

# Avon secretary retires after 33 years of duty

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

AVON — On Vera Smyth's last day as cemetery secretary at St. Agnes Church, her co-worker, Joan Ippolito, began tearing up as she recalled their years together.

"She's always been one of the most caring people I've ever met," said Ippolito, the parish's office supervisor, in her office that adjoined Smyth's. "Vera's been my hero because she's been very active ... She's a very special lady in every way."

"I don't think we've ever had a squabble," said Smyth, who is 78.

"I can't remember one in 15 years," Ippolito added, noting they began working together in 1983.

Smyth will be honored for decades of service to St. Agnes at a brunch in the parish center on Sunday, July 12, following 10:30 a.m. Mass. Her pastor, Father James C. Burke, said he has been particularly impressed by Smyth's ability to adapt to the computer age without complaint. Smyth has never stopped learning and improving her work skills, he explained.

"Most people sort of sit back and say 'Well, I don't know if I'm going to do anything anymore,' but she's always been very open-minded," he said. "She's a valuable asset to any pastor and to the community, and we're very sorry to see her leaving."

Smyth has been an active member of the parish since 1957, when she and her husband, Howard, moved from the Buffalo area, where she had grown up. Smyth said she loved being able to raise their five daughters in a small town like Avon.

"When the girls were growing up, it was so safe and everything," she recalled. "They could go bicycling out in the country and everywhere."



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

**Vera Smyth, cemetery secretary for St. Agnes Church, Avon, answers a phone call June 22 in the church office. She is one of several diocesan parish secretaries stepping down after years of service, and who are being honored by their parishes.**

She added that she has always liked the town's intimate atmosphere and relishes meeting her neighbors in such places as the local post office.

"You inquire about their family, and they inquire about yours," she said.

While their children attended the parish's school, Smyth was a Girl Scout leader at the parish, and she and her husband would do such tasks as paint the school's kindergarten furniture each summer.

In 1964, St. Agnes' then-pastor, Father

James C. Lane, asked Smyth to do some voluntary secretarial work and to serve on the church's cemetery committee. By 1965, she had added accounting and bookkeeping to her parish duties and became St. Agnes' full-time paid secretary. Having worked in the secular business world, Smyth said she liked switching to church work.

"There's a different atmosphere," she said. "You're not greedy and pushy like in the secular world. It's more relaxed. If you have a sickness in the family, you can take the day off."

That doesn't mean that life is a picnic when you work for a parish, she stressed. In particular, she noted that parish priests with whom she has worked over the years carry many burdens.

"You can see a lot of the problems and what the priest has to contend with," she said. "He might not be helping everybody the way they think he should."

But Smyth noted she did not share such opinions.

"All the priests that I've worked with I've certainly enjoyed, and I've learned a lot from their holiness and attitude," she

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said.

Smyth added that she welcomed the growing involvement of lay people in parishes, which has allowed priests to share the burden of running the parishes. She herself is a eucharistic minister and lector, she said.

"I like to give the Word of God across to other people," she said, adding that she brings the Eucharist to the sick and homebound.

"It's so nice to be able to give God to people," she said. "You certainly learn that you can be thankful for your health and everything."

Smyth's own health was threatened in the mid-1980s when she had surgery to remove cancerous tissue from her left eye. Her recovery took several months, and she turned over her duties to Ippolito and Lynne Siragusa, the church's current business supervisor.

However, Smyth couldn't stay away too long from her beloved parish, and she returned to work as cemetery secretary after recovering from her eye surgery.

In addition to her work at the parish, Smyth said she and fellow parishioners Lucille Brown and Charles Cook helped create a Stephen Ministry program that flourished for several years. Stephen Ministry pairs spiritual companion volunteers with people during times of need.

A widow since her husband died in 1971, Smyth said she plans to devote her time now to visiting with her children and grandchildren. She also enjoys such hobbies as playing cards and knitting, she said.

"I think I've done enough," she said of her work at the parish. "(But) I'll always be around, and I'll always be a help to them."

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