St. Rita of Cascia Parish, with Italian roots, was established in 1922

BY ARMANDO MACHADO

St. Rita of Cascia Parish in Tacoma is named after an Italian saint who was canonized in 1900. Centuries after her death, and thousands of miles away, the small parish of St. Rita of Cascia, with Italian roots, was established in 1922. It currently has 222 registered households. The pastor is Jesuit Father Carmine J. Sacco.

Born in Rocca Porena in the Diocese of Spoleto, St. Rita died in her 70s at the Augustinian convent of Cascia in 1456. She is represented as holding roses, or roses and figs, and sometimes with a wound in her forehead, according to the Catholic Encyclopedia. As a widow (her husband was murdered) whose twin sons also died, she applied for admission to the Augustinian convent at Cascia, but was refused because of her widow status.

"By continued entreaties, and, as is related, by Divine intervention, she gained admission, received the habit of the order and in time her profession," the encyclopedia states. "On account of the many miracles reported to have wrought her intercession, she received in Spain the title of La Santa de los imposibles (Saint of the Impossible). Her feast day is May 22.

"The parish community tries to live out the call of the Eucharist to reach out to others — doing for others, for neighbors," Father Sacco said last week. "We help with the food bank; we provide an Italian meal at the Nativity House (a drop-in center in Tacoma for the homeless)."

He said that the parish helps with a variety of charitable efforts locally, regionally and abroad, including two missions in central Africa.

As for parish volunteers, Father Sacco noted, "We are blessed with volunteers in our ministries. They are excellent, hard workers; they give of their time, talent and treasure."

Parish ministries include the Parents Club and the School of Religion — in which parents work with ministry teachers in the formation of faith for their children. They meet the second Monday of each month during the school year to plan activities for the children; provide assistance to the teachers; provide special classes for the parents; and hold fundraisers for the needs and appreciation of the teachers.

In the Aug. 3, 2000 issue of the Catholic Northwest Progress, the church was one of several parishes featured in an article about youth groups preparing for World Youth Day later that month in Rome.

The youths at St. Rita's Parish raised about a third of their $34,000 goal with an auction, the article noted. Some of the rest came in part from car washes, a garage sale, dinners, and working concession booths at Safeco Field.

Although St. Rita's is a small community, the parish had a 19-member group for the trip to Rome, including 14 young people, ages 16-22. That was a sign of the parish's deep Italian roots. When the parish was established in 1922, Jesuit Father Achilles was assigned to oversee it, to serve the Italian people of Tacoma, according to the parish handbook. The pastors that followed, all Jesuits, were: Father Athanasius Biagini, Father Anthony Baffaro, and Father Sacco, who has been pastor since 1979.

Also in 1979, the parish's designation as a national church — a category the Catholic Church established for ethnic parishes — was removed because there was no longer a need to help Italian immigrants in the area assimilate into U.S. culture.

St. Rita's Parish was then declared a canonically established parish of the Archdiocese of Seattle with geographical boundaries, and it continues to operate with those guidelines.