

## FEATURE

## Chemung cluster strives to create new traditions

## Parish Profile

St. Casimir,  
St. Charles  
Borromeo, Elmira



By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ELMIRA — Since the late 19th century, Catholics in Chemung County have clearly distinguished between St. Charles Borromeo and St. Casimir churches.

"St. Charles was the Catholic church in Elmira Heights, and St. Casimir was the Polish church in Elmira," Father Christopher Linsler said.

Recently, however, these churches have been called upon to examine their similarities. This ongoing process is the result of a 1994 clustering that made the two parishes into one.

Despite the often delicate nature of clustering, Casimir Krolak said parishioners have adapted smoothly to what is now known as the Roman Catholic Community of St. Casimir and St. Charles Borromeo.

"We thought there was going to be a problem, but somehow it just didn't happen," remarked Krolak, 73, a lifelong parishioner of his namesake church.

Rita Zarzedez said that solid preparation by both parish's pastoral councils helped prevent any major squabbles.

"The councils were very open. They put their concerns on the table; they didn't hide them. So we could work toward solutions together before they became real problems," said Zarzedez, a former council member at St. Charles Borromeo. She now serves on the cluster's combined parish pastoral council.

Zarzedez said she views the clustering as an opportunity for revitalization rather than a negative experience.

"Sometimes we tend to get into ruts in our lives," she remarked. "This has caused us to take a hard look at what we're doing, and how we're doing it."

Father Linsler, who became the cluster's pastor when it formed, applauded preparatory efforts of the lay people.

"They developed a vision statement that we try our best to remain faithful to," Father Linsler said.

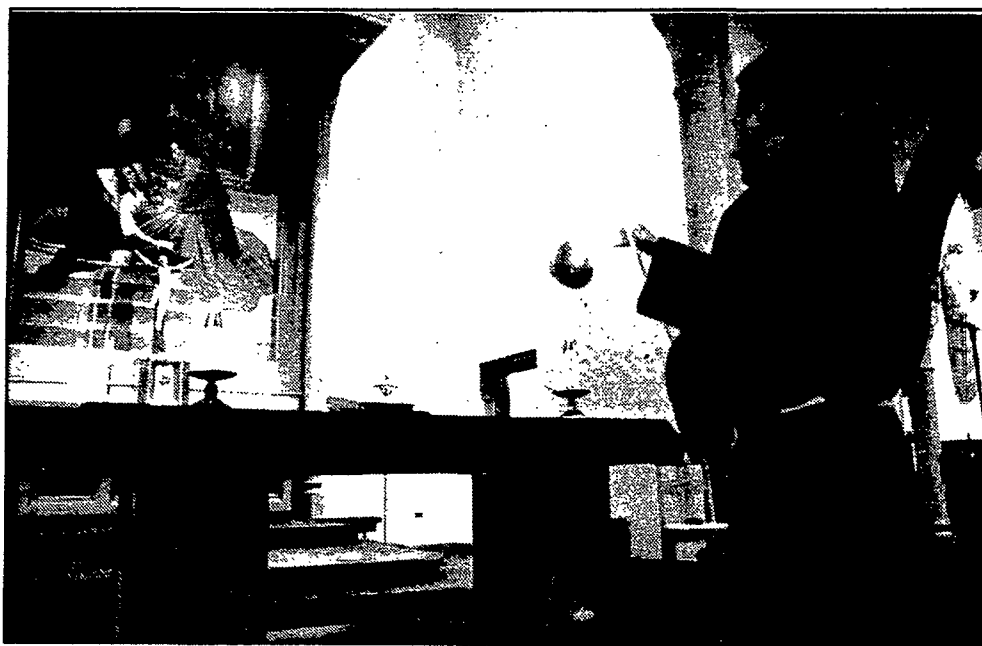
The St. Casimir-St. Charles Borromeo union-blends two longtime parishes that share similar locations, founding dates and sizes.

