PARISH PROFILE

Friday Harbor’s St. Francis’ has deep roots in San Juans

More than a few St. Francis parishioners were doubtful when, in 1959, former pastor Father Paul Auer announced that the 45-family mission would be moving to a more convenient location—and taking its building with it. They wondered: Could the then-75-year-old wooden church building really survive a three-mile trip over farmland and old roads?

There must have been a collective gasp when, almost immediately, the steeple got tangled up in a fir tree. But in the end, the steeple had to be removed and burned, and the rest of the building held strong through the journey, and this month the parish celebrated the structure’s 125th anniversary. The building remains sturdy, like the 19th-century pioneers who built it and whose descendents still people its pews.

Indeed, it seems some parish families have been here forever.

“My husband and I have been here since 1972,” said Mary Moad Smith, president of the pastoral council, “and I think we’d be considered, well, a little more than newcomers.”

A welcoming, diverse parish

That’s not to say, however, that the parish is monolithic or unwelcoming. Far from it. Relative newcomers like parish administrator, Father Raymond Heffernan, who’s been St. Francis’ priest administrator since 2000, says he’s never too busy to talk to anybody. “Any stranger off the street can walk in and he greets them like an old friend, and he says ‘What can I do for you?’ and he just makes everybody feel so welcome. And he never ever acts like you’re intruding.”

In the last seven or eight years, the parish has welcomed approximately 100 Hispanic families into its ranks, said Father Heffernan. He’s started offering Mass in Spanish monthly. “I’m certainly not fluent, but I’m able to communicate,” he said.

The Hispanic community has “brought a lot of cultural richness to our parish,” said Smith. “They’ve celebrated the hilt [the feast of] Our Lady of Guadalupe on the 12th of December each year. On the eve, there’s a procession through town with carrying the statue and dancing and singing on every street corner.”

The arrival of the Hispanic families has also given the parish an infusion of youth. “We were getting to be more like an older parish, with not a lot of young people,” said Steckler, “and now we have lots and lots of children again. It’s really nice.”

There are about 15 children in Steckler’s religious education program, plus four high schoolers preparing for confirmation and a couple of men in RCIA.

Many islands, one parish

The parish also has a long-running and active Altar Society. And though there aren’t many other official ministries, parishioners keep busy meeting the needs of the parish and the community.

“When we’re a small community and there’s so much to do, it’s really amazing to tell me how the people here volunteer to help in whatever way they can,” said Steckler. “And they don’t just volunteer here, they volunteer with hospice, they volunteer at the library, they volunteer at the convalescent center, and it doesn’t even matter how old they are. Everybody pitches in and helps out.”

The parish’s 305 families are spread out over several islands. In addition to the two weekend Masses offered at the Friday Harbor church on San Juan Island, there are also weekly Masses on two other islands; most weekends, Father John Mollel, chaplain at the Benedictine monastery on Shaw Island, offers Mass on Lopez Island and Father David Young, a retired Navy chaplain, offers Mass on Orcas Island.

“While the parish is one on paper, each island has its own identity,” said Father Heffernan.

The distance isn’t the problem here, it’s trying to jive with the ferry times,” he said. “Sometimes it’s easy to get here, and then not so easy to get back.”

Roots in the Pig War

St. Francis Parish has deep roots in the San Juan Islands. The current Friday Harbor church building was built in 1884 to replace a log cabin church—built in 1860 after a bloodless American-British border dispute called the Pig War—that burned down in 1874.

In the early years, the Catholic community of the area was served by a succession of travelling mission priests. In 1910, St. Francis was made a mission of the new St. Mary Parish in Anacortes, and it was served for the next 38 years by Pastor Father Gustave Treunet, who first installed electric lights in the church building.

In 1958, Pastor Father Paul Auer purchased five acres in Friday Harbor for $5,000, and in the fall of 1959 the church building was moved from its old cemetery home to its current location on Price Street, where it was more easily accessible to parishioners and the many visitors to the island. The church’s first rectory was also built at the new site.

St. Francis became a parish in its own right in 1968, and it has continued to grow steadily, from just nine home-growing families in 1884 to an increasingly diverse community of more than 300 families today.