

FEATURE

A Franciscan spirituality permeates St. Hyacinth's

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

AUBURN — The candles flicker throughout St. Hyacinth Church as Roberta Kukiela walks past the stained glass windows and 12 portraits of saints with light fixtures above each one and a kneeler below.

"The people here, they love their candles," she said. "They bring them comfort, myself included."

Candles also glow as one enters the church, before a shrine to Polish St. Maximilian Kolbe. The statue of the Conventual Franciscan, known for offering his life at Auschwitz for that of another prisoner, stands behind bars within a simulated prison.

Established as a Polish parish in 1905, and despite the strong attachments to Poland still evident in the church, St. Hyacinth is home today to more than 600 families of various ethnic backgrounds.

The parish exudes a Franciscan charism and spirituality, noted Father Robert Grzybowski, OFM Conv, who left New Jersey to accept his assignment as pastor six years ago.

"What brings people here is the blessing of animals, the Transitus and the novenas to the stations," said Father Grzybowski, whose congregation has staffed the parish since 1926. "These are three things which are Franciscan."

Environment, too, is important at St. Hyacinth. Monica Bryla, a member since baptism 58 years ago, has been active in helping plan elaborate scenes in the sanc-

Parish Profile
St. Hyacinth,
Auburn



tuary for many occasions.

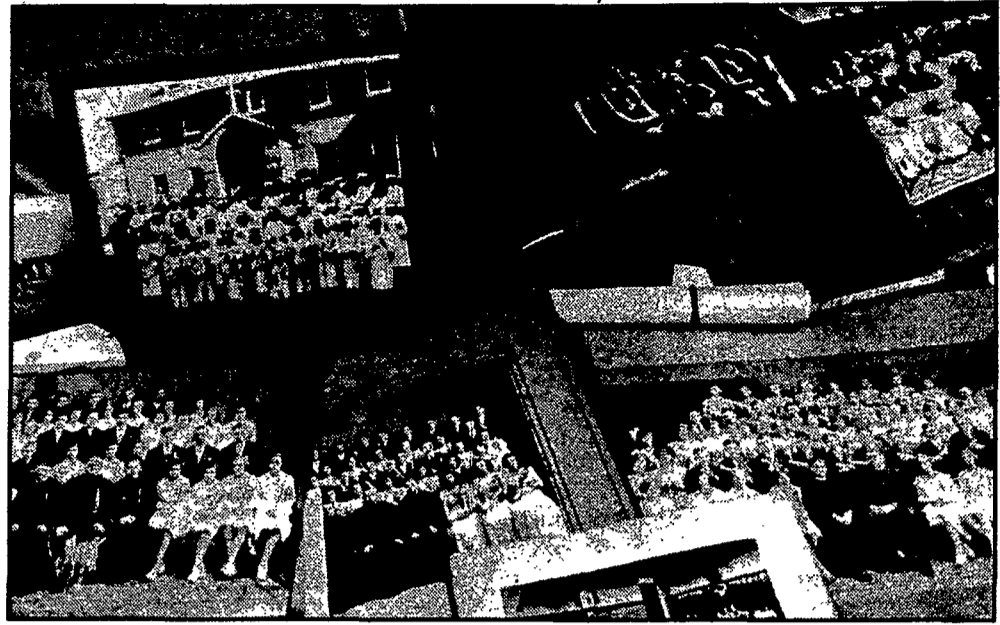
"What I've believed for years, is we're in charge of visual aids more or less, than decoration," she said. "To me, our job, my job is that when people come into the church from off the streets, off the parking lot, my job is to redirect their hearts and thoughts ... regardless of what has happened before church."

"I know that with the things we've done, we've had plenty of comments that come back to us," she added.

For Transitus, which memorializes the death of St. Francis, Bryla and other parishioners set up a garden in the sanctuary over the Oct. 4 weekend. A lifelike statue of the patron saint of animals and ecologists is placed standing on a "little rock mountain" against a backdrop of fresh pine branches, with other live flowers and greenery. Life-size figures of rabbits, squirrels and other creatures are placed around him.

