

# Health

## Healing ministries offer spiritual hope for ill

By Lee Strong  
Associate editor

**GATES** — The lines extended down the several aisles at St. Jude's Church the evening of May 19.

Some people were talking quietly. Some fingered rosary beads. Most were silent, watching.

Those at the heads of the lines were directed to stand side-by-side. Then Father Matthew Swizdor, OFM Cap, looking frail and thin and with slightly stooped shoulders, paused in front of each person. The Fleming native softly murmured prayers and held out his hands, sometimes touching shoulders or foreheads, other times merely holding his palm toward the person.

After he prayed over them, most people simply went back to their pews to sit and pray.

But a few fell backwards into the waiting arms of catchers, who carefully lowered those "resting in the spirit" onto the floor.

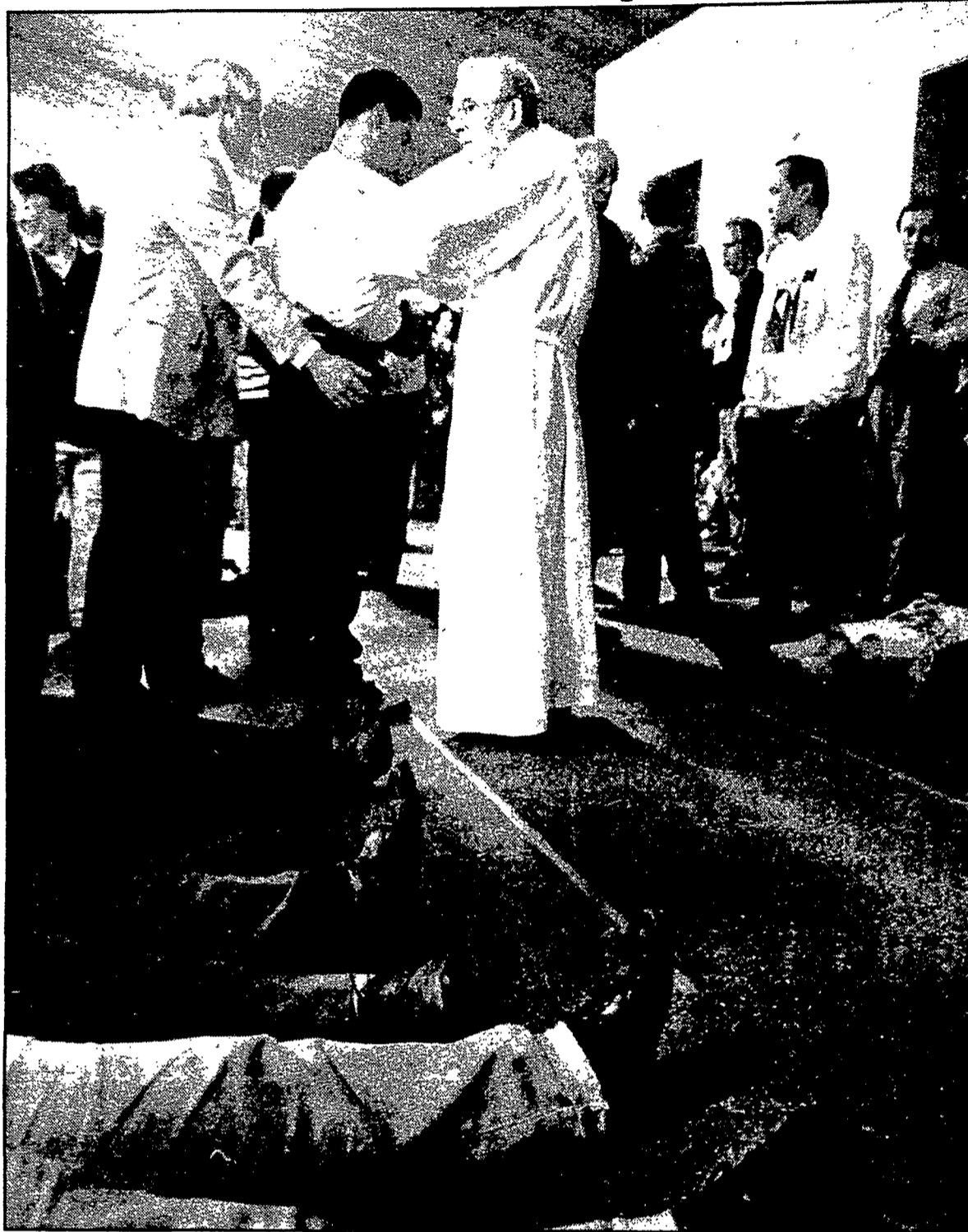
"When the Holy Spirit strikes you, you don't even know you are going down," Father Swizdor explained in a later interview.

That Monday night, it was not long before the floor was littered with people, some remaining motionless 10 minutes or more. New people approaching Father Swizdor had to step carefully. Eventually, they were shifted to an less-crowded spot.

Father Swizdor continued up and down the row until everyone who came forward had been prayed over — it took close to an hour after the Mass he'd celebrated. Then he remained in the church to talk to people and to hear confessions.

The 79-year-old Franciscan would do the same over the next four nights, packing the church for his first "Life in the Spirit" healing services since his heart attack a year ago.

That illness interrupted a heal-



Father Matthew Swizdor leaves a trail of faithful "resting in the spirit" at a healing Mass at St. Jude's Church, Gates, May 23.

ing ministry he has conducted for some 20 years now. In that span, he has presided at hundreds of

services, prayed over thousands of people, witnessed the spiritual and physical healings of countless individuals, and written three books about his ministry and reporting cases of healings — *Lay Hands on the Sick* (1983), *The Power*

*of the Kingdom* (1987) and *See God and Live* (1995).

"The Lord uses me to heal people," he explained. "I don't heal people; I'm just an instrument."

"I just pray with people," Father Swizdor continued. "My

main thrust is spiritual healing and spiritual renewal. If there is physical healing, I don't talk too much about that. The most important thing is to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit."

The spiritual enrichment provided by the services is a major draw for people, according to Pamela Gilfus, of Rochester's St. Stanislaus Parish, who attended all five St. Jude's services.

"We don't come for the healings," Gilfus said in an interview at the May 22 service. "My healings are interior. They are more a movement of my heart and my mind and my soul."

And individuals who go to the service know whom to credit for any healings, noted Sharon Norton, of Holy Spirit Parish, Penfield.

"The healing comes from God," Sharon Norton said at the May 22 service. "God will heal who he wants, and how he wants."

Father Swizdor, who works out of St. Hyacinth Parish, Auburn, is one of a handful of priests across the country noted for their healing ministries. The ministry began to spread in Catholic circles in the 1970s, particularly following publication of Dominican Father Francis MacNutt's 1974 book, *Healing*, and in conjunction with the charismatic renewal.

Father Richard McAlear, OMI, who comes to the Diocese of Rochester each fall to conduct healing services, discovered the ministry through his involvement with the renewal in Buffalo.

"The charismatic renewal reminded us that Jesus is active in the church today through the Spirit. The gifts of Spirit are very much needed," he said in a telephone interview from San Diego, where he was conducting a healing retreat.

"In the early to mid '70s, we were learning as we went," noted Father McAlear. His full-time job is vocation director for the Oblates of Mary in Washington, D.C., but he regularly conducts healing retreats and workshops.

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