

PARISH
FEATURE

Parish maintains tradition in city of diversity

Parish Profile
Immaculate Conception, Ithaca



By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ITHACA — In a city long known for its progressive culture, Immaculate Conception Church has been marked by a contrastingly traditional mind-set.

Located at 113 N. Geneva St. in downtown Ithaca, Immaculate Conception serves a city renowned for its collegiate setting in the same way that Rochester is known for Eastman Kodak Company and Corning for its glass center.

Cornell University rests just under two miles to the east of Immaculate Conception, and Ithaca College lies a similar distance to the south. These two institutions draw students, professors and their families from all parts of the world.

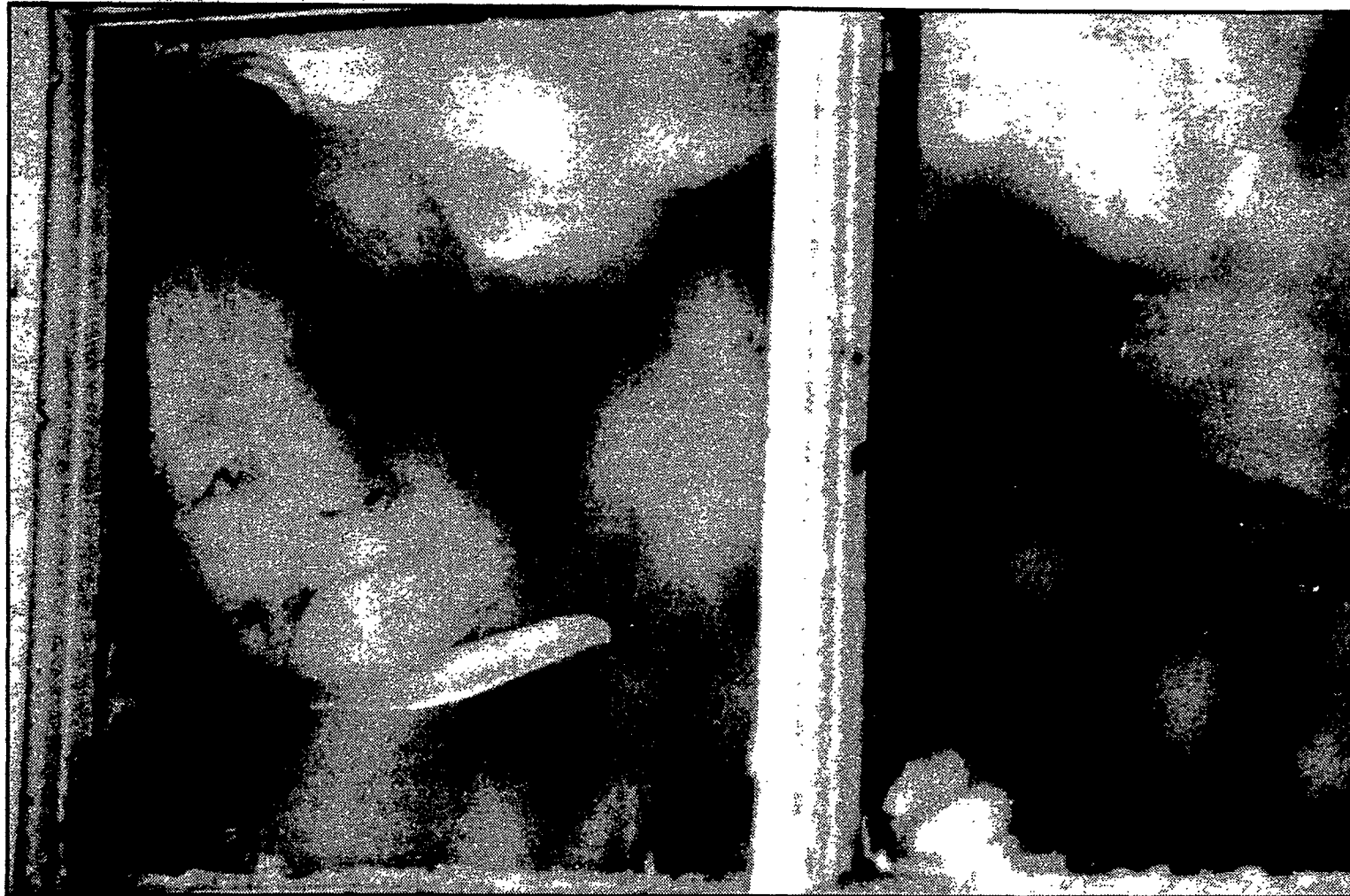
"This is a nice place to live if you want to get an education on your own. Just talk to the people who are from different places," remarked Claude Colleyacme, 77, a lifelong Immaculate Conception parishioner.

