

FEATURE

Communities encourage each other's faith, work

Parish Profile

Catholic Communities of St. Anne & St. Gregory



By **Kathleen Schwar**
Staff writer

PALMYRA — While in the interview process for a job with the Catholic Communities of St. Anne's & St. Gregory's in Palmyra/Marion, Angelika Sternowski attended the churches' celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi.

The one large Mass was held at the Marion Junior/Senior High School, the only place large enough to hold the total number of people who usually attend the churches' five Masses.

St. Anne's has 531 registered families; St. Gregory's has 280.

The feast day service reinforced her impression of the depth and strength of the lay leadership and various ministries in the parishes.

"I was almost in awe," she said. Special choirs sang; small Christian community leaders were blessed; a layperson gave a witness talk; a brunch and reception topped it off.

After being hired as religious formation coordinator, Sternowski decided at her first meeting with adults preparing for a children's liturgy to hold a few moments of faith sharing to help break the ice. She was unprepared for the how long and how open the discussion was.

"I had to say, 'You have to stop so we can get something done,'" she recounted, adding that she had been amazed at how the conversations had gone although, "They didn't know me at all." But such sharing seems typical at parish meetings, according to Mary Courtney, newly-elected cluster parish council president.

"We do that a lot," Courtney shrugged, "so it doesn't become just a meeting where 'I'm here for an hour-and-a-half meeting, let's vote on the issues and get out of here.'"

It's the kind of sharing that draws people to the Stephen Ministry — eight men signed up for this year's training, which is more typically taken by women — to become peer counselors dealing with people in crisis.

It attracts youth to become involved in such activities as making sleeping bags for the homeless or taking part in adoration or parish missions — and even inspired 15-year-old Jerry Aman to stand in front of the church one recent Sunday to invite the church to the annual mission.

It encourages the social ministry committee to organize such efforts as clothing migrant workers, ministering to prisoners and building houses for Habitat for Humanity.

Even babies seem to have their say at the

SNAPSHOTS

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St. Anne
136 Church St.
Palmyra, NY 14522
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St. Gregory
P.O. Box 71
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315/926-4323

Ministerial Staff:

Pastor: **Father Robert Gaudio**
Religious education coordinator:
Angelika Sternowski
Pastoral associate:
Dr. Denise Mack
Parish secretary: **Mary Rutkowski**
(Palmyra), **Kathy Weeks** (Marion)
Pastor Emeritus:
Father Francis H. Vogt (Palmyra)
Parish council president:
Mary Courtney
Cluster youth director:
Kathleen Fuchs-Johnson

church.

"If ever we tried to put all the kids who cry in a cry room," Courtney began, "It would explode," laughed Deni Mack, pastoral associate, completing the thought.

"Father has certainly fostered that atmosphere (of tolerance)," Courtney added.

"You see a lot of mainstreaming into the church," commented parishioner Joanne Popeck. "(The youth) are visible in the main church."

Youth have been especially visible since their confirmation process has required attending one of the diocese's search retreats, Father Robert Gaudio, pastor, noted. Not only have they remained active in church, but they've brought friends, he said.

One of the keys to the involvement is encouraging people to connect their lives to their faith, Father Gaudio said.

"We model that when the staff meets, we model that at Eucharist, we model that during the mission," the pastor observed. "It also develops a sense of confidence and leadership in people."

Youth follow that same model of faith sharing. Throughout their junior and senior high years, teens sometimes meet all together, but more frequently in smaller groups of 10, at homes and in the church.

"The idea is to make lifelong connections, both with adults and kids," Sternowski said.

Teens were among the more than 100 people attending the church's mission Oct. 20-24, which was based on a theme of the "Be Attitudes." Small groups formed after hearing guest speakers, to share thoughts



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Father Robert Gaudio lights the candles surrounding the altar during the first night of St. Anne/St. Gregory churches' annual mission Oct. 20 at St. Anne's Church, Palmyra. The evening service was one of a series of five, based on nine "Be Attitudes."

on ways to live out peacemaking, hungering for justice, and other "be attitudes." Parishioners carried candles home one night, roses another night and wiped salt water "tears" from eyes of the sorrowing another night.

Father Gaudio hopes more small Christian communities will develop out of the mission to help parishioners continue sharing on an intimate level over the next several years.

Parishioners also are encouraged to connect with their faith after daily Masses at church and Wednesday Masses at the local Towpath Manor seniors' high-rise building. In "dialogue homilies," Father Gaudio and Mack encourage give-and-take by parishioners during Mass, and later suggest a faith-sharing question to consider after church. The goal of the question is to invite people to react to what they heard at Mass.

Popeck said she carries these questions with her as she drives home alone after Mass.

"I talk to myself," Popeck reported. "It's a real stretching to develop our own spirituality."

Popeck also noted that Mack preaches regularly at each church, and at funerals, but said she hadn't realized how unusual it is for women to preach until meeting with

members of other churches.

"We love it and we take it for granted," she said. "We're blessed with two strong homilists who complement each other."

Mack, in fact, was co-editor of *Extraordinary Preaching*, a book of sermons women in the Rochester diocese have preached. The book came out this fall.

Mack brings to the parish "a deep sense of feminine spirituality," Father Gaudio said. "Deni kind of makes us more whole in that sense."

Clustering since 1986, too, has encouraged a wholeness and opened up opportunities, noted Mary Ellen Hickey, who has served in such varied capacities as organizer, resident historian, liturgist and parish council member since joining St. Gregory's in 1944.

Prior to 1986, St. Gregory's, had been a mission church at various times of St. Anne's and other churches. It had been independent parish only since 1949.

"Father Gaudio has seemed to have the gift of really bringing the two parishes together," she said. Noting that church members plan to discuss sharing services with St. Patrick's Church in Macedon, she added, "We really don't know what the next few years will hold for us."

But, she said, "We have to be open to where we are led."

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