

# Churchville senior still serves Mass

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

CHURCHVILLE — Thelma “Bunny” Lejniaks said everybody loves her uncle, Donald J. Cooney, a daily communicant at St. Vincent de Paul Church.

“I don’t think he has an enemy in the world,” she said.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Cooney responded. “How about Satan?”

If Satan is his only enemy, it may be because Cooney is such a faithful Catholic, having attended Masses and communion services at St. Vincent’s since his wife, Helen, passed away in 1990. Occasionally, Cooney even serves on the altar at Mass, including the day he celebrated his 94th birthday, June 12.

“I figure it’s something I can do especially now that I am old,” he said. “You feel a little closer to the church.”

Actually, Cooney’s always been close to St. Vincent, serving over several decades as a bingo worker and usher in addition to serving on the altar. He noted he comes from a devout family that produced two Sisters of St. Joseph: Sister of St. Joseph Anne Elizabeth Cooney, who died on Dec. 28, 2002, and Sister Dorothy Cooney, who resides at her order’s infirmary in Pittsford. Another sister, Rosella Hartman, lives in Chili.

Ogden-born Cooney grew up in a family of 12, he said as he sat in his 118-year-old home. It’s there that he said he holds a wine-imbibing “happy hour” every day at 4 p.m., which is open to the everyone in the neighborhood — and by extension, the world.

The son of a farmer, Cooney said he was driving a team of horses and plowing the land at age 12.

“I liked it all right, I guess,” he said of farming, pointing out that as a young man, he earned his Sundays off when a semi-pro baseball team



Leila Navidi/Catholic Courier

Donald Cooney extinguishes a candle during Mass July 4 at Churchville’s St. Vincent de Paul Parish. He occasionally serves on the altar during Mass, including on June 12, which was the day he celebrated his 94th birthday.

## SeniorLife

asked his father if he could play for them. As second baseman for the Holley Moose, he played ball up until his induction into the Army in 1942.

“We used to play in places like Albion, Medina,” Cooney said of his baseball days. “There wasn’t so many things to do outside of baseball like there is today.”

His family eventually moved to Rochester, and Cooney was an ambulance driver for St. Mary’s Hospital in the late 1930s. He remembered one call from the days when trolleys still crossed the city.

“Somebody walked in front of a streetcar,” he said. “When I got down there, the patient happened to be a cousin of mine.”

Fortunately, his cousin recovered, he said, and Cooney’s training in ambulance work paid off when he be-

came an infantry medic in the Pacific during World War II. He was awarded the Purple Heart after suffering a shrapnel wound in his right leg, as well as several other medals, and experienced his share of sadness.

“I lost four of my buddies in one day,” he said, adding that he was on the Japanese island of Ie Shima the

day famed war correspondent Ernie Pyle was killed there.

He noted that prayer proved to be a useful ally. For example, he said, he was in a convoy on Guam on a pitch-black night when the soldier driving their Jeep had to stop. The driver then dropped his keys, but to avoid enemy detection, the headlights of the Jeep had to remain off. The convoy went on ahead without them, leaving them alone to search for the keys in the darkness.

“I said three Hail Marys,” Cooney said. “I was looking around, and I found the keys under almost the front tire.”

He met his future wife at a dance before the war, and the couple wed once the war ended. He took a job with his brother’s farm implement company in Churchville, where he’s lived since 1948, and also worked as a golf-course groundskeeper until his retirement in 1975.

Despite having lived almost a century, and having one knee replaced, Cooney remains active. He maintains a garden in his back yard, along with his 100-year-old toolshed. When asked what his secret for long living was, he said with a laugh: “Get a good dentist.”

He then mused for a moment and said, “I don’t know, I’m just lucky, that’s all.”

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