

PARISH PROFILE

Auburn parish balances traditions, new ways

Parish Profile

St. Francis of Assisi, Auburn



By Lee Strong
Associate editor

AUBURN — For anyone hoping to get a sense of St. Francis of Assisi Parish, the 10:30 a.m. Sunday Mass is a good place to start.

The music for the Mass features organ and many of the traditional hymns sung for generations at the church.

But during the Liturgy of the Word, the children are led away for "Children's Church" to hear the Scripture message read and explained to them in language they can understand.

The Mass illustrates the attempt to balance the traditional devotions of long-time — generally Italian — parishioners with the needs of younger people.

That balancing act is not always easy, acknowledged Frank Netti, who in November will complete a term as a parish trustee.

"We have a lot of elderly people in the parish, and the younger people have to realize their needs," Netti said. At the same time, he continued, "We're trying to grow so younger people see something interesting and want to be there."

Thus for traditionalists, St. Francis of Assisi offers Sunday evening rosary services at the Lourdes Grotto, the largest Marian shrine in the Diocese of Rochester. Other shrines on parish grounds honor Our Lady of Fatima, St. Leucio and Mother Cabrini. A large mural of St. Francis of Assisi hangs in the church above the former high altar, and a life-size wooden cross stands at the northeast side of the parking lot.

Moreover, every Friday, the church is open for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. On Aug. 15 each year, parishioners stage a parade — complete with band — around the neighborhood to honor Mary on the Feast of the Assumption. Twice each year, the parish hosts triduums, or three days of prayer, led by Capuchin Franciscan priests.

"I've tried to maintain that so we don't lose that," observed the pastor, Father Robert L. Beligotti, of the triduums.

At the same time, however, the parish is undergoing changes to take into account changing circumstances.

As part of the synod goal to provide adult education, for example, the parish has begun a Sunday morning coffee hour for parents to discuss faith issues while their children are attending religious education classes.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Father Robert L. Beligotti, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church, blesses parishioners' pets during the Auburn parish's feast day Oct. 4.

And as part of the outreach to young families, the parish has an "Adopt a Family" program through which a series of letters are sent to parents of children slated to be baptized, and contact is maintained with the parents and the child for up to three years after the baptism.

"I think the synod process was good for us because it brought people out who were interested in personal devotions and gave them a broader parish way of looking at things," noted Netti, who led the parish synod committee.

But parishioners have always responded well when needs arise, noted Religious Education Coordinator Jack Wilson.

"When Father (Patrick) Seelman (TOR) was here and we had to do renovations of the buildings, (the people)

came up with three quarters of a million (dollars)," Wilson recalled of Father Seelman's pastorate from 1985-91. "They are very generous."

"We're very proud," acknowledged Parish Council Chairman Paul Saltarello. "Even though we don't have that many parishioners that come to the church, when we need money, they do respond."

This willingness to respond to a need is in itself a tradition at the parish — one that Mary Anne Giacona tapped into when she launched the Children's Church several years ago.

Giacona was concerned that Masses at the parish had little to offer the children. So she took it upon herself to organize the children's liturgy. The idea caught on — with 35 children attending the services.

SNAPSHOTS

St. Francis of Assisi Church
185 Clark St., Auburn
Phone: 315/252-7593
Registered families: 978
Incorporated: May 15, 1907
First church completed: 1908
New church completed: 1958
Staff:
Father Robert L. Beligotti, pastor
Jack Wilson,
religious education coordinator
Paul Saltarello,
parish council chairman
Deborah Pinckney, bookkeeper
Angela Franceschelli, secretary

the services.

"The whole experience started a whole other thing: The younger people finally felt involved," Giacona reported, noting that the families have subsequently gotten involved in other parts of parish life.

In choosing to take the initiative to get the program going, Giacona was following in the footsteps of the men and women who created the parish in the first decade of the 20th century.

The parish was incorporated May 15, 1907, to meet the needs of the the Italian immigrants. These immigrants volunteered their labor to build their first church under the first pastor, Father John Robotti.

The church was completed in 1908, but the spirit of parishioner involvement continued. In the early 1950s, for example, volunteer laborers under the supervision of an architect built the Lourdes Shrine.

All through the years, the parish has maintained its Italian flavor. Even today Father Beligotti includes messages in Italian in the parish bulletin.

Saltarello was attracted to the parish because of its ethnic atmosphere when he emigrated to Auburn from Italy in 1964. He also appreciates the way the old and the new are being balanced.

"We're still trying to follow the traditions, but not as strong as before because things do change," Saltarello observed.

One of the current challenges is to prepare for the future, Wilson noted.

"I see a lot of positive signs, with a little hesitancy on the part of the old-timers," Wilson said. "Father Beligotti is the type of fellow that wants to move forward."

One possible direction of the parish is greater cooperation with other parishes in Auburn — as it is currently doing with St. Mary's Parish in terms of RCIA.

But for now, the parish will continue to stress balancing the the wishes of old-time parishioners, young parishioners and the demands of the future, the pastor acknowledged.

"We must make our first priority to see to it that everyone who comes feels at home here and welcome," Father Beligotti stated.

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