For Easter, an empty tomb is set off by more than 100 pots of flowers placed down the steps from the altar.

"Father Robert is allergic to lilies, so we stray from lilies," Bryla explained. "We have a multi-colored garden around the



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Old St. Hyacinth School class photos and memorabilia were on display during an Oct. 9 "Seniors Night Out" at the parish center.



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Retired St. Hyacinth School teacher Helen Malek receives an apple and a hug from past student Billie Bishop at the Oct. 9 event.

altar." Silk butterflies with wing spans of 2-3 feet adorn that garden and the church walls.

"I think it's important to set the mood," she said.

The music, directed by Jim Viccaro, also sets the mood. St. Cecilia's Choir, named after the patron saint of music and musicians, has built up a wide repertoire over the years of contemporary and traditional songs, he said, often accompanied by flute, cello or violin.

"One of our traditions is to keep some Polish music they learned when they went to St. Hyacinth School," he said. "They pass it on to the other choir members."

Fall is a spiritual season for St. Hyacinth, not only because of the Franciscan traditions, but also for devotions such as 40 Hours, a eucharistic adoration that the pastor describes as ending with an elaborate Benediction.

"I find it a very prayerful community," said Helen Tolomay, who joined six years ago when she was hired as parish secretary. "There are a lot of opportunities for prayer groups or individuals."

Fall also is the time CYO basketball and cheerleading kicks in. Nearly every night till spring, dozens of children and their families fill the parish center gym.


"One stipulation is, to join they have to be regular parishioners," said Mary Emerson, CYO director, who's belonged to St. Hyacinth for about 30 years.

As young children, these parishioners may attend their own liturgy during Sunday Mass in a children's room established with donations from Jerome and Rose Wawrzaszek. It is dedicated to their daughter Bonnie Lynn, who died of leukemia in 1960.

They also can follow the Mass through color pictures in children's missalettes, published by the Franciscans, available in pews throughout the church.

After confirmation, teens are trained to serve as lectors.

The parish "rolls out the red carpet" for its parishioners, no matter the family unit: married, widowed, blended, singles or single parents, according to Kukiela, coordinator/administrator of religious education. Four times a year now, a "night



SNAPSHOT

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Ministerial Staff:
Pastor: Fr. Robert Grzybowski, OFM Conv.
Parochial vicar: Fr. Callistus Juras, OFM Conv.
In residence: Father Matthew Swizdor, OFM Conv.
Deacon: Deacon Cary DiLallo
Religious education coordinator: Roberta Kukiela
Parish secretary: Helen Tolomay
Choir director: James Viccaro

out" for parishioners 50 and older brings people together for fun and sharing of spirituality, she said.

"The thing is to have them see the person who sits in the first pew as someone other than the person who sits in the first pew," she said.

She came up with the idea after Father Grzybowski suggested borrowing a community van to pick up seniors unable to drive to Sunday morning Mass. Parishioner Ron Nervina now runs the van every Sunday. The nights out expand the time older parishioners can be together, she said.

Parishioners used to meet for church on the second floor of St. Hyacinth School. In 1964 the new church building was opened, on the other side of the rectory adjacent to the school. Since 1990 the school has merged with those of other Auburn parishes; the school building serves as the parish center and also is leased to Tyburn Academy, a private high school opened in 1993 under Father Albert Shamon.

St. Hyacinth has inspired 22 vocations — 11 women religious, 10 priests and his own, according to Permanent Deacon Gary DiLallo. The priests include Father Matthew Swizdor, who has a healing ministry and is the deacon's uncle.

Having grown up in the parish and now serving as a colonel in the U.S. Army 98th Division out of Rochester, he enjoys his two weekends a month back at St. Hyacinth.

"I enjoy immensely working with the people, praying there, preaching," he said. "Isn't it a beautiful church? There's a sense of holiness. God's home. You just have a good peaceful feeling."

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