

DIOCESAN NEWS

Long wait is rewarded in Greece community

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

GREECE — If patience is indeed a virtue, then members of Our Lady of Mercy Parish are among the most virtuous people in existence. After all, it's not too many faith communities that wait nearly a half-century for their first church to be built.

On June 16, Bishop Matthew H. Clark presided as Our Lady of Mercy held a dedication liturgy lasting well over two hours. With the waiting period finally behind them, parishioners can fully rejoice in their handsome new structure.

"They're just in awe. We've had people break down and cry when they walk in the doors; they just can't believe it," said Dave Shufelt, the parish's maintenance supervisor, who is also a member of the new church's building committee.

"We're extremely happy with it. We couldn't be happier," added Alice Servas, who, with her husband, Carl, has belonged to Our Lady of Mercy since 1960.

The parish's new pastor, Father Robert Beligotti, acknowledged that his June 25 starting date couldn't have come at a more upbeat time in parish history.

"I feel as if I'm coming into the promised land," said Father Beligotti, referring to the Israelites and their long journey as depicted in the Book of Deuteronomy. "The people feel they finally have a place of worship after waiting so long."

The new structure has a seating capacity of 600 and also features a weekday Mass chapel in which the tabernacle is located. A full-immersion baptismal font is situated near the rear of the church, and a large gathering area graces its entrance.

Father Beligotti noted that some additions are still on the way: a statue of Mary, which will likely be placed in the gathering

space, and an aluminum cross for the steeple. Father Beligotti said he hopes to dedicate the cross on Sept. 22, the feast of Our Lady of Mercy.

LaBella Associates PC was the project's architect, and Frank J. Marianacci Inc. was the general contractor. Shufelt said the church's total cost is \$1.7 million, of which \$600,000 has already been received. Also helping the project along have been numerous volunteer subcommittees, such as the group on which Carl Servas served for art and environment/acoustics.

"We started meeting a year ago last February, and with very few exceptions we met every week," he said.

Our Lady of Mercy is located at the corner of Armstrong and Denise roads, in the northeast corner of the town of Greece. The parish was founded in 1957; its name was suggested by Bishop James E. Kearney to honor that year's centennial of the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester.

The first Masses were celebrated at the former Lake Theater on Lake Avenue, now the site of Charlotte Appliance. By late 1958 construction on the new school building was completed, and the first liturgy there was celebrated on Christmas Day.

In 1960 a multipurpose worship space was ready for occupancy. This cavernous room, which was attached to the school gymnasium, would prove to be the site of the parish's Masses for the next 41 years. The new church is built on the same site as this so-called temporary church.

Alice and Carl Servas noted that past attempts had been made to build a permanent church, going back to the days of Father John Whalen, pastor from 1958 to 1974.

"We thought about it for many years. (But) operating a school, it was a drain on finances," Carl Servas said.

After Our Lady of Mercy School closed,



Stacey Staubus/Photo intern

Parishioners of Rochester's Our Lady of Mercy Parish attend Mass in their new church July 14.

in 1980, the parish leased the building to various tenants and ultimately hoped to sell the facility, with the profits going toward a new church — but no deal was ever made.

Even so, parishioners did not abandon hope of getting their church. Michelle Andrews-Smith, pastoral council chair, said the parish had for many years requested that memorial donations be designated toward a building fund. An envelope campaign began in the mid-1990s; fundraising efforts were intensified in 2001; and groundbreaking finally took place last August.

Andrews-Smith said the parish wishes to keep the school building — which is largely unused at this time — for parish activities because there is no church hall. This would require further funding for necessary improvements to meet town codes. "Many of us feel the building has a lot of viability and history, (and) we really need a community space," Andrews-Smith said.

But that development is somewhere down the road. For the present, parishioners are reaping the rewards of all their work, money and patience.

"The people of Mercy are very, very generous. It's been a long process," Alice Servas said.

In a speech she gave at the June 16 ded-



Karin von Voigtlander/Staff photographer
The new church was designed by LaBella Associates.

ication, Andrews-Smith said the parish has endured struggles almost from the beginning: Father Michael O'Brien died suddenly in his first year as Mercy's founding pastor. She also noted that after the school closed, there were even concerns that the parish itself would close — Mercy has 769 families, whereas some parishes in Greece total 3,000 families and beyond.

However, Andrews-Smith said, "Our Lady of Mercy has continued to be small yet mighty. In the face of the good times and bad, we remain together, close, and always a family."

"It's a small parish, but they are so much into this church," Shufelt added. "They just keep this place going as strong as can be. They are strong-faithed, loving people."

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