"You tend to get all kinds of nationalities and religious perspectives," said Father Bernard L. Carges, Immaculate Conception's pastor since 1975.

This environment often causes Immaculate Conception to stand out, noted Deacon James D. Hankey.

"It's a city of liberals — not the things you'd expect a Catholic to be," said Deacon Hankey, who also serves as the parish's business manager.

Founded in 1848, Immaculate Conception stood as Ithaca's only Catholic parish until St. Catherine of Siena was



Two-year-old Jocelyn Stooks Sept. 18 peeks playfully out of the Stuart Park Pavilion in Ithaca during Immaculate Conception's parish picnic. S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

founded in 1960. Immaculate Conception's current church edifice — the parish's third — was dedicated by then-Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid in 1898.

The spacious building with its stunning stained-glass windows has experienced few changes, noted Colleyacme.

"I know that at a lot of churches it hasn't been that way," said Colleyacme, referring to parishes where substantial church renovations have taken place. "We've been fortunate in that we've kept it pretty much the same, more or less. It's the people's church."

Father Carges helps add to the "people's church" image by leaving the church doors unlocked until past 8 p.m. each day. "There's a great following of people who stop in for daily visits," the Ithaca pastor remarked.

In regard to the building's upkeep, Colleyacme commented that parishioners "have always been very good about contributing for everything we've got to have money for." He noted a unique method of fundraising employed in the 1930s by the late Monsignor William Byrne, who would place a chart in the rear of the church documenting what each parishioner had contributed.

"Everybody knew what everybody was giving," said Colleyacme, who added with a smile, "He got the money."

More recently, finances have been a crucial issue surrounding Immaculate Conception School, located at 320 W. Buffalo St. The only Catholic institution in Tompkins County, Immaculate Conception has operated since 1884.

Yet its middle-school portion was in danger of closing down until parents and alumni launched a fundraising and recruitment effort in the early 1990s, allowing the facility to remain open. According to Diana Baker, principal, the drive enabled Immaculate Conception's 1993-94 enrollment to surpass 200 for the first time in several years. Enrollment for 1994-95 is currently 212.

Many families have also shown their loyalty to Immaculate Conception by staying connected with the parish even after they've moved outside the city.

"It's a larger geographic area now. You've got people coming from all over," said Deacon Hankey.

Of course, even the most heritage-steeped parishes must face the reality of changing times. Those interviewed for this story emphasized the need for

Immaculate Conception's lay community to assume active roles in light of a declining number of clergy and women religious serving today's church.

"We have to look at our needs from a non-traditional viewpoint," remarked Deacon Hankey.

"We got accustomed to having the nuns and priests doing things for us. It's almost like we suffer from our riches of the past," acknowledged volunteer youth minister Barb Ozminkowski. "We're finally getting this wake-up call."

"The responsibility of Barb wasn't there 20 or 30 years ago. That was a staff responsibility," Deacon Hankey noted.

The benefit of lay involvement such as Ozminkowski's is revealed in the youth program's progress. Formed just over a year ago, membership is currently 25 children in grades 6 to 9.

"I've heard anything from 'it's about time' to compliments on the activities we've done, like Living Stations and community service," said Ozminkowski.



SNAPSHOTS

Immaculate Conception Church
113 N. Geneva St., Ithaca, N.Y.
Ministerial staff:
Pastor: Father Bernard L. Carges
Parochial Vicar: Father Eugene P. Sweeney
Pastoral Associate: Sister Elise Quigley, RSM
Deacon: James D. Hankey
Religious Education Coordinator: Caryl Funke
Music Director: Jayne Demakos

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