

Retirement

'It's
their
nature
to fly
South



Snowbirds missed in home parishes

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

Some winter Sundays, said Father Robert Schrader of St. Mary's Church in Auburn, "There have been occasions when I got the microphone and asked, 'Is there a lector in the house?'"

That's because the parish's few dozen snowbirds (northerners who vacation in the South during winter) have taken flight. And despite the best-laid plans for those who are lectors, singers, ushers and other ministers to line up substitutes, vacancies occur.

The migration of snowbirds starts in fall, on or after Election Day. The departures pick up from there, with a big exodus after Christmas.

"It seems every week somebody comes up to you and says, 'Well, I'll see you in the spring,'" said Father John Forni of Wolcott, pastor of the Catholic Community of the Blessed Trinity.

"Every person, especially those frequently involved in things, you do miss them. Especially in a small parish," he said.

In planning a funeral luncheon this month, for example, parishioners from St. Mary Magdalene in Wolcott had to wing it without their master list of regular

Martha Ministry volunteers.

The list was in the care of Mary, who was visiting Florida and Texas.

"I'm sure the list would be up here, very safely tucked away," Father Forni added. But not having it meant a little more time and effort to pull together the right people. It also meant they'd be sure to retain a copy of the master list elsewhere in the future.

"You learn things like that," he said.

During the winter, some 40-50 parishioners at St. Mary Magdalene and 15-20 from St. Thomas in Red Creek go away, Father Forni estimated. About 200 are left attending St. Mary and 100 at St. Thomas.

From a financial aspect, however, the effect of snowbirds apparently is not a huge concern among parishes contacted.

In Geneseo, Father William Gordinier, pastor of St. Mary's Church, said years ago it did affect the parish budget when quite a few parishioners went south during winter.

"At one time we did have a dip in the wintertime when people were away," he said. However, he explained, "Five years ago we got into the stewardship program, and people seem to make it up when they come back. I'm sure they help parishes where they are too. ... By and large we don't notice the dip so much."

At St. John the Evangelist Church in Greece, Father Joseph D'Aurizio said perhaps 100 parishioners become snowbirds in winter. "But they are very loyal. They will make up the contributions or even send them in," he said.

At St. Louis Church, Pittsford, Father James Schwartz, pastor, estimated about 50 members head south during the winter.

"We are really working hard at getting people to fill out a commitment card at the beginning of the year, to budget a specific amount to the parish so there would be a commitment factor in that they continue to contribute," he said.

"We just kind of factor in snowbirds as a way of life for our parish and we deal with it," he said, acknowledging the activity factor can be harder to deal with. Even though the church has about 5,000 members, he said, the snowbirds include active "daily Eucharist kinds of people, weekly Bible study, and their absence is very much missed. I'm thinking of Joyce Rooney, our cantor, who is gone now."

Some pastors pointed out there often is no typical Sunday collection, because of winter snowbirds and summer vacationers, as well as an influx of summer visitors — which often helps make up for con-

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Retirees fill churches in other towns

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Shortly after they began spending winters in Florida, Edith Reidy recalled, she and her husband Harry discovered at least one reason a priest at a local Catholic parish welcomed their presence.

"(He) said, 'We have to make all our money during the winter when the snowbirds are around. After that we starve,'" Edith laughed. She and Harry attend St. Mary's Church in Elmira the rest of the year.

The priest's statement does carry a certain amount of truth to it. As the population of snowbirds — northerners who head South during the winter months — swells in retirement areas, so does attendance at Catholic parishes.

Sunday collections presumably rise as well.

Diane and Bob Meyer, parishioners at St. Mary's Church in Geneseo, are among the diocesan Catholics who escape the snow each year. They spend late September through early May in Spring Hill, Fla., about 40 miles north of Tampa.

The Meyers attend St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Church in Spring Hill. Diane said that at this time of year, "If you do not get there early, you will stand."

Toni Thomas, parish secretary at St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, said that attendance the weekend of March 20-21 for seven Masses — that's right, seven — was 6,165. Collections totaled \$26,434.

Comparatively, Thomas said, the figures for a weekend in August 1998 were 4,700 and \$18,524.

Diane Meyer said she was surprised at the outpouring of Catholics in the Tampa area during the winter. "We thought it would be all Baptist, but there are lots of Catholics from up north," she said.

She added that the people traffic lessens by springtime, saying the parish drops one of its weekend Masses beginning in May. Joe Cartella said he notices a similar trend in his part of Florida.

"You can tell. A lot will leave at the end of March and beginning of April," Joe said. He and his wife, Jane, reside in Trout Lake — just north of Orlando — late October through early May. They're parishioners at St. Ann's Church in Hornell.

Yet Florida's population boom is more than just retired snowbirds, Diane Meyer said.

"There are a lot of elderly, but a lot of young people also," she said.

Edith Reidy agreed that Florida seems to have an increasing number of year-

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