

Priest's column finds Web audience

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

The lasting influence of a saint hinges not only on the acts of that person, but also how faithfully his or her life has continued to be promoted. In that vein, one can imagine many thank-yous by saints descending from heaven and tickling the ears of Father Robert F. McNamara.

The 92-year-old priest authors a weekly column, *Saints Alive*, for the parish bulletin at Irondequoit's St. Thomas the Apostle. And thanks to the Internet, his readership now reaches far beyond parish boundaries.

In the mid-1980s Father McNamara, the diocesan historian and archivist, began penning *Saints Alive* for St. Thomas the Apostle, where he had arrived in 1981 to live in retirement. Each column profiles a historical figure who has achieved either sainthood or beatification.

Although Father McNamara moved to McAuley Residence at the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse in April 2002, his column still runs in St. Thomas' print bulletin. When the parish's elaborate Web site (www.stthomasirondequoit.com) was launched in 2001, *Saints Alive* became one of the featured links.

According to Ellen Brannin, St. Thomas parish secretary, nearly 350 historical Catholic figures are featured on the Web site — all of whom have appeared as *Saints Alive* profiles over the years. Brannin, who has archived the *Saints Alive* link and assists Deacon Thomas Beck, pastoral associate, in maintaining the Web site, said many more saintly figures are in the process of being added to the lists. In addition, Brannin said that Father McNamara "still



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Father Robert F. McNamara sits June 6 at the desk in his room at Brighton's McAuley Residence, located at the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse. Father McNamara writes *Saints Alive*, a weekly column for St. Thomas the Apostle Parish in Irondequoit.

has a couple that he's thinking of writing fresh."

"It's a wonderful reference," Father McNamara said of the *Saints Alive* link, saying it proves the positive value of the Internet "although people are griping about the pornography."

Brannin said the geographical increase in readership has been pleasantly surprising for Father McNamara. "He's tickled pink," she remarked.

"A few months ago we began getting replies. A couple of really interesting ones came back," Father McNamara said.

Brannin reports that feedback has come from Missouri, Korea, Thailand, Croatia and Oklahoma. Meanwhile, Father McNamara has been

impressed to receive correspondence from England as well as Italy. In fact, a relative of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901-1925), who was beatified in 1990, e-mailed from Italy to point out that a *Saints Alive* column on Blessed Frassati contained errors. Father McNamara, who explained that his sources had been inaccurate, created a revised version.

In addition to offering comments about his columns, Brannin said Internet readers request further information about saints. Brannin then consults with Father McNamara by phone or through visits, saying the

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priest does not personally respond to the e-mails.

Brannin said Father McNamara's eloquent style makes *Saints Alive* an easy and interesting read. "A lot of sites you see about saints are so dry," she remarked.

An example of Father McNamara's poetic wording can be found in a column about Blessed Jeanne Jugan of France (1792-1879), who founded the Little Sisters of the Poor order: "As she served devotedly in one house or another of her growing community, she was content to have her role in founding it forgotten. Not until after her death did her own sisters fully realize that this serene, wise and witty old servant of the poor had established their sisterhood," Father McNamara writes.

Father McNamara, who taught church history for 43 years at St. Bernard's Seminary, has many other writings to his credit. He has written, and assisted on, numerous parish histories. His 1998 book, *The Diocese of Rochester in America: 1868-1993*, is an updated version of his original release covering the diocese's first 100 years. It stands as the most comprehensive account of Rochester diocesan history on record. In addition, Father McNamara has been a frequent story contributor to the *Catholic Courier* and continues serving as a valued source on other *Courier* features.



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