

# PARISH PROFILE

## Strong-willed parishioners to celebrate 150th

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

REXVILLE — It could have been the final — and saddest — chapter for one of the oldest diocesan parishes.

On June 9, 1981, a fire caused by a lightning strike burned St. Mary's Church to the ground. In several ensuing meetings, parishioners and diocesan officials debated the possibility of dissolving the parish, rather than building another church.

But from the church's ashes emerged a pyre more fervent than the devastating blaze itself: the will and determination of the St. Mary's community.

"There's a lot of pride in this church, and we weren't going to be told it won't be rebuilt," remarked Francis Meehan, 70, a lifelong St. Mary's parishioner.

With insurance money fully covering expenses, a new St. Mary's Church was constructed. And, by the time the new edifice was dedicated at the original church site on Feb. 19, 1984, sadness had been replaced by triumph.

Parishioners will have another chance to exult in their victory over the elements on Sunday, Oct. 15, when St. Mary's celebrates the parish's 150th anniversary. Bishop Matthew H. Clark will celebrate the 11 a.m. Mass, which will be followed by a dinner. In addition, the 150th-anniversary committee has created a display of memorabilia from the church's lengthy history.

Many of the 130 families in this southern Steuben County community have roots going all the way back to the parish's early years, said Meehan.

"The people are mostly farmers. They're all independent business people," noted Meehan, whose family's dairy business spans four generations.

Due to the nature of their duties — 16-hour-days, seven days per week are typical — these farmers rarely venture outside of Rexville.

"There was a period of 21 or 22 years where the farthest my wife and I traveled was Hornell," said Meehan.

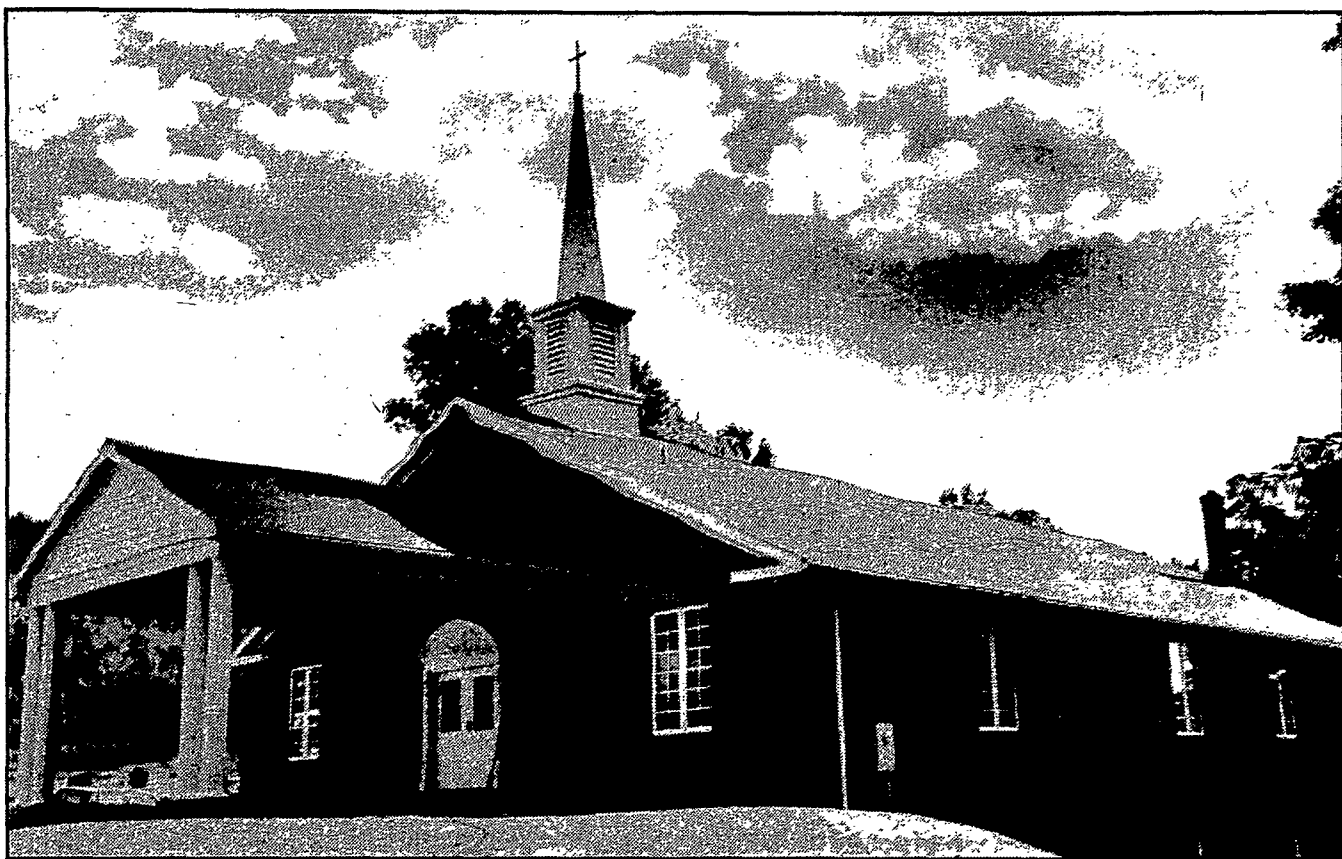
"No vacations, long hours," agreed Margaret Lewis, whose grandmother became the second person baptized at St. Mary's in 1845.

