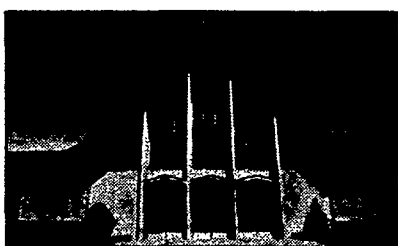


## FEATURE

## Immigrant involvement defines St. Anthony's



### Parish Profile

St. Anthony of Padua,  
Rochester

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — History has a way of repeating itself at St. Anthony of Padua Parish.

Nearly one century ago, St. Anthony's was established to serve Italian immigrants populating the west side of Rochester. Today, it serves another band of immigrants — the Vietnamese, the parish's most prevalent ethnic group.

Of St. Anthony's 315 families, nearly 60 percent are Vietnamese. This group also has the largest families and youngest median age, so its presence at St. Anthony's is likely to grow even more. Coming from all over Monroe County, Vietnamese Catholics fill the church for the 11 a.m. Sunday Mass in their native language.

And well before Mass begins, Vietnamese of all ages congregate in basement meeting rooms at St. Anthony's for computer and literacy classes led by volunteers.

"There have also been citizenship classes," parishioner Phuong Tran noted.

St. Anthony's other weekend liturgy, at 5 p.m. on Saturday, is attended mostly by Catholics of Italian heritage. Though most no longer live near the church, longtime parishioners such as Sam Donofrio, Al Ciaccia and Peter Feola say they want to retain ties with their childhood parish by attending that liturgy.

"People say, 'What do you go there for?' It's my roots; I love it," Ciaccia remarked.

"It's the only church I've ever been to. We feel it's a part of us," Feola added.

St. Anthony's was established in 1906. For its first 60 years, the parish was housed in a former school building at the corner of North Plymouth and Lyell avenues. Ciaccia recalls large parish celebrations for Italian patron saints, and Feola remembers elaborate parades in Jones Park near the church.

A significant event in parish history occurred in 1966 when St. Anthony's opened a brand-new church at its present location on Lorimer Street, between Lake and Dewey avenues. Around this same time, the



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Thu Truong, 8, (right) and other parishioners rehearse a dance at St. Anthony of Padua Parish in Rochester May 13. They presented their dance, a devotion to Mary, May 27.



Hinh Vo teaches Trinh Bui, 10, how to write in Vietnamese during a class before the 11 a.m. Mass May 13.

surrounding neighborhood began shifting as Italians moved out and other ethnic groups — mostly non-Catholic — moved in. Parish attendance declined, and the school was closed in 1987.

"The last 20 years or so, there's been a drastic change," Donofrio said of the neighborhood.

St. Anthony's has gotten an unexpected attendance boost from the Vietnamese. That community's Rochester connection dates back 26 years, when immigrants first came to the area after their homeland of South Vietnam was taken over by Communist North Vietnam.

"We didn't want Communism. I left at the last minute, in a small boat," Tran said. Upon arriving in Rochester, she said, "I didn't know where to go, and hoped the Americans would help us."

Phuong Nguyen said refugees such as he were forced to leave quickly, and many had no advanced education. Upon arriving in Rochester, he said, "It was very hard to ask for a job." However, Andy Tran said, quite a few Vietnamese from the mid-1970s have gone on to obtain college degrees, and now pass their skills on — such as in computer technology — to Catholics still arriving from Vietnam.

"A sense of community is always a cor-

nerstone of our culture," Tran commented.

The Vietnamese occasionally held Masses at Rochester's Corpus Christi Church before moving to St. Anthony's in 1989. A permanent Vietnamese priest began serving the community in 1995. Currently, Father Joseph Ngan lives at St. Anthony's and also assists on a limited basis in Buffalo.

The Vietnamese have their own governing body at St. Anthony's. Led by Thang Nguyen, president, the group of officers works in conjunction with St. Anthony's parish pastoral council.

Donofrio noted that collaborative efforts are ongoing between the Vietnamese and other parish members. For instance, he said, attendance by the Vietnamese at the annual parish picnic has increased in recent years.

Ironically, few Italians and Vietnamese actually live in the immediate area. The parish, according to Barbara Smullen, parish pastoral minister, tries to meet neighborhood needs through its involvement with Interfaith Action. The multi-denominational coalition promotes faith-based community organizing.

"We've found challenges that most urban churches have found in the last 20 years," Smullen said. "We try to be really ecumenical in our approach."



Deacon Hoc Thai Nguyen and Father Joseph Ngan (right) kiss the altar at the 11 a.m. Mass, which is spoken in Vietnamese, May 13.

One example is Diane Ventrillo, a St. Anthony's parishioner who belongs to St. Anthony's newly formed Community Enrichment Group. She and other volunteers frequently visit City School 57, helping tutor students in English.

"It's very rewarding, it really is. It's so nice to have a little one hug you, when you tell them a word they didn't know," Ventrillo said.

Donofrio said that St. Anthony's is also collaborating more frequently with other Catholic churches on the city's west side, particularly Holy Apostles and Holy Family — the other churches in the area's pastoral planning group. Father Paul Tomasso serves as pastor of all three parishes.

"We've gotten to know each other more," said Donofrio, a planning-group member, citing "200 Club" gatherings and other social events. "People are really warming up to each other. That's how we're going to accomplish these goals."

## SNAPSHOT

St. Anthony of Padua Parish  
60 Lorimer St.  
Rochester, N.Y. 14608  
Phone: 716/458-1180  
Fax: 716/458-7836

### Ministerial staff:

Pastor: **Father Paul J. Tomasso**  
Parochial vicar and Vietnamese  
ministry: **Father Joseph Ngan**  
(716/458-3647)

Assisting priest, weekends:

**Father Pius Pathmarajah**

Parish deacon:

**Deacon John Antenucci**

Parish deacon: **Deacon Joseph**

**Hoc Thai Nguyen**

Pastoral minister:

**Barbara Smullen**

Secretary:

**Sister Jacqueline Robinson,**  
SSJ

Business manager: **Diane Grant**

Parish pastoral council chair:

**Joseph Simeone**