Parish offers warm welcome on state’s windy coast

St. Jerome enjoys playing host, providing hospitable port for Catholics among three million visitors to Ocean Shores each year

OCEAN SHORES
BY GREG MAGNONI

Lola and Gordon Weiss first attended Mass at Ocean Shores’ St. Jerome Church in 1983, but they didn’t become fulltime members of the parish until 1991. Their journey is typical of the road many St. Jerome families travel prior to settling permanently in the parish. Like many of the 121 families registered at the little church at Hogans Corner on Washington’s north coast, Gordon and Lola lived and worked in the Puget Sound area most of the year. They traveled back and forth from Woodinville for years before finally settling permanently in the state’s most visited seaside destination.

Lola says it wasn’t just her love for the beach and the ocean that convinced her and Gordon to move to Ocean Shores. They also fell in love with St. Jerome parish and its “warm and welcoming” spirit.

“It is outstanding and I’m not kidding,” Lola said. “Everybody pulls together.”

Because Ocean Shores is a growing retirement community and a destination for some three million visitors each year, St. Jerome arguably plays host to more visitors each year than any other parish in Western Washington. According to Lola, Mass attendance swells at Easter and Christmas like most other parishes, but also on other holidays, throughout the summer, on weekends and increasingly during the winter months.

“They come and they go like the tide,” said Lola, who is quick to add, “It’s very nice to have them.”

It’s the people

Outgoing pastor Father Martin Bourke, says the thing that makes St. Jerome special is “the people themselves.” People, he said, like Bruce Macpherson and Susan Fleming who were instrumental in spearheading a 1999 campaign to replace siding and windows at the church. And Bob and Margaret Boprey, who took charge of the campaign in its latter stages as well as making sure that the church always was in readiness for liturgies.

Father Bourke became pastor of St. Jerome in 2002. Together with Parochial Vicar Father Joseph Nguyen and Senior Priest-in-residence Father Stephen Roman, he serves a community of six churches in the South Sound Deanery. He recently accepted an appointment as pastor of the Skagit Valley Catholic Churches and will be succeeded at St. Jerome by Father Dennis Robb, currently pastor of Everett’s Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

“Father Bourke will celebrate his last Mass as pastor of St. Jerome on June 24 followed by a reception in his honor. “They told me that anyone who comes to Grays Harbor never leaves, but apparently I’m going to be the exception to that,” he said.

Father Roman, who celebrated his 50th Jubilee as a priest in 2007, has become as much a fixture to the tiny, seaside faith community as the wind and waves.

“Father Steve is a big part of the parish,” said Lola Weiss, who said it’s a rare occurrence to leave Mass without hearing a joke during Father Roman’s homily or at dismissal. Because the church plays host to so many out-of-towners, asking visitors to stand up and say where they’re from has become a ritual at Father Roman’s weekend Masses.

Parish History

In the 1960s the closest church to Ocean Shores was Our Lady of Good Help in Hoquiam some 20 miles away, and the need for regular Sunday Masses grew with the number of tourists. Father Joseph Dominic first started offering Masses at the Community Hall at Ocean Shores Mall until attendance growth forced the parish to move Sunday Mass to the Legend Tavern and eventually to the Community Club Auditorium.

In 1968, prominent landowner Giles Hogan donated land for a church and St. Jerome parish was established in 1969 by Archbishop Thomas A. Connolly. Father Dominic was named the first pastor and served at the parish until his retirement in 1989.

According to the parish history, the church members consisted primarily of tourists in the early days, most from the Puget Sound area. Today the parish includes many year-round residents living on the north coast but continues to welcome a steady stream of visitors. Renovations and roof replacements have been necessary despite the church’s short history. As the parish history stated in 1999, “Thirty years of cold, wet winters and salty sea air have taken their toll on our church.”

The renovations continue with a planned 500-square-foot expansion to provide a private meeting space for Father Romait and a ground-floor office area. The expansion is expected to be completed by the end of the summer at a cost of $50,000.

Art and music

Lisa Steiner, who assists at the parish on Tuesday and Thursday, said art and liturgical music are one of St. Jerome’s most distinctive features. Father Dominic, an expert woodcarver born in Verbric, Yugoslavia, created a base-relief crucifix and Stations of the Cross that hang in the church to this day. It was Father Dominic who wanted the parish named in honor of St. Jerome, the biblical scholar who also hailed from the Dalmatian Coast of Yugoslavia.

A grotto and prayer garden with an eight-foot limestone sculpture of Our Lady of Solitude was added in 1994.

Steiner said two parishioners who take great pride in their liturgical ministries are Gini and Jack Schuster of Mount Vernon, parents of Father Frank Schuster, pastor of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta Parish in Woodinville and immediate past pastor of Bellingham’s Church of the Assumption. Gini is choir director and Jack is a lector.

The choir also includes Ruth Borrelli, a classically trained soprano, and Carol Swift who accompanies the choir on piano along with harpist Sue Shaffer and guitarist Penny Hale.

As the north coast continues to attract a growing number of retirees, Father Bourke said future parish needs include a Mass at Pacific Beach for Catholics who must travel from as far away as Taholah.