The demands of farming often make it difficult for Catholics to break free to attend parish functions, noted Kerry O'Brien. Even leaving the farm for a few hours can result in significant losses of milk for his business, he said.

Yet O'Brien does not use this dilemma as an excuse to stay away from church. He serves as parish-council president, teaches religious education and organizes youth functions.

The practice of passing a strong Catholic faith to successive generations is a noticeable dimension of the St. Mary's community, said parish pastor Father Stephen R. Kraus.

"I notice that parents take a very deep interest in the



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Dedicated in 1984, the new St. Mary's Church in Rexville was built after a 1981 fire destroyed the original structure.

faith of their kids. There was a very deeply ingrained faith here, and it's holding on," Father Kraus commented.

The faith is shared by parishioners in both good times and bad, he acknowledged.

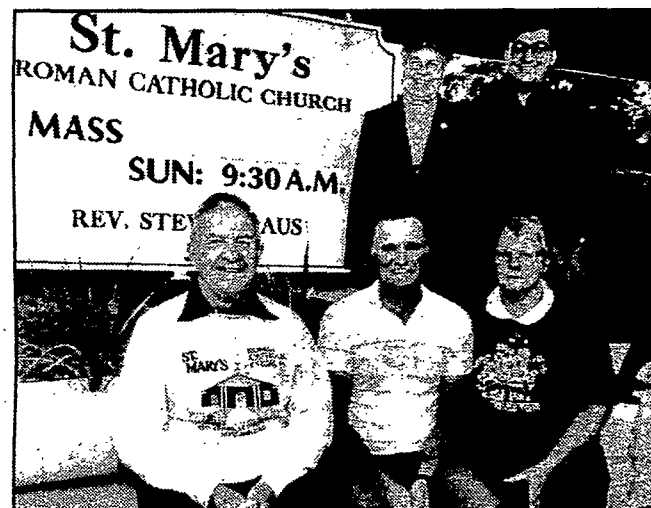
"I have never been in a place where there are as many people for weddings and funerals as there are here," remarked Father Kraus. "It's that kind of togetherness that's characterized this parish."

Despite its traditional aspects and rural setting, St. Mary's also takes an active role in current issues affecting the Rochester diocese. Parishioners enthusiastically took part in the diocesan Synod, targeting such parish needs such as adult education, O'Brien said.

"We were able to set a lot of goals," he noted. "It gave everyone a chance to be involved," Meehan added.

As for this Sunday, the St. Mary's faithful are looking very forward to involving themselves with the special Mass in their 11-year-old structure to commemorate the 150-year-old parish.

"Parishioners here are very, very proud of this building," Meehan concluded. "Very, very proud."



Leaders at St. Mary's in Rexville — from left (front row): Francis Meehan; Kerry O'Brien; Margaret Lewis; (back row) Sister Virginia McGlynn, SSND; and Father Stephen R. Kraus — will join other parishioners this weekend in celebration of the parish's 150th anniversary.

## Finding our voice through memories

By Robert A. Healy, AIA

How do we nurture a community in the process of a building or renovation project? How do we invite the parish together for adult decision making that leads to consensus and avoids a voting process that would immediately result in winners and losers?

Consensus is a way to move projects forward in a gospel manner. The gospel is not always about the majority. It is often about the minority being a witness to change the hearts of the many.

So often, our nature is to make decisions quickly. To properly address difficult decisions, the community must sit with one another to discuss the issues. We can encourage a system of non-judgmental listening and talking by presenting the proper questions — questions that allow people to find their voice so that every answer is the right answer. We can achieve this by sharing our memories.

Consider these issues to generate

community discussion:

- Recall one special time in your life when you felt truly close to God. Does your memory speak of peace, connection, comfort or fear?
- What do you remember about worship as a child? Do thoughts of family, fasting, dressing up or Latin come to mind?
- If you could take only three things into the future to explain what is essential in being a Catholic, would they be words that speak of hope, acceptance and love?

Ask for memories and truly listen to the voices. As issues are given a human face, the sensitivity around them changes. Suddenly, within a community, you find a diverse core memory system that needs to be celebrated. And when people are in a posture of speaking out of vision, it becomes easier to deal with statues, kneelers and tabernacles — for now there is context to what we are called to do.



Robert A. Healy, AIA is Vice President and Director of Architecture at LaBella Associates, P.C., 300 State Street, Rochester, NY 14614, 716-454-6110. Specializing in the design needs of the Catholic Church, he has worked with parishes throughout Western New York. This series of articles reflects the issues raised at Form/Reform: The National Conference on Environment and Art for Catholic Worship, held in San Diego, California in March, 1995.

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