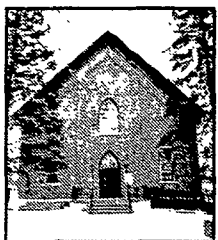


FEATURE

St. Patrick's Parish, Moravia, reaches milestone

Parish Profile

St. Patrick's,
MoraviaBy Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

MORAVIA — For 125 years St. Patrick's Parish has represented the Catholic presence in Moravia, a small village set deep in glacial valleys of southeastern Cayuga County.

"This is God's country," declared the pastor, Father Robert J. Downs, a Rochester native.

Dedicated Catholics have, over the years, kept up the original 1888 stately brick building on Grove Street and more recently-built rectory. They've seen the church through good times and bad, according to the church's late historian, Clara S. O'Connell.

"If they couldn't give money quite often they gave services, or farm produce for the pastor's food, or in depression years, helped those less fortunate than themselves," she wrote in a parish history in 1984.

The same dedication can be found in the parish today — even as parishioners struggle to keep up with costs and to plan for inevitable changes.

The parish is preparing itself in its 125th year for critical change — Father Downs retires in June. He also is pastor of the nearby St. Bernard's Church in Scipio Center.

The pastor said he has been a "one-man band."

"It's as much circumstances as attitude, because we can't afford people," Father Downs said.

He's the "music director" — minus a choir and organist. He's the parish council. He's the church secretary. He has taken only one sick day in his 12 years there.

Thankfully, he remembers, that sick day was shortly after about 12 parishioners trained in 1986 to become eucharistic ministers, and so a Communion service could be conducted without him.

To face the impending changes, a five-member Parish Planning Committee has been at work for more than a year. The committee released its recommendations at the two Jan. 4-5 Masses. Coffee hours were scheduled Jan. 11-12 for discussions, and a vote will be taken Jan. 18-19 to indicate parishioners' support for the recommendations.

"We weren't too happy with the idea we might face closure or whatever, but it is a fact of life," said Robert Hazelton, chairman of the committee. "There was some disappointment, some emotional response from myself and everybody else, I'm sure. ... Now, let's do what we have to do."

The committee's first recommendation was to continue with a pastor for St. Patrick's and St. Bernard's; its second choice was for a pastoral administrator with a sacramental minister. However, a temporary solution, for one year, will probably be put into place, Hazelton said.

Recently, the committee learned the pastor of St. Anthony's Church in Groton al-



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Father Robert J. Downs, pastor of St. Patrick's Parish in Moravia for 12 years, will retire this summer. He is hoping that Renew will help develop lay leadership.

so plans to retire this summer. There are several connections between the Moravia and Groton parishes, with relatives attending each and Groton parishioners sending children to school in Moravia, Hazelton said, so it is possible the two parishes may consider sharing some resources. The committee also is calling for a review of all churches in the area.

"People very much want to be here. Some have been here since they were children," Hazelton, who with his wife Margaret has been a member for 15 years, added.

Parishioners are hoping that a temporary solution also will give them time to see the fruits of Renew. The parish began the spiritual renewal program last fall and will continue it during Lent.

"People see that Renew is working," said Ruth Wood, volunteer religious education administrator since 1978 and a teacher since 1968. "In the first session we had in fall I had seen some people I hadn't seen in a while return."

"They realized it wasn't drilling them with catechism or anything; it is a faith-sharing group," she added. "I think people realized it is a good thing to share, to open up."

Summertime coffee hours on the lawn after Mass also give people a chance to gather after Mass, the one weekly opportunity to get together. People also look forward to an annual Palm Sunday breakfast



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Ornaments created by parish families are dated, blessed and hung on the church's Christmas tree each year.

SNAPSHOTS

St. Patrick's Church
51 Grove St.

Moravia, NY 13118
315/497-0626

Registered families: 90-100

Ministerial Staff:

Pastor: **Father Robert J. Downs**

Religious education administrator:
Ruth Wood

and an annual summer picnic.

The parish is a "working man's parish," said Pauline McGuerty, a 35-year member who serves on the planning committee. Members include semi-retirees such as herself, former co-publisher of the Moravia Republican-Register and current columnist and copy setter — and farmers, school faculty and staff, and retirees. Many of those people drive to Auburn or Ithaca to work.

McGuerty has been concerned about the decrease in the number of young people in the parish. Students in religious education numbered as high as 150 in the mid-1970s, but currently number about 40.

However, McGuerty said, "Renew does seem to be making a difference. Younger people are in on this and there's your future right there."

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