

FEATURE

Family feeling endears St. Francis to parishioners

Parish Profile
St. Francis,
Geneva

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

GENEVA — Mary Bertino suspected something was up when Father Ronald Harley, pastor of St. Francis de Sales Church, headed down the aisle as Mass ended July 27 and asked people to remain for a few minutes. It also hadn't escaped her that most of her family was there for morning Mass.

He asked her to stand up and announced her birthday. The church full of people responded with applause and sang "Happy Birthday" to her.

"It was wonderful, the thing he did," said Bertino, a parishioner for all of her 80 years. "We are like family down here."

Don Ninestine, similarly, acknowledges, he's "gotten emotional" over the parish's caring both when his father died two years ago and when his wife Dolores was diagnosed last spring with cancer.

"The outpouring from the parish meant so much to us," he said. Numerous parishioners turned out to pay their respects to his father and to support him, he said, and sent get-well cards and prayers to Dolores, parish council chairperson until recently.

The couple has four children, all living out of state. In such lonely times, however, Don said, "It's not the same talking to the kids over the phone as when someone is coming up to me."

St. Francis de Sales, with 1,270 registered families, is the fourth oldest parish in the diocese, one of two parishes in Geneva. Its home is an expanded version of the stately brick church built in 1864-67, which itself incorporated the foundation of the original 1830s church. The people, according to Father Harley, have a "fierce loyalty" to their parish.

"People are willing to give the shirt off their back for it," he said.

Given that and local history, he said, it is a big deal for the church to be collaborating with St. Stephen Church as the churches approach a major transition under the diocesan strategic planning process.

"You belonged to 'Christian Hill' or the 'butt-end of town,'" Father Harley said, summing up the old-time rivalry. St. Stephen's is built on a hill; St. Francis is on a lower main street of town.

Yet the parishes have increasingly cooperated, especially since their elementary schools consolidated 15 years ago. They hold combined staff meetings monthly, with one outcome being a shared Mass schedule for Holy Days and the past summer. The social ministry committees work jointly. The parishes hold a combined annual picnic. Parishioners also help staff the perpetual eucharistic adoration chapel at St. Stephen's.

There was an earlier precedent for this cooperation between the parishes.

After severe arson damage in April 1965 closed St. Francis for a year, St. Stephen's welcomed their neighboring parishioners to use the church on the hill, especially for

weddings and funerals. However, St. Francis parishioners met for Mass in a downtown movie theater.

"If anything, it strengthened the loyalty," Don said of the fire.

The timing of the repair work meant the church became one of the first in the diocese renovated according to the new liturgical guidelines of the Second Vatican Council, according to Father Robert F. McNamara, diocesan historian. Visitors came from miles away to see it, according to a parish history.

The main attraction was the permanent marble altar facing the people, which replaced a wooden Gothic-style altar. A mural of the risen Christ was painted behind the altar. A "river of grace" painting flows from one end of the church ceiling to the other. Two large wooden confessionals/reconciliation rooms, down from four, are positioned on either side of the church. Light filtering through stained glass windows, most installed in 1935, and reflecting off pale blue walls create a bright atmosphere.

Numerous St. Francis' parishioners can remember the 1965 arson and two other fires, which struck the elementary school in 1940 and St. Francis de Sales High School in the mid-1940s. The congregation is largely an older one, many members having raised their children and retired. When Father Harley arrived nine years ago, he had worked primarily in parishes with younger congregations. He acknowledged having been a bit anxious. However, he was soon delighted with his new parish.

"It was a wonderful experience to come here, parishioners were expending all these energies and time. The talent bank is wonderful," he said.

"There is a wonderful spirit in the community. It comes from, (A), people have known each other all their lives, and (B), they really like one another and really care for one another," Father Harley said. "They'd do anything for one another. Before the 4:30 Mass Saturday, they start rioting for seats at 3:30. There's a real buzz."

There's also a "buzz" among the Hispanic population, who attend the one monthly Spanish Mass at St. Francis and also attend either English Masses there or Spanish Masses at St. Michael's Church, Penn Yan.

Epifanio Candelario, born in Puerto Rico, was among the first Hispanics to join the church, arriving to stay and work at the Geneva Foundry in 1950.

"I love them there, they're nice people," he said of his fellow parishioners. He helps with Mexican Catholics who come to work temporarily on farms, driving them get to



T.J. Tristano
Father Ronald Harley, pastor of St. Francis de Sales Church, Geneva, (center) presides at Mass Aug. 10 at Seneca Lake State Park, along with Msgr. Gerard Krieg and Father Brian Jeffers of St. Stephen's Church (far left, left to right). The Mass preceded the parish's joint church picnic with St. Stephen's Parish, one of many joint activities for the two Geneva parishes.

church, for example.

"When somebody needs something, we help each other," he said. "That's the way it should be."

In 1996 the parish joined area parishes and Catholic organizations in hiring Xochitl Palacios as the diocese's first regional Hispanic pastoral associate for Yates and Ontario counties. She works out of St. Francis.

Parishioners like Dolores Ninestine recall when four priests served the church, assisted by residents of the former Capuchin monastery (now Geneva on the Lake) and DeSales High School principals. But when Father Harley arrived, he replaced two full-time priests.

"People were afraid I was sent here to close the parish," the pastor said, adding he believes, however, both Geneva parishes are large enough and healthy enough to survive — if they collaborate where they should.

As sole pastor, he welcomed lay participation. In eight years the Stephen Ministry, for example, has grown to 17 people who visit people who are grieving for one reason or another.

"They've been a great help to me and people of the parish," Father Harley said. In addition, 20 eucharistic ministers regularly visit 100-150 homebound parishioners.

Liturgies, too, encourage participation. According to John Peters, who with his wife Joan, has been raising six children in the parish, "Our liturgies are very alive."

A lector and eucharistic minister himself, Peters heads the recently-formed sacrificial giving committee. He also teaches RCIA, participated on numerous committees, and with his wife oversees pre-baptismal preparation.

He and his wife, graduates of St. Stephen's School and St. Francis School, respectively, lived out-of-state after marrying in 1974. After moving back in 1980, he said, "We really feel since we've been back that we really belonged."

He appreciates that the older people

SNAPSHOT

St. Francis de Sales Church
130 Exchange St.
Geneva, N.Y. 14456
315/789-0930

Ministerial Staff:

Pastor: **Father Ronald P. Harley**

Hispanic ministry coordinator:

Xochitl Palacios

Pastoral associate:

Sister Lucy Jean, CSC

Cemeteries administrator:

Betty DiFederico

Religious formation coordinator:

Beverly Guerrie

School principal: **Elaine Morrow**

Pastoral musician:

Michael Osowski

Pre-baptismal ministry:

Joan, John Peters

Pastoral council chairperson:

Elizabeth Wiatrowski

Business administrator:

Karen Robideau

Secretary, religious education:

Melody Joyce

In residence:

Father Vincent Panepinto

Parish secretary: **Rita Antinelli**

have "set the pace," he said, because, "The whole family feeling perpetuates itself from one generation to the next."

Children are allowed the sacraments when they're ready, he also said. His son Kyle, 9, took his first Communion when he was about 4. In fact, Kyle can't remember it, it was so long ago. Kyle also has been an altar server since he was 5.

Kyle highly recommends St. Francis, saying that people should know three things: "The priest is nice, sometimes he tells jokes and sometimes in summer if it's too hot, he tells a shorter homily."

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