Small parish is big in generosity

St. Mary's, archbishop to mark parish centennial on Sunday

ANACORTES
BY TERRY MCGUIRE

When word got around St. Mary Parish that an expectant couple could ill afford to pay the midwife fees, “all of a sudden people started giving money,” said parishioner Keith Mack, a friend of the couple.

“That type of stuff goes on around here,” he said. “It is a very generous group of people that are here.”

Mack and his wife, Heather Leahy-Mack, know they’re part of a special parish. They became members eight years ago after being drawn by its sense of community.

Now Grand Knight of St. Mary’s Knights of Columbus Father Treunet Council 3611, Mack witnessed the parish’s generous spirit again when the council asked parishioners to contribute towards an ultrasound machine for a pregnancy aid clinic in Spokane.

The community came through with the $6,500 needed to generate matching funds for the machine. It will be installed at the clinic next Monday.

The parish of just 476 households, which celebrates its centennial on Sunday, is a community that’s “faithful, devout, reverent and generous,” says its pastor, Father Vu Tran.

“They share their generosity through their time, talent and treasure,” said Father Tran, who is in his second year as pastor after three years as St. Mary’s priest administrator.

Archdiocesan statistics show the parish is regularly at or near the top in its deannery in percentage of giving to the Annual Catholic Appeal.

St. Mary’s also tithes 5 percent of its income to charity. Father Tran said: three percent to its St. Vincent de Paul Society conference and the rest to an Indian mission in Montana and to Catholic education.

Perpetual adoration parish

Though a faith-filled community, the parish’s small size caused Father William R. Harris, pastor from 1993 to 2006, to doubt whether there would be enough committed parishioners to establish perpetual adoration, where the Eucharist is exposed 24 hours a day for continuous adoration.

“I hoped at some point there would be perpetual adoration but I thought because of the size of the parish it would never happen during my time,” Father Harris recalled last week. “It did” happen, he said, “because of the strong faith of the people, and their love for Christ and the Eucharist.

“...and I think their faith is expressed in their caring concern for the poor,” he said.

Today, approximately 150 adorers cover the 168 hours per week needed.

Thirty-eight-year pastorate

According to a parish history, St. Mary’s was established by Bishop Edward O’Dea in 1910, 33 years after cartographer Amos Bowman founded Anacortes, renaming the community of “Ship Harbor” in honor of his wife, Annie Curtis. Up to then the area’s Catholic community had been served by priests from La Conner, Snohomish and Sedro-Woolley. By its third year, the new parish boasted 500 members.

Founding Pastor Father Gustave Trunenets, a native of France, guided the parish for the next 38 years, until cancer claimed him in 1948. He was pastor in 1924 when fire destroyed the sacristy of the original, 1904-built church, taking with it many sacred vessels and vestments from France. He told the media of his certainty that a fanatic out to destroy the church was responsible. A year later, the sanctuary lamp was stolen, causing Father Trunenet to surmise it was someone hoping to cash in on the high price of gold.

“It was a very pretty lamp and it is quite a loss to our church,” he wrote, “though it is only brass.”

A new church was dedicated in 1929, its dome later replaced by a steeple. In 1962, a 60-mile-per-hour windstorm toppled the spire, sending it crashing into the rectory and landing less than three feet from where Pastor Father Paul Auer was sitting at his desk.

The current church, seating approximately 350, was built in 1979 and renovated in 2004.

St. Merryfest draws thousands

St. Mary’s community today consists of about 96 percent Caucasian households of European descent, including parishioners of Croatian ancestry. Families of Hispanic and Southeast Asian backgrounds make up the rest. The parish community includes a large segment of retirees, whose presence is reflected at the weekday Masses, attended by 50 to 70 people each day, Father Tran said.

The St. Nicholas Advent Festival, held on the first Sunday in Advent on or around the saint’s feast day, celebrates the parish’s Croatian ties. The festival currently raises funds for the liturgy and to send parish youths to next year’s World Youth Day in Spain, Father Tran said.

A popular summertime event is the St. Mary’s St. Merryfest, a community festival that draws thousands of people each year. Held in June, it helps cover the parish’s liability insurance while providing hundreds of free tickets each year to children in need. It was started during Father Harris’ pastorate after the local carnival stopped coming to town when it lost its staging site. Father Harris said he saw the festival as “a way for St. Mary to give back to the community of Anacortes.”

Parishioners say St. Mary gives back in other ways. For example, the parish’s St. Vincent de Paul Society conference food bank, open on Fridays, serves about 25 people from the wider community, most of them non-Catholic, said conference president Barbara Oos.

“St. Mary’s Parish is just so supportive of us,” she said. “For such a small parish, they’ve really been good to us financially and with food items.”

Scholarships aplenty

St. Mary’s Knights of Columbus Council recently provided nine $1,000 scholarships to college-bound high school seniors through the Ray Wittman Scholarship Fund, named in honor of a late member.

“We’re pretty doggone proud of the things we do,” said fund president Glenn Watts, speaking not only of the scholarships but of all the other activities the 119-member council is involved in at the parish.

Sunday’s centennial will be celebrated on the parish feast day, the feast of the Assumption. A memorial wall carrying the names of some of the deceased parishioners and priests who’ve served the parish over the century is in the works, along with the re-establishment of a grotto to Our Lady of Lourdes that will include outdoor Stations of the Cross and renovated statues from the old church.