

PARISH PROFILE

Southern Tier cluster blends histories, talents, faith

Parish Profile

Corning-Painted Post
Roman Catholic
Community



By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Mary Jo Searson was a parishioner at St. Patrick's Church in Corning for much of her childhood.

She and her husband Mike were married in 1973 at another Corning church, St. Mary's, and became parishioners there afterward.

The Searsons now live in Painted Post and reside among several people who own longtime ties with that village's only Catholic church, Immaculate Heart of Mary.

So at which of these churches do you suppose the Searsons are most likely to spot a mix of neighbors and friends? On Saturdays, the answer is none of the above.

According to Mary Jo, the Searsons often see acquaintances while attending the 5:30 p.m. Saturday Mass at Corning's third Catholic church, St. Vincent DePaul.

With five miles being the longest distance between any two of these four churches, it's not difficult to attend Mass in a variety of settings. And in recent years, this is exactly what parish leaders have encouraged their parishioners to do.

Next month will mark the sixth anniversary of the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community, in which all four churches now operate as a single parish. According to Father William V. Spilly, the outgoing pastor, the Corning-Painted Post area has been an excellent site for a cluster to flourish.

"In a small town like we have, it is ideal to work this way as church," said Father Spilly. "In a city like Rochester, you couldn't do this — it's too big."

Father Spilly sees the current configuration as a throwback to an earlier time, when St. Mary's Church served as the area's only Catholic parish for the latter half of the 19th century.

"Now we look at it as one parish and four churches," said Father Spilly, who has served as the cluster's only pastor up to this point. He will be replaced July 1 by Father Michael F. Conboy, currently the pastor at St. Joseph's Church in Penfield. (Father Spilly's duties after July 1 were still undetermined at press time, but he said he hopes to take on another parish assignment.)

Immaculate Heart of Mary, established in 1952, is the parish's youngest church; St. Mary's, founded in 1848, is the oldest. The cluster's other two



Domino Usiak and Christopher Babcock carry their first Communion banner to the altar at the beginning of the 9 a.m. Mass at St. Mary's Church, part of the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community. Fourteen young parishioners made their first Communion during the May 5 Mass.

churches were founded just nine years apart: St. Patrick's in 1904 and St. Vincent DePaul in 1913.

Some interesting geographical statistics characterize this cluster community. Despite the church buildings' closeness, parish boundaries stretch more than 200 square miles.

"It's probably the largest geographical parish in the diocese," said Father Spilly, who added that he drives approximately 30,000 miles per year.

The Corning-Painted Post cluster is also massive in terms of membership: At 3,300 families, it's the second-largest parish in the Rochester diocese.

However, by the late 1980s, parishioners found that it would soon be no longer possible to maintain one active priest at each of the four churches. With Father Francis R. Davis scheduled to retire in 1990 as pastor of St. Patrick's Church, a replacement seemed unlikely due to the declining number of available priests.

Parish reflection teams were formed at each of the four churches to plot their futures. According to Sister Edna Slyck, RSM, a pastoral associate in the cluster, these teams opted in January 1990 for a four-church community with a three-priest team.

Five months later, Father Spilly arrived in Steuben County with six years of cluster experience as pastor of the four-church Cayuga Team Ministry in Cayuga County. In his new assignment, his top goal was to instill unity in the Corning-Painted Post churches.



Mark Rossettie (center), receives his first Communion from Father Paul Bonacci while surrounded by his father Richard, brother Damian, and mother Lorraine.

"There are ways you build up that church community and also recognize the history prior to 1990," Father Spilly said. "You get through the external things and look at how much better it is to worship together."

The consolidation has seen four church offices replaced by a central office at St. Vincent DePaul. In addition, a community parish council has been added, along with a cluster transition committee "to help us walk into our future," Sister Slyck said.

The combining of liturgical celebrations, such as confirmation and the Easter Vigil Mass, has also helped erase old parish boundaries. In addition, the cluster's weekend Mass schedule was reduced last fall from 12 to eight Masses, prompting many parishioners to attend other cluster churches if they wished to retain their previous

Mass schedules. Thus the Searsons now opt for St. Vincent DePaul when they wish to attend Mass on Saturday.

"That caused people to break with their own church building," Mike Searson noted.

"There is more interchanging with a limited number of Masses. You will find you'll see several different parishioners," added Phil Dellisante, a St. Vincent DePaul member since 1937.

"I cannot recall a time when I've heard, 'I hate this Mass and I hate coming here,'" remarked David Seely, a 15-year member at St. Patrick's Church.

Barbara Hagy views the cluster churches as being "children who are all members of the same family."

One of this family's activities, so to speak, originates out of Immaculate Heart of Mary, where Hagy has belonged since 1963. Hagy noted that the church's Women's Group has recently added several members from the three Catholic churches in Corning. None of those churches, she said, were offering a similar social outlet for women at the time the cluster formed.

Despite these positive developments, some people acknowledge that the adjustment period has been gradual.

"Nobody wants to give up what's been of value to them for such a long time," Seely said.

"I have been at Immaculate Heart of Mary for so long, it's almost like home," Hagy added.

"That inherent feeling of, 'Hey, it's still my parish' — it's going to take time to go away," Dellisante acknowledged.

By the same token, Sister Slyck said, clustering offers many advantages.

"There are so many positives with the shared resources. When you put

BEST WISHES
FROM THE
FOLLOWING CORNING
AREA BUSINESSES...

Boomers
35 E. Market Street • Corning
(607) 962-6800

Gill Photographics
228 Davis Road • Corning
(607) 962-2133

Families need
loving care and
dedicated service
in time of loss.

We, as a professional
Catholic family, are here
to meet your needs.

Jack Haughey and family
HAUGHEY
Funeral Home

216 East First Street, Corning, NY 14830

(607) 936-9322

BARRE GUILD MONUMENTS

CORNING
GLASS
CENTER



Imagine...an International Celebration of Glass!

THE CORNING
MUSEUM OF GLASS

HALL OF SCIENCE
AND INDUSTRY

STEBEN
FACTORY

CORNING GLASS
CENTER SHOPS

Free admission to all residents living within a 25 mile radius. Open 7 days, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
151 Centerway, Corning, New York 14831 (607) 974-8271