

FEATURE

Church volunteers find service hard habit to break

Parish Profile

Holy Apostles, Rochester

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Jack Fawkes, 81, graduated from Holy Apostles Elementary School in 1930, put his own kids through the now-closed institution, and still does volunteer maintenance work around the parish.

"It's kind of like a bad habit or a good habit," Fawkes said of his work for the parish. "You get into the habit, and you can't get out."

Since it was founded in 1884, Holy Apostles has been a habit for generations of families growing up in the Lyell Avenue area of Rochester. The parish began as a spiritual home for Irish and German immigrants, and later encompassed Italians, Hispanics and other ethnic groups. Holy Apostles received its name because it was the 12th parish to be established in the Diocese of Rochester, according to a parish history.

Like many city parishes, it has suffered a decline in membership over the past couple of decades, but the parish's volunteers seem as committed as ever to their church. Indeed, several noted that they no longer live in the Lyell Avenue area, yet prefer to keep attending Holy Apostles.

"Although I live across town, I feel the spirit of Holy Apostles is very special and supportive," said Fran Pullano, a member of the parish's finance committee. "You just don't leave those kind of people."

Ken Mattil, a volunteer sacristan, bingo worker and maintenance man, echoed Pullano's point.

"I grew up here," he said. "I've been to other churches, but this is where my roots are."

Mary Spaziano, who has done everything from work bingo games to paint the parking lot, also sees the parishioners as her spiritual relatives.

"Whenever a project here is needed, I'm usually here," she said. "I love the people. They're family to me."

Barbara Kier Stifter, president of the parish finance committee, expressed similar sentiments, adding that weekend Masses are both socially engaging and spiritual uplifting.

"You look forward to the 'Hello' before church, after church and even during church," she said. "It's like home in your life."

Holy Apostles is now home to 596 families, and many parish volunteers noted that two, three and even four generations of their families have attended church there.

"I'm the third generation of my family at

Holy Apostles, and I love it here," said Stifter's sister, Mary Ellen Kier, who volunteers for such tasks as lecturing and singing.

Kier pointed out that her great-grandfather, an Irish immigrant, worked in a quarry in Medina, in western New York, from which the parish procured the stone used to build the current church, completed in 1897.

The parish will celebrate the building's 100th anniversary with a free performance by 25 members of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra on Wednesday, Oct. 8, at 7:30 p.m. Father Daniel McMullin, parochial vicar, will share his tenor voice with the audience attending the event in the church.

Then, on Saturday, Oct. 11, Bishop Matthew H. Clark will celebrate a 3:30 p.m. Mass to mark the anniversary, along with Father McMullin and Father Paul Tomasso, pastor. Father Tomasso also serves as pastor of three neighboring churches — Ss. Peter and Paul, St. Francis of Assisi and St. Anthony of Padua.

Holy Apostles is also home to a retired priest, Father Benedict Ehmann. Father Ehmann, a well-known liturgical expert, has lived at Holy Apostles for 23 years, and said he was quite fond of the parish.

"I'm very grateful I'm even tolerated," Father Ehmann said jokingly.

Far beyond tolerating Father Ehmann, the parish recently honored him by naming a lending library at the parish in his honor in gratitude for his years of service.

Service seems to run in the blood of the parish's priests, according to Gerald T. Girvin, who is writing a parish history. For example, he said Father Timothy C. Murphy, the parish's first pastor, was admired by workmen in the area because he rolled up his sleeves and pitched in to build the parish's new church in 1896.

"They say that on summer nights, you could see all of the men with their picks and their axes and tools coming up Lyell and Austin streets after supper to work on the church until dark," Girvin said.

Thirty-seven modern-day parishioners took to the streets on Sept. 13, for the parish's first annual five-mile fundraising walk, organized by Rob Meli. The walk raised almost \$7,000 for building upkeep and repairs, he said.

"We were shooting for \$5,000," Meli said. "We're thrilled. It gives us encouragement for next year."

Not only did the walk raise money for the parish, it increased its visibility in the parish's neighborhood, Pullano said. Such visibility is important, according to David Klaus, parish pastoral council president, because the parish's membership is growing older, and he wants Holy Apostles to attract new members.

"If we show other people that we care, we'll eventually draw people in," he said. "Churches in general, and Christian churches in particular, provide a stabilizing force in an area."

Holy Apostles shows it cares through an extensive neighborhood outreach program, including a low-priced clothing store, Klaus said. The parish also supports a local food pantry, according to volunteer Barbara Huber.

Huber said she and a handful of volunteers collect donated food each week from the Wegmans supermarket on Monroe Avenue in Pittsford. The parish then distrib-



Greg Franca/Staff photographer

Above, Mary Ann Cuccaro organizes bags of bread Sept. 25 at Holy Apostles Church, Rochester. The food was to be delivered to shut-ins, the sick and poor people, and was donated by Wegmans Food Markets. At left, Father Benedict Ehmann, 92, starts the day with breakfast in the rectory. He has been at the parish 23 years.



utes the food on Thursdays to low-income residents and also gives some to shut-ins and to a local community center.

Like many Holy Apostles volunteers, Huber approaches her work with a sense of joy and humor.

"After all," she said, "I'm over 70, and I'm going to gain weight if I'm not keeping busy."

Along with the other three parishes Father Tomasso pastors, Holy Apostles is also exploring how it might serve many of the area's single mothers better, according to Carolyn Mastrella, a past president of the parish council who volunteers for several activities. Mastrella said such work would be in keeping with the diocese's third synod goal — to recognize and value the dignity of women in church and society.

Mastrella added that the parish is both supported by its elderly homebound parishioners — who gave much of the money raised in the Sept. 13 walk — and, in turn, supports them.

Sister Dorothy Mary Leising, SSND, pastoral minister, for example, noted that she ministers to 80 homebound parishioners on a regular basis, in addition to her other duties. Elderly parishioners appreciate a visit by a parish representative, or an occasional card, she observed.

"It's just a wonderful thing to know that you're loved this much in your golden years," she said.

Betty Spaziano, Mary Spaziano's cousin, spoke of her role as a eucharistic minister with the same enthusiasm Sister Leising expressed about her ministry to the elderly.

"I think it's an honor and a privilege to give the body and blood of Christ to my

SNAPSHOT

Holy Apostles Church
530 Lyell Ave.
Rochester, N.Y. 14606
Phone: 716/254-7170

Ministerial staff:

Pastor: **Father Paul Tomasso**
Parochial vicar:

Father Daniel McMullin
Assisting: **Father Benedict Ehmann**
Deacon: **John Antenucci**
Pastoral minister:
Sr. Dorothy Mary Leising, SSND
Parish coordinator: **Bonnie Fenner**

fellow Catholics," she said.

Spaziano is also a member of the Resurrection Choir that performs at funerals, according to Arthur Hammer, parish music director and organist. Music at all the church's services is a vital element of the parish's liturgical life, he said.

"I love music," he said. "To me, it simply adds immeasurably to the Mass and to other services."

That belief was shared by Marion Burke, head of the parish's liturgy committee. Burke also heads a contemporary singing and instrumental group that she said combines elements of folk, jazz and gospel in its music for Mass.

"It's just an uplifting feeling when you're singing and praising the Lord," she said.

Like Burke and the other volunteers, Lauretta Ford has volunteered for too many activities to list. A bingo worker and eucharistic minister, Ford credited her dedication to the parish to its faithful members and volunteers, including those, like her, who no longer live near the parish.

"I moved out of here 10 years ago, but only in distance," she said. "I've never severed my relations here."

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