

PARISH PROFILE

Kenyan pastor adds cheer in Livingston parishes

Parish Profile



St. Thomas Aquinas, Leicester
St. Lucy, Retsof

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

LEICESTER — Changes in leadership have been fairly steady in recent years at St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Lucy, two parishes in western Livingston County. What hasn't changed, Father George Okoth said, is the loyalty and commitment displayed by numerous parishioners.

"I love this place. I'm doing my level best and the people do their level best," said Father Okoth, a priest from Kenya who has served as St. Thomas/St. Lucy pastor since June 2000.

Father Okoth is the parishes' third pastor since 1999. Additionally, due to the pastoral planning process that began in 1998, St. Thomas and St. Lucy now connect with a wider community: Some staff members also serve at St. Mary in Geneseo; St. Patrick in Mount Morris; and Holy Angels in Nunda. The five churches comprise the Western Livingston Planning Group.

St. Thomas/St. Lucy parishioner population was originally a heavy blend of farm and mine workers and their families. Today's parishioners also work at nearby SUNY College at Geneseo, or commute to jobs in Rochester.

"You don't know if you're sitting next to the doctor, the lawyer or the miner," said Joe Christiano, a longtime St. Lucy parishioner. "But I like the diversity — it's a warm community. You've got a togetherness that you just feel good about."

St. Thomas, located in the village and town of Leicester, was established in 1897 to serve a growing farming industry. Five miles to the north, St. Lucy was founded in 1911 for Italian immigrants who sought employment in salt mines around Retsof, a hamlet in the town of York.

The two western Livingston County churches began a formal affiliation in 1931 when St. Lucy became a mission parish of St. Thomas. These days, each parish has approximately 150 families and Father Okoth describes the relationship as "two corporations working as one, equal partners."

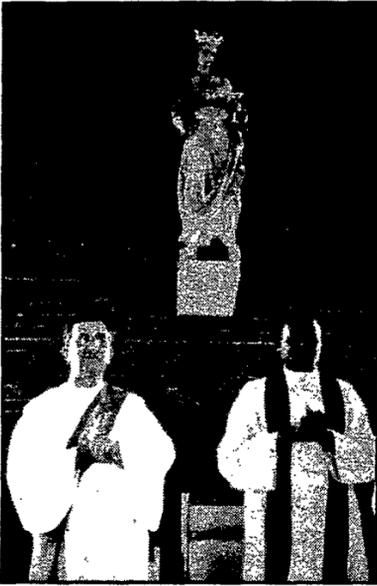
In addition to the Western Livingston Planning Group, the area is graced by the presence of Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard, which was founded in 1951. Many other nearby small parishes have come and gone over the years: Church of the Assumption, Mount Morris (1914-61); Santa Maria de Mercede, Cuylerville (1914-33); All Saints, Fowlerville (1884-1910); St. Raphael, Piffard (1887-1977); and Holy Name, Groveland (1894-1993).

Another closing of note was the Akzo Salt Mine in Retsof, which ceased in 1995 after several parts of the mine collapsed the previous year. However, Christiano said parish attendance remained strong as mine workers sought new jobs.



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

(Above) Father George Okoth and a parishioner hug after the 5 p.m. Mass July 21 at St. Lucy's in Retsof. (Below left) Deacon George Spezzano and Father Okoth stand at the closing prayer of Mass. (Below right) Parishioners raise their hands in prayer during the Our Father.



"They were good, faithful people and they continued to support the church," said Christiano, who heads the St. Thomas/St. Lucy finance committee that has equal representation from both parishes.

Good and faithful people can be found throughout the parishes, Christiano said. He noted that parish volunteers are dedicated to helping with raffles and flea markets, and several people helped design a bathroom recently at St. Thomas.

Donna Falkner, the parishes' 15-year secretary/bookkeeper, said collaboration between St. Thomas and St. Lucy "has happened more in recent years." Tullio Troisi, from St. Lucy, who attends weekday Mass at both churches, agreed that parish boundaries aren't as strictly observed as in previous generations. "Transportation was a little different in those days," he said.

A recent baseball trip to Baltimore to



see an Orioles-Yankees game drew nearly 30 people from both parishes, said St. Thomas' Francis Christiano, who is Joe's cousin. Father Okoth joked that Mass attendance dips noticeably because these excursions are so popular.

"I'm planning on making a trip and saying a Mass for them. And when they cuss at the field, they can go to confession quite conveniently," Father Okoth quipped.

Several parishioners said that Father Okoth's frequent good cheer has been gladly welcomed.

"I think a little humor helps always, and Father George has a grand sense of humor," said Velma W. Mahoney, from St. Thomas, who recently retired as the Leicester town historian. The family of her late husband, D. Carlton Mahoney, were charter members of St. Thomas.

Father Okoth came to St. Thomas/St. Lucy after another charismatic foreign priest, Father Desmond O'Neill of Australia, died suddenly in March 2000 after only nine months as pastor. Father O'Neill had replaced Father Richard Be-

SNAPSHOT

The Catholic Community of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Lucy
Parish house: 175 Main St.,
Leicester, N.Y. 14481
716/382-3400

St. Thomas Aquinas Church
175 Main St.
Leicester, N.Y.

St. Lucy Church
Corner of Retsof Avenue and Retsof
Road, Retsof, N.Y.

Ministerial staff:

Pastor:

Father George Okoth

Secretary/bookkeeper:

Donna Falkner

Organist:

Matthew Stearns

Religious education coordinator:

Barb McAdoo

Western Livingston Planning
Group:

Regional deacon:

Deacon George Spezzano

Regional pastoral minister:

Mabel Treadwell

Regional youth coordinator:

Michael Sauter

ligotti, the pastor from 1994-99.

"He had a good pair of ears; he listened," Joe Christiano said of Father O'Neill. "And Father George does the same."

Father Okoth, who came to the Rochester Diocese in 1998, is guiding St. Thomas/St. Lucy while also pursuing a counseling degree at SUNY College at Brockport. He is the second African priest to be named a diocesan pastor here; the other is Father Peter Enyan-Boadu, of Ghana, who heads Church of the Nativity in Brockport.

"This man here has made us a very welcoming community," said Falkner. "He has us greet each other in church, and has strangers stand up and say where they're from if they're comfortable. He has been loved by everyone."

Overall, Francis Christiano said, he feels good about the way that St. Thomas and St. Lucy have adapted to various transitions.

"I have a lot of pride in the church and want to see it grow. I like the way things are working out," he stated.

EDUCATION ISSUE

Publication date: August 16 • Advertising deadline: August 9

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