

PARISH PROFILE

Smaller is just swell with Seneca County parish

Parish Profile
St. Francis Solanus,
Interlaken



By Mike Latona
Staff Writer

INTERLAKEN — At 82 registered families, St. Francis Solanus Parish is among the very smallest parishes in the Rochester Diocese. In fact, for much of its 125-year history, St. Francis' membership has actually hovered closer to 50 families.

Yet these low quantities are of the highest quality, asserted Father Bernard Maloney, OFM Cap., pastor.

"You have people who are taking responsibility. Relationships are developed, and the sense of community is more felt," said Father Maloney, who has served St. Francis since 1998.

When asked if his parish's size has created any difficulties, Father Maloney paused, then said with a laugh, "I haven't uncovered any!"

Parishioners, as well, prefer the intimate setting of St. Francis, located in southern Seneca County near Cayuga Lake.

"Whenever we travel and go to a big parish, I don't feel I've been to Mass," remarked Millie Messmer. "You can sit so close here."

"It feels like home. You know everybody," Barbara Adams commented.

According to Betty Crane, the parish's personal touch is exemplified in such events as Sunday social hours when children make first Communion. Jen Persoon, who has belonged to St. Francis for two years, said one of her kids received this hospitality last year.

"They put on a beautiful coffee hour, with flowers. It was so nice," she said.

Adams noted that a group of St. Francis parishioners often arranges lunches after funerals. And Messmer said special collections are taken up for parishioners going through hardships. "People are very generous," she said.

Many families have been in the parish for several generations, although there are more newcomers as of late, Clara Frantz said.

"At one point we knew everyone," she remarked.

Earlier this summer, virtually the whole St. Francis community gathered for its big social outing of the year, the annual barbecue. Dedication to this event is "tremendous," Webb Rankin said. "The parish just comes out."

St. Francis also plays host to a fair num-



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Meghan Perry, 3, tickles 3-year-old Nicole Bromka's ear with a piece of ice at the 40th annual St. Francis Solanus chicken barbecue July 16.

ber of summer travelers who are absorbed into the parish family as well, Therese Elliot observed.

"The summer people help with the barbecue," she said.

That event is held at St. Fidelis Friary on Cayuga Lake, about five miles north of St. Francis Church. The friary is home to the Capuchin Friars of the Province of St. Mary, who have played a key role in the life of St. Francis Parish over the past 50 years.

Five years after the friary was established in 1951, the Capuchins were designated by the Rochester Diocese as official administrators of St. Francis Parish. At that time the parish's status was changed from "mission" to "independent."

More recently, Capuchin priests have also assumed administration of St. Francis' two neighboring parishes, Holy Cross in Ovid and St. James in Trumansburg. Father Maloney is pastor of both St. Francis and Holy Cross, and Father Eugene O'Hara, OFM Cap., serves as pastor at St. James.

Father Maloney said that through pastoral planning, the three parishes "wanted to be distinct," rather than form a cluster.



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Christina Bromka, 5, spins and watches a number wheel at the St. Francis Solanus 40th annual chicken dinner, held at St. Fidelis Friary.

Even so, more of St. Francis' resources — including the priests — are now shared with Holy Cross and St. James.

St. Francis parishioner Merwyn Crane observed that as the Capuchin priests' responsibilities have increased at neighboring parishes, fewer Masses are being offered at his church. St. Francis now only has a 9 a.m. Sunday Mass, compared to three weekend liturgies just five years ago.

Such St. Francis programs as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, youth ministry, and marriage preparation are combined with Holy Cross and/or St. James. One St. Francis program that remains separate is religious education, thanks to vigorous volunteer support. In fact, this past year Kathy Dusinger taught a class with the help of her 15-year-old twin daughters Kelly and Betsy. Together they helped youths prepare for confirmation.

"We did a lot with the sacraments this year," Kelly said, while Betsy remarked that they taught "basic things you should

SNAPSHOT

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MINISTERIAL STAFF:

Pastor: Father Bernard M. Maloney, OFM Cap.

Secretary/bookkeeper:
Sandra Huhn

Music director: Sandra Huhn

Religious-education coordinator:

Cathy Millsbaugh

Youth ministers:

Rich and Deb Rasmussen

RCIA Coordinator:

Barbara Mearse

Parish pastoral council chair:

Jeff Houck

know if you're going to be part of the church." According to their mother, the parish will have a confirmation ceremony "hopefully in 2001."

St. Francis Solanus Parish was established in 1875 in what was then known as Farmer Village. The community was renamed Farmerville in 1892, and became Interlaken in 1904.

Masses are still held in St. Francis' original, 125-year-old church. The building is situated peacefully on Orchard Street, one block east of Interlaken's main road, Route 96.

The worship space consists of 20 pews for six people each. In overflow situations, worshipers may sit on folding chairs in the parish center annex.

The annex was built in 1975. Other than removal of the steeple in 1956, the church's physical appearance has undergone relatively few changes over the years.

Since Father Maloney's arrival, parishioners say their participation at Sunday Mass has become more vigorous. This is marked by a big emphasis on singing, as well as an increase in such liturgical roles as lectors, commentators, and eucharistic ministers.

"Certainly we've had a good number of people stepping forward, which I think has enhanced the liturgies greatly," Father Maloney said.

"Father Bernie, he delegates. That's why we have so many people at the altar," Paul Adams said.

The efforts are noticeable, according to Ann Baddle.

"When my kids come here, they say, 'There were more people on the altar than in the congregation,'" she remarked.

Father Maloney said that one of his present goals is to "uncover the Catholics in the area who are unchurched." He hopes that parish membership will be up to about 90 families by the end of the summer.

Rankin, however, said he doesn't really care to see St. Francis grow too large, adding that parishioners love their small church.

"We're pretty happy with what we've got," he stated.

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