**Parish Visitor:** Mary Lou Marks  
**Religious Education Coordinator:** Christine Coniglio  
**Principal:** Catholic School System in Avon, Vicki Rose  
**Parish Secretary:** Joan Ippolito  
**Bookkeeper:** Lynne Siragusa  
**Cemetery Secretary:** Vera Smyth  
**Parish Council Chairwoman:** Carol Cottone

volunteer work at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality in Rochester, and by working with a local Methodist church to put on a twice-yearly pancake breakfast, Coniglio said.

Youth group member Lindsay Gibson, a senior at Avon Central, pointed out that donations collected at the breakfasts go to St. Joseph's and other area food pantries and soup kitchens.

"It's just great knowing that you're giving back to the community and the less fortunate," she said.

A community such as St. Agnes is held together through prayer, something the parish's Prayer Network attempts to highlight, according to Cindy Zhe, a network leader.

The Prayer Network's 30 members are regularly given the names of parishioners who request that members pray

on their behalf, Zhe said.

"Sometimes in a tragic situation, people in the parish feel like they can't help the family," she said, adding that praying for someone "feels like you're doing something."

"We keep prayer in the limelight so that everyone knows that people are praying together for their intention," she continued.

She added that the network allows some of the parish's older members to participate in a ministry if they are unable to leave their home for one reason or another.

Robert J. Quinn has made of point of making the parish's sick and dying a part of St. Agnes, too. He has distributed the Eucharist to the homebound and sick for the last decade.

"You don't have to have any kind of skill except the skill of listening," Quinn said of his work. "I end up getting back more than I give."

That's the message Carol Cottone, chairwoman of the parish pastoral council, hopes to send Catholics through the "Call Five" program instituted last year.

Participants in Call Five telephone five parishioners a month to conduct an informal survey of what they want from St. Agnes Parish, Cottone said.

Inspired by a similar program at St. Joseph's Church in Livonia, the parish hopes to learn what its faithful need as well as find what keeps the parish's inactive members from participating.

"What we're trying to sell is to let them know we're available to you," she said.

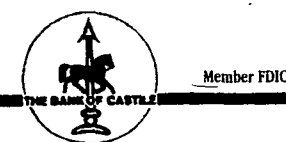
  
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