St. Casimir, located in northern Elmira, was the first of the two churches to be established. It was founded in 1890 to serve a large influx of Polish immigrants in the Elmira area.

Krolak recalled that many liturgies at St. Casimir were designed to provide immigrant families with warm memories of their homeland.

"There was all Polish music. That was the Mass for my mother," he said.

St. Charles Borromeo, located less than two miles to the north in Elmira Heights, was founded in 1897 as a mission parish of St. Mary-Our Mother Church in Horseheads. It became incorporated as a parish in 1935.



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Father Simeon Gallagher, OFM Cap., conducted a Parish Lenten Retreat held at both St. Casimir and St. Charles Borromeo, Elmira March 8-13. The theme of the retreat was "The Freedom to Believe: Becoming an Adult Catholic."

According to Father Linsler, St. Casimir is composed of 600 families and St. Charles Borromeo is made up of 500 families.

Deacon William Dougherty pointed out that Polish roots also run deep at St. Charles Borromeo, but families are less likely to speak in the native tongue. He added that the Elmira Heights church is also home to a number of Irish Catholic families.

Father Linsler said he has carefully weighed longstanding parish loyalties and traditions while asking two communities to act as one.

"I think there has gradually been a blend. (But) when you deal with churches and church buildings, these are matters dealing very closely with people's hearts — especially in a small town like Elmira," Father Linsler said.

"It's a very difficult process. You're about to lose a sense of identity," Zarzedez remarked.

Yet many parishioners began worshipping at both buildings, Deacon Dougherty noted, when the weekend Mass schedule was reduced shortly after the cluster was formed. St. Charles Borromeo currently holds 7:30 and 11 a.m. Masses on Sundays, and St. Casimir's Masses are at 4:30 p.m. Saturday and 9 a.m. Sunday.

"Most people in the cluster look upon our schedule as a parish Mass schedule," said Deacon Dougherty, who has belonged to St. Charles Borromeo since the 1950s. "Their attendance is based on convenience, not which church the Mass is held in. I'm very pleased to see that, and it's happening more and more all the time."

"I don't think it took a long time to become a routine thing," Zarzedez said.

Other combined efforts since the clustering include the religious-education



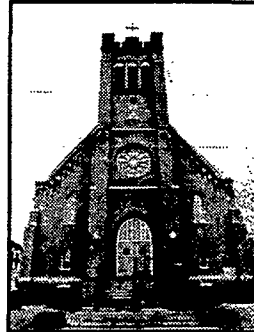
program, which numbers 130 children; and the parish pastoral council, which blends six members each from St. Charles Borromeo and St. Casimir.

In addition, the cluster recently sponsored its first Lenten retreat. Services were held March 8-13 and were divided between both churches.

Zarzedez, a St. Charles Borromeo

## SNAPSHOTS

Roman Catholic Community of  
St. Casimir and St. Charles  
Borromeo



St. Casimir:  
1004 Davis St.  
Elmira, N.Y. 14901  
Phone: 607/734-1622



St. Charles Borromeo:  
132 Oakwood Ave.  
Elmira Heights, N.Y. 14903  
Phone: 607/734-7619

Pastor:

Father Christopher E. Linsler

In residence:

Father Severine P. Yagaza

In residence:

Father Edward J. Foy

Deacon:

Deacon William P. Dougherty

Pastoral associate:

Sister Joanne Cullen, RSM

Religious education director:

Patricia LaFortune

Music director:

Joseph Milliken

Administrative asst. (St. Casimir):

Anne Bremer

Secretary (St. Charles Borromeo):

Marilyn Dickinson

Parish pastoral council president:

Francis Kamas

parishioner since 1981, said her church has become more welcoming toward the St. Casimir people who have begun attending services there.

"You want to make them feel comfortable," she said.

She added that St. Casimir has made similar efforts. "They probably have more tradition there, but they certainly make everything open to everyone," Zarzedez commented.

Congratulations to St. Charles Borromeo & St. Casimir

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