

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Rochester couple promotes Fatima processions

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Many people have godparents who have passed on to the next life. The woman Fatima Flores, 64, considers her godmother was assumed into heaven.

That's right, Mary, mother of Jesus, is whom Fatima considers her godmother. When Fatima's mother was pregnant with her in Portugal, she was quite ill. So, praying to God for good health, she promised Mary she would name her daughter after the Portuguese town where Mary reportedly appeared to three children in 1917.

One of the most famous Marian apparitions in church history, Our Lady of Fatima has devotees among millions of Catholics who fulfill her reported request for frequent rosaries for the cause of world peace. When Fatima was born healthy, in gratitude, her mother named Mary as her godmother, and had someone serve as a "proxy" for Mary at Fatima's baptism.

Fatima Flores attends St. Augustine's Church in Rochester with her husband, Joaquim, 68. The couple immigrated to the United States from South Africa in 1966. They had moved to South Africa from Portugal in the 1950s, and have been married 44 years.

The Floreses are prominent members of the Monroe County Portuguese community, and both serve on St. Augustine's 19th Ward Portuguese Committee. St. Augustine's belongs to the 19th Ward Roman Catholic Community, to which the parishes of Our Lady of Good Counsel and St. Monica's also belong. The couple have three children and four grandchildren.

A retired electrician, Joaquim serves as a volunteer lay minister for St. Augustine's to the Portuguese community, which numbers about 300 families in Monroe County, he said. St. Augustine's acknowledges its Portuguese membership by having its 10:30 a.m. Sunday Mass readings in both English and Portuguese every other week, he said. Among his many activities are organizing Portuguese Catholic events, and visiting the sick with his wife, as well as helping out with groundskeeping at his parish. Joaquim is a past president of the Rochester Portuguese Club, and he and his wife are



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Joaquim and Fatima Flores stand before a statue of Our Lady of Fatima at their Rochester home May 3. Natives of Portugal, they are parishioners of St. Augustine's Church in the 19th Ward.

both members of the Legion of Mary.

The couple grew up in the same town in Portugal, Povoá de Varzim, which is about 190 miles from Fatima. The Floreses are devotees of Our Lady of Fatima and almost always include the town on their itinerary whenever they return to Portugal for visits. When asked what was so special about the place, Joaquim started to cry.

"When I'm on the grounds, I feel wonderful there, I don't know," he said through tears.

Fatima grew quiet as her husband spoke and then added: "When you go there, you feel you are in a blessed place. You feel you are not you."

The Floreses have worked to promote devotion to Our Lady of Fatima with an annual procession through the 19th Ward around May 13, the date of her first appearance. Participants take a statue of Our Lady of Fatima and process from one of the three 19th Ward parishes to another, usually leaving the statue there until October when they hold another similar procession to mark Mary's last appearance to the three children on Oct. 13, 1917.

The statue that will be carried in the procession is owned by Maria Flora Freitas, who also belongs to the Portuguese Committee, and who is a friend of the Floreses. Freitas said Our Lady of Fatima is an important object of devotion for Portuguese Catholics, her message of peace more relevant in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on America.

"We pray to our lady for our needs, for world peace, for everything especially now in these times," she said through her son, Virgilio, who translated for her.

Peace is the ultimate object of the annual processions, Joaquim said, noting that the 19th Ward is sometimes marked by violence fostered by street criminals. By publicly proclaiming their love for Mary and Jesus, 19th Ward Catholics may cause some such criminals to consider why people would be willing to march through the streets for God, the Floreses noted.

"It is taking Jesus into the streets of the 19th Ward," Joaquim said of the Fatima processions. "The intention is to bring peace and happiness to the 19th Ward."

He added that last year, the Portuguese Committee held processions on three consecutive weekends in May, transporting the Fatima statue from one 19th Ward parish to another each of the Sundays. He noted that each procession was bathed in light from a sun that was surrounded by a "halo" or ring of light, and he said the ring disappeared from around the sun each time the procession ended.

"When we saw the halo on the day of the first procession, everybody started to cry because everybody thought it was the sign of Mary to make peace in the streets," he said. "Why did they appear at the times of these processions? I told (Father Robert Werth, 19th Ward pastor) when I saw this: 'Our Lady approves of us.'"

This year's 19th Ward procession will take place Sunday, May 12. The celebration will begin with a Mass at 10:15 a.m. at St. Augustine. The procession will include community representatives, church leaders, area dignitaries, community groups, members of the Portuguese-American community, Catholic school students, parishioners and 19th Ward neighbors. Following the procession, Benediction and a reception will take place at Our Lady of Good Counsel. Other highlights of the event include recitation of the rosary during the procession and a distribution of free informational booklets about the Portuguese faith, culture and people. The event is free and open to the public.

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