Our Lady of Fatima a beacon in Magnolia district

‘Close-knit parish reaches out to greater community through ministries and music program

SEATTLE

BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

You’ll find Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Magnolia, “a small town in the midst of Seattle,” as Pastor Father James Johnson describes it. And in Fatima you’ll find a very “close-knit parish centered on the life of that community.”

Some of the parishioners who helped found the parish in 1952 are still there. And it’s not uncommon for multiple generations of families — children, parents and grandparents — to all be parishioners. Kids raised at Fatima seem to find their way back when it’s time to start raising their own families.

A welcoming parish

Such history, coupled with the parish’s relative geographical isolation — an outsider would never need to pass through Magnolia to get anywhere else — might suggest insularity. But parishioners say Fatima is uncommonly welcoming. Alice Reimold remembers when she and her mother first came to Fatima in 1983.

“A group of parishioners always made sure we were invited to be with someone when we really didn’t know anyone in the parish,” she said.

For Reimold, who has no family in the area, the parish has “been a wonderful family” over the years. In recent years, Fatima has welcomed an influx of young families to the neighborhood and the parish.

“When I first got there [in 2001], I was involved to dinner with a group of families,” said Father Johnson, “and they said … in that neighborhood where they lived, five years prior there were, like, five kids and now there were 28, and 18 of them went to Fatima …

“There’s always lots of children at Mass, lots of active kids,” he added, “but that’s always been a wonderful thing, and I think the parish has really always had a charism for that.”

Community outreach

The parish extends its spirit of hospitality to the greater community through several ministries.

For the last five years, from Oct. to March, Fatima has hosted an overflow shelter for older homeless men two nights a week in conjunction with the St. Martin de Porres shelter in downtown Seattle. In the mid-1990s, a group of parishioners started Magnolia Moms, a neighborhood outreach program for homeless or homeless-need. Through their primary program, “Chili Corner,” they collect clothing, diapers, cribs, strollers and other parent-recessities and distribute them to a network of shelters. Each fall, they provide more than 200 backpacks full of school supplies for homeless children in Seattle, and in the spring they deliver about 300 Easter baskets to mothers and kids in transitional housing. Each winter, they collect over 200 coats for those in need.

“It’s amazing,” said Father Johnson of their efforts.

The Lucia Guild, a spiritual and social group for the women of the parish, holds an annual bake sale and homemade craft sale each November, last year they raised more than $800 for various Catholic charities.

“We work hard, earn the money, then we give it away,” said Diane Matherston, the guild’s treasurer, who’s been a parishioner at Fatima since 1958.

The parish also has an active Knights of Columbus council and Filipino-American Society.

Fatima’s vibrant youth ministry program grew from two mission trips each summer. Each year, about 30 junior high kids travel up to Lynden to participate in the Agape Project through Western Washington University’s Newman Center.

“It’s a weeklong migrant immersion project,” explained Casey Korbowski, pastoral assistant for outreach and youth ministry. “They learn about migrant lives and what Catholic social teaching has to tell us about their situation.

About 25 high schoolers have signed up so far to travel to New Orleans this summer to help with rebuilding areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

The parish school has 310 students and this year provided about $115,000 in financial aid, said Father Johnson.

Making music

In recent years, Fatima has developed a reputation for its ambitious music program under Matthew Locuck, who in the summer of 2008 became the parish’s pastoral assistant for liturgy and music. He had grown up in the parish and school in the 1970s and 1980s.

Under Locuck, Fatima’s music program has quadrupled in size. It now includes a chamber choir, a women’s choir and a men’s schola dedicated to traditional hymns, motets and Gregorian chant.

“To me, it was all about getting more people involved, because I could see the people, I could see the hunger out there,” said Locuck.

The parish also has a resident Baroque orchestra that plays on 18th-century instruments. And in October, the parish started a youth string orchestra program in conjunction with the parish school, open to kids from kindergarten through eighth grade.

Each November, the parish puts on a performance of Handel’s “Messiah,” and on March 18 the chamber choir and orchestra will perform a Vesper service by Handel as part of the Seattle Handel Festival. The parish also has a popular secular music series held in the parish center.

In recent years, Fatima has hosted concerts by world-famous ensembles including the male choral group Canticle, the Vienna Boys’ Choir and the Canadian Brass, who performed there Feb. 4. Ticket sales support the music program which, at its heart, is all about the Mass, said Locucks.

“We have to put our best foot forward every single Mass, every single week, every single liturgy — we owe that to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist,” he said.

Early Masses in movie theater

Our Lady of Fatima Parish was established by Archbishop Thomas A. Connolly on Jan. 18, 1952. The archbishop appointed Father Emery Blanchard as the parish’s first pastor. Some 440 people were present for the parish’s first Mass, celebrated Jan. 27 in an American Legion hall.

In March of 1952, the parish began celebrating Masses in the Magnolia Theater. According to a parish history, parishioners would vie for seats at the ends of rows so they could kneel in the aisle and avoid the candy, gum and spilled soda under the seats.

That fall, a parish fund drive was set up so far to travel to New Orleans this summer to help with rebuilding areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

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Our Lady of Fatima Parish puts on a performance of Handel’s ‘Messiah’ each November.

Our Lady of Fatima Parish, Seattle

Founded: 1952
Households: 1,171
Street address: 3218 W. Barrett St.
Phone: 206-283-1456
Website: www.olfatima.org

PASTORS:

Father Emery Blanchard, 1952
Father Howard Lavelle, 1976
Father William Lane, 1979
Father Thomas Quinn, 1987
Father James Johnson, 2001

Top: Archbishop Thomas A. Connolly prepares to lay the cornerstone of the parish’s temporary church building, where the first Mass was celebrated on Christmas Eve, 1953. Middle: Archbishop Connolly blesses the current church on Dec. 8, 1968. Bottom: Founding pastor Father Emery Blanchard shows kids around the parish school, opened in 1954.