

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Helpful church historian celebrates 90th birthday

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT — They came in waves, bestowing 90th-birthday greetings upon an obviously delighted Father Robert F. McNamara.

"This is wonderful, to be wined and dined. My goodness," Father McNamara exclaimed with a huge grin.

As the foremost expert and author on the history of the Diocese of Rochester, Father McNamara has written about countless people and events. But on Nov. 5, at St. Thomas the Apostle Church, the spotlight was reversed.

Father McNamara — who actually turned 90 years old two days earlier — celebrated the 9:30 a.m. Sunday Mass in his honor. The liturgy was followed by a reception in the parish center.

Father Robert C. Bradler, St. Thomas the Apostle pastor, spoke warmly of Father McNamara during his homily, linking the priest to that weekend's Gospel theme of loving God and loving one another. Although Father McNamara has difficulty walking, Father Bradler noted, he maintains a strong daily devotion to prayer and celebrating Mass.

"He has done it day after day. He has the patience of Job," Father Bradler stated.

Father Bradler added that Father McNamara is approached frequently with questions about church history.

"He's always willing to do something for someone else," Father Bradler said. "Even at this stage of his life, he is willing to be of service to so many people."

Following the homily, a standing ovation broke out.

"I was very, very touched," Father McNamara remarked. "It was very moving."

At his birthday reception, Father McNamara was treated with two rounds of "Happy Birthday." He joked that the octave should have been made "a little lower for the men"; then he greeted a long line of well-wishers before sitting down to some cake.

This was no ordinary cake: Made by a St. Thomas the Apostle parishioner, Betsy Ripton, it featured images of 25 of Father McNamara's favorite saints.

Father McNamara was ordained in 1936, and taught church history at St. Bernard's Seminary from 1938 to 1981. His first history book, published in 1948, was a profile of his native parish, St. Mary's in Corning.

He later wrote *The Diocese of Rochester: 1868-1968*, the most detailed account of diocesan history up to that time. In 1998 Father McNamara released an updated version, *The Diocese of Rochester in America: 1868-1993*, which added a segment covering the diocese under Bishops Fulton J. Sheen, Joseph L. Hogan and Matthew H. Clark.

Father McNamara has been a font of knowledge for numerous history books at the parish level. He has penned several of those histories himself, and has also acted as consultant to other authors.

Preserving an accurate history, Father McNamara stated, should be a priority for every church community. "I'm always trying to encourage parishes to establish historical committees," he said.

Father McNamara has resided at St. Thomas the Apostle since his retirement in 1981. He still serves as the diocesan



John Powell/Photo intern

Mary Fogler of Irondequoit wishes Father McNamara a happy 90th birthday at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Irondequoit on Nov. 5.

archivist, a role he has held since 1976.

He also continues to teach RCIA classes at St. Thomas the Apostle. And, the priest admitted, his reputation as a walking encyclopedia helps keep his phone ringing with requests for information. "I can't hide it," he said cheerfully.

Father McNamara has been a frequent contributor to the *Catholic Courier* over the

years, writing numerous guest articles and assisting reporters in uncovering historical data.

"I'm flattered to answer questions, whether I can answer them or not," he said.

Based on this reporter's experience, there's never been a time when Father McNamara hasn't come up with an answer.

Happy 100th to ...

■ **Sister Mary Marcian Rontanno, SSND**, who celebrated her 100th birthday Sept. 25, at the School Sisters of Notre Dame Motherhouse in Wilton, Conn., with a liturgy and reception.

Sister Marcian is a Rochester native. She taught chemistry and religion for 68 years in Baltimore, St. Petersburg and Rochester. From 1962-1989 she taught chemistry at Bishop Kearney High School, and later was administrative assistant there. The school's front entranceway is named Sister Marcian Way in her honor.

Since retirement in 1992, she has been devoted to writing letters and reading. Still in good health, according to the order, she said that God "appoints for us so much to do, and you take each day and thank him for it and try to do the best you can."

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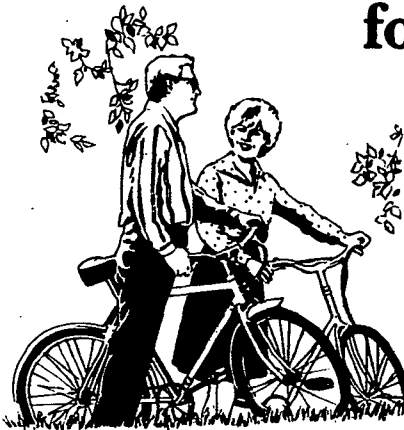
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