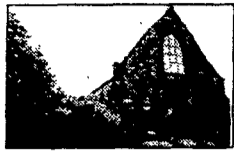


PARISH PROFILE

With past behind it, community seeks new identity

Parish Profile

Corpus Christi,
Rochester



By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — When the Diocese of Rochester in late 1998 asked Sister of St. Joseph, Sue Hoffman, if she was interested in working at Corpus Christi Church, it was not the most appealing of prospects.

The previous August, Bishop Matthew H. Clark had removed the parish's administrator, Father Jim Callan, for ongoing public defiance of church teachings regarding ministry to gays, the role of women in the church and intercommunion with non-Catholics. In the weeks and months following Father Callan's removal, several staff members had been fired for refusing to comply with diocesan directives. Then, hundreds of parishioners left Corpus to found a new faith community now called Spiritus Christi. The diocese considers Spiritus to be in schism with the Catholic Church, and its Catholic members to have excommunicated themselves from the church.

In February 1999, Sister Hoffman became the parish's pastoral associate. In the weeks prior to accepting the position, she had visited the grave of a priest she had known to leave a bouquet of flowers. As she unwrapped the flowers, she prayed that the Lord would send her a sign indicating whether she should accept the position. Just then, the paper in which the flowers were wrapped flew out of her hands and landed against the tombstone of another priest — Msgr. William Hart, who happened to have been pastor of Corpus from 1929 to 1955. He died in 1962.

"When something like that happens, you don't question it," she recalled with a



Karin von Volgtlander/Photo intern
Father Dan McMullin laughs with Kristen Shiner-McGuire while Lea Brosan waits to say good-bye to Father McMullin at Corpus Christi Church June 16. Father McMullin will return to St. Mary's in Geneseo on August 1 after six weeks of prayer and rest in Great Britain.

slight chuckle.

Sister Hoffman is one of dozens of people at Corpus Christi who have witnessed the once-tumultuous parish stabilize in the last two years and begin to grow again. Although some of the current members noted they considered themselves as "progressive" as those who left, they also expressed their belief that Catholics must remain united with one another despite profound disagreements over the direction the church should take.

This month, the parish bade goodbye to one such self-described progressive, Father Daniel T. McMullin, pastor since Oct. 1998. The priest is currently traveling in Great Britain, and will return in August to become pastor of St. Mary's Parish, Geneseo, and chaplain to the Newman Community at the State University of New York College at Geneseo.

About 400 households now call Corpus Christi home, he said. Although that figure is far smaller than the thousand or two the parish boasted in the mid '90s, the



Nicholas Grillo dozes off from the heat in Corpus Christi Church, while his aunt, Frances Grillo (seated behind), listens to Father McMullin's farewell.

parish population has grown back slightly since the Spiritus Christi exodus.

"More than half are new people," Father McMullin said, estimating that about 60 percent of current parishioners began attending services during the past few years. "The community that has remained now is pretty exceptional, and is certainly willing to move into the future with some energy and excitement."

One parishioner who lived through the headline-making events of 1998 and '99 is Maggie Torres, who directs Matthew's Closet, the only one of five outreach ministries Corpus Christi founded under Father Callan to remain officially linked to Corpus. The others — a prison ministry, a health center, a home for the dying and a shelter — have become independent of Corpus Christi, but the parish still supplies the ministries volunteers and donations.

A low-cost and/or free clothing outlet, Matthew's Closet has been directed for four years by Torres, a parishioner for 27 years. Torres said some former parishioners still volunteer at Matthew's Closet, alongside volunteers from the parish itself, area schools and other parishes. She stressed that she values all that she has learned at Corpus, through good times and bad.

"I hold respect to all who left," Torres said of her former fellow parishioners. "But I feel really good that I stayed."

One of the Matthew's Closet board members, Paul Robinson, noted that he and his wife, Bea, and his daughter, Sue, started attending Corpus Christi just before it began to unravel in the late '90s. Like Torres, Robinson expressed confidence that Corpus will continue to thrive in the future.

"It's a much smaller parish, but it's pretty vibrant," he said. "We've got a good core group of parishioners."

Father McMullin said two events, in particular, have bolstered the Corpus community's belief that it is here to stay. First, in July of last year, the diocese forgave Corpus almost a quarter million dollars worth of debt. Corpus was one of 34 diocesan parishes and schools that benefited from

SNAPSHOT

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Father Vincent P. Panepinto

Pastoral Associate:

Sister Sue Hoffman, SSJ

Pastoral Associate for Hispanic

Ministry:

Sister Martha Teresa Gomez,

OLC

Business Manager:

Rosalee Magee

Religious Education Administrator:

Janice Blodgett

Music Director:

Mary Lou Indiano

Secretary/Translator:

Leilani Huertas

Director, Matthew's Closet:

Maggie Torres

diocesan debt-relief efforts made in recognition of the Catholic Church's Great Year of the Jubilee 2000. Corpus is in much better financial shape now than it was a few years ago, he said, because of both the debt relief and because it has undertaken such cost-saving measures as divesting itself of various properties.

He added that when Bishop Clark appointed a new pastor to take his place — Father Vincent P. Panepinto, who assumed the pastorate June 26 — this move solidified parishioners' belief that the diocese values the existence of Corpus. That confidence is expressed in the fact that new families are joining the parish, he said.

"We've had a baptism every week since Easter Sunday," he said, adding that several weddings have been planned at the parish for the next year or so.

One area of steady growth for the parish has been among the Spanish-speaking Catholics of Rochester, according to Sister Martha Teresa Gomez, OLC, a Mexican native and U.S. citizen who serves as pastoral associate for Hispanic Ministry. The parish is home to 75 to 80 Spanish-speaking families who come from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Colombia and Costa Rica. She said that 75 to 100 people attend the 6:30 p.m. Spanish language Mass every Saturday. Fathers McMullin and Panepinto both speak Spanish.

Through home visits by Sister Gomez and by word-of-mouth promotion, Corpus has attracted several new Spanish-speaking families in the past two years, she said. Sister Hoffman added that Corpus has held a number of bilingual services including those held during Holy Week this year.

Janice Blodgett, religious-education administrator since December, also pointed out that about 15 kids in the parish's pre-kindergarten-to-eighth-grade catechetical program are from Spanish-speaking families. And speaking of families, Blodgett, a former full-time TV commercial producer, took the Corpus position because it allows her to bring her third child — Mariah, born last August — to work with her. In fact, when she once suggested at a staff meeting that she get a baby-sitter to watch her child during work hours, at least two staff members vetoed the idea, she recalled.

"Everybody in this kind of work just loves kids," she said.

Like other members of Corpus, Blodgett said she was optimistic about the future, a future whose promise is evidenced by the presence of young families and new parishioners.

"It's an exciting time to be in the parish," she said. "It's an exciting time to be part of Corpus."



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