Mercer Island parish celebrates half century as prayerful, active community

Perpetual adoration parish provides spiritual and physical nourishment to island and beyond

With 1,500 households in St. Monica Parish, Father Patrick Freitag likes to tell people “we’re the largest family on Mercer Island.”

And after only four months as its pastor, he has witnessed that sense of family as he gets to know the faith community. Some 40 percent of the parishioners reside off the island, he notes, yet they continue making St. Monica’s their spiritual and social home. At the coffee hours following Sunday Masses he sees large numbers of families staying to visit and share what’s going on in their lives.

“They’ve moved to different places but they still remain connected here as their home.”

Every Friday, Father Freitag embarks on his “meet-and-greet” visits with parishioners. He has found a similarity in the stories of how they came to be here and what they find life-giving.

“It all comes back to the Eucharist — hands down,” Father Freitag said. “And it’s something then that we’re really challenged to live out.”

‘Vibrant group’

Though newly arrived as pastor, Father Freitag has his own ties to the parish. He was not alone. Others with ties to the parish include Fathers David Mayovsky, Kurt Nagel and Paul Berghout.

Father Freitag has his own ties to the community of prayer” he found at St. Monica’s, helped influence his decision to consider the priesthood, he said.

“People (here) just like helping each other,” DiGirolamo says.

The Friends of the Needy is one of the parish’s most visible outreaches, with its white van picking up and delivering food and meals to Seattle-area feeding programs. Every morning, except on Sundays and a few holidays, the van heads out to pick up day-old produce, baked goods and dairy products from area supermarkets, Starbucks stores and Noah’s Bagels.

But drivers coordinator Paula Fitzgerald Boos says she never has problems finding volunteers — about 55 drivers in all.

“It’s magical; people always step up, and that’s what makes this ministry work,” she said.

On Tuesday mornings, a group of from eight to 12 volunteer cooks are at the ready in the parish kitchen following the 8 o’clock Mass. They take food collected by the van, along with foodstuffs donated or purchased through school and parish fundraisers, and prepare meals for several hundred homeless people at two Seattle programs. “It’s all from scratch,” says Fran Kendall, who coordinates the cooking team. “And a lot of it is trying to utilize what we get.” Each meal includes a salad, homemade dressing, buttered bread and a hot entrée, usually a casserole.

Later in the day, other volunteers deliver and serve the meals.

Fast-growing parish

St. Monica’s was established in 1958 by Archbishop Thomas A. Connolly. According to a parish history, found by Archbishop Thomas A. Connolly blessing a St. Monica facility around 1960 (above) and Archbishop Alex J. Brunett blessing a new statue of St. Monica earlier this month (right).

PASTORS:
Father John A. Walsh, 1958
Father James Gandrau, 1977
Father John Bowman, 1990
Father Dennis Kemp, 2002
Father Patrick Freitag, 2008

Evidence of the parish’s devotion to prayer can be seen in its perpetual adoration of the Eucharist, a practice that marks its 23rd anniversary at St. Monica’s next month.

More than 200 adorers are available for the 168-hour week, DiGirolamo said.

More than 50 ministries

He noted, too, that St. Monica’s has more than 50 active ministries to serve the community’s spiritual, social and physical needs, from rosary makers to ministry to the homebound to a current revival of Monica’s Table, where volunteers provide meals or other services to those experiencing a family crisis such as an illness or death.

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St. Monica’s Table’s most visible outreach is the 11-year-old “Friends of the Needy,” which is sponsored by the parish.

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FAST-GROWING PARISH

St. Monica’s was established in 1958 by Archbishop Thomas A. Connolly. According to a parish history, founding pastor Father John A. Walsh saw his community of 380 households increase by nearly 100 families over the first two years. Both the current church and parish school buildings opened in 1960.

The first parish dinner, which became the foundation for today’s auction, was established during its tenure.

His successor, Father Gandrau, developed parish programs and ministries and added facilities including a gym and family center.

The church interior was renovated and the parish walls were painted in 1986, Father Freitag said. More than 50 active ministries to serve the community’s spiritual, social and physical needs, from rosary makers to ministry to the homebound to a current revival of Monica’s Table, where volunteers provide meals or other services to those experiencing a family crisis such as an illness or death.

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