

# SENIOR LIFESTYLES

## Deacon celebrates 75th with his parish 'family'

By Mike Latona  
Staff Writer

ROCHESTER — It can be said, with reasonable accuracy, that Deacon Chuck Dispenza never met a microphone he didn't like.

So perhaps it was no coincidence that the May 7 10:30 a.m. Mass at St. Bridget's Church lasted a full two hours and 15 minutes — and guess who was the homilist?

Deacon Dispenza began his homily saying he was nervous, remarking, "I've almost forgotten everything I was going to say." That comment set off mock applause from the front pews, where several visiting deacons sat.

"My fellow deacons are overjoyed," Deacon Dispenza responded, grinning.

As it turned out, Deacon Dispenza did say quite a bit, mostly in the form of thanking deacons, family members, parishioners and other well-wishers who packed St. Bridget's to celebrate his 75th birthday, which fell on that day. The liturgy was celebrated in grand style, with the noted St. Bridget's Gospel choir belting out numerous tunes.

The festive Mass also acknowledged the fourth anniversary of Deacon Dispenza's June 8, 1996, ordination at Sacred Heart Cathedral. One of his classmates, Deacon Joseph Fitz H. Glasgow of the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward, read the Gospel that day.

Deacon Dispenza noted, in his homily, that he and Deacon Glasgow had a combined age of 147 years when they were ordained. "But I'm not going to say how old he is," Deacon Dispenza quipped. Deacon Glasgow is now 80.

Deacon Dispenza also told the congregation that while serving in World War II, he prayed that he would live to be 40 years old. Now that he's gone 35 years beyond that, he said, "I'm ecstatic."

A retired English teacher from Gates-Chili High School, he did not begin pursuing the diaconate until the early 1990s following the death of his wife, June. In a 1996 *Courier* article, Deacon Dispenza said that entering the diaconate program, in many ways, allowed him to fulfill his childhood ambition of becoming a priest.

Following ordination, Deacon Dispenza sailed into ministry at St. Bridget's, an inner-city parish located on Mark Street near Hudson Avenue. During the May 7 Mass, he thanked Father Anthony Mugaero, pastor of St. Bridget's, "for the encouragement he gave me in formation, and the encouragement he has given me here." He also expressed his love for the St. Bridget's community during the Mass's prayers of the faithful, giving "thanksgiving for this beautiful family I have acquired."

Years before Deacon Dispenza became an enthusiastic presence at the pulpit, he was a highly sought-after toastmaster in the Rochester area. Going even further back, he was a cheerleader at the former Madison High School, in the days when male cheerleaders were the norm.

However, Deacon Dispenza's speaking gifts were put in serious jeopardy in early 1998, when he suffered a stroke that greatly deterred his speech and movement. After several months of intense therapy he regained his abilities, and on May 7 he moved and spoke with the dexterity of a young man.



Mike Mergen/Photo intern  
Friends and family embraced Deacon Chuck Dispenza and offered congratulations on his 75th birthday at Mass May 7 at St. Bridget's Church, Rochester.



"It was a long, hard struggle," he acknowledged.

Deacon Dispenza has largely resumed his active schedule in which he not only ministers at St. Bridget's, but also helps out at other parishes in the Rochester area. And once again he can fully immerse himself in preaching. In fact, during a reception in the church hall May 7, Deacon Dispenza remarked that his penchant for

lengthy homilies is well-known in the church community.

"One Sunday I gave (only) a 10-minute homily," he recalled. "Someone came up later and said, 'Are you feeling all right?'"

...  
**EDITORS' NOTE:** Deacon Dispenza is Mike Latona's godfather. The deacon has been friends since childhood with Latona's father, Pat.

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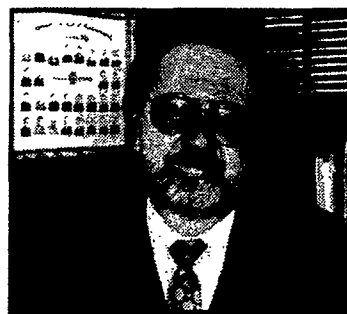


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