BY GREG MAGNONI

The life and mission of a parish and school are seldom more intimately intertwined than during their formative years. In those days, the intersection of parish and school is often unmistakable because Masses are celebrated in the school gym.

Such was the case for St. Joseph Parish in Vancouver. Established in 1952, St. Joseph’s very first Masses were celebrated in the basement of the rectory and then in a storage shed fondly dubbed “the chicken coop,” according to the parish history. In 1954, just more than two years after Archbishop Thomas A. Connolly created the parish and asked the Sisters of Providence to staff a school, however, the first Mass was celebrated in the 758-seat St. Joseph “Church,” originally intended to serve as the school auditorium.

It would be almost 40 years before the parish in rapidly growing east Clark County moved to a new church funded and constructed behind the leadership of its fourth pastor, Father Kenneth Haydock. And yet to this day, with a parish population of more than 2,000 families, St. Joseph still enjoys a particularly fruitful collaboration between the parish and its school.

Coordinated vision, mission

“We have worked hard to try to see how both the parish can assist the school in its mission and how the mission of the parish can be a part of the ministry of the school,” St. Joseph Pastor Gary Lazzeroni said. In her 10th year as principal of St. Joseph School, Lesley Harrison wholeheartedly agreed. The school, she said, is not a separate private school. It is a ministry of the parish.

“We are a Catholic parish school; we put that before anything else,” said Harrison.

Harrison said a majority of St. Joseph School’s parents are members of the parish and, as a consequence, the students’ faith development in the classroom mirrors that of the parish.

Father Lazzeroni, who was named St. Joseph’s priest administrator in 2008 and appointed pastor this year, said one indication of the coordinated vision and mission of the parish and school is the collaboration between their respective staffs. Both Father Lazzeroni and parochial vicar Father Joseph Althenhofen, for instance, make scheduled visits to the school once a week.

In addition, the school principal attends pastoral staff meetings, and at the start and the end of each school year the teachers and parish staff come together for Mass and a luncheon.

Young and old

Marge Martel’s four children and five grandchildren all attended St. Joseph School and she agrees that the life of the school contributes to the life of the parish and vice versa.

“What I have found that I like about [St. Joseph] is that with the school we have the young people, the young parishioners, and they keep you going,” Martel said. “It’s nice to have that blend — the younger ones and the older ones.”

Martel typifies St. Joseph parishioners past and present. She and her husband, Eurgel, joined St. Joseph Parish in the 60s.

“Being a cradle Catholic, I had three children and I went to the office to get registered in the parish,” Martel said.

“When we went to the parish office and asked where the church and the rectory were located, she was told that Mass was held right there in the gym and that the priests lived in an old farmhouse nearby.”

“I thought to myself, ‘My goodness, we need a lot of stuff here,'” Martel recalled. Like other parishioners through the years, she pitched in and “filled in helping here and there,” eventually assuming the position of parish receptionist for some 30 years.

As a result of the early pastors and parishioners, Father Lazzeroni said the parish now has “an incredibly beautiful campus. I tell my friends that I feel like I live in a beautiful park.”

Sausage fest

Another example of the close-knit relationship between St. Joseph Parish and its school is the annual Vancouver Sausage Festival, celebrating its 40th year in 2011. In 1972, the school board was considering cancellation of its seventh- and eighth-grade classes for lack of funds.

With the support of their pastor, Father Edmund Kearney, a planning committee was formed, parishioners donated time, materials and money, and the “sausage fest,” as it is commonly known, raised more than $12,000 to keep classes open for the school’s upper grades.

Today, the annual Sausage Fest is one of Vancouver’s premier community events, held annually on the weekend after Labor Day. The event still raises funds to support the school as well as parish faith formation programs.

It’s gone way beyond being a fundraiser,” said Father Lazzeroni. “I would say parishioners feel that — way more important — is the community-building aspect of it, both among parish volunteers and those who come.”

That sense of community and spirit of outreach is another point of intersection between the parish mission and that of the school.

“This is a very family-oriented community,” said Harrison, the school principal. “We talk a lot about finding our place in a bigger world.” The K-8 school sponsors annual service projects for every grade level including “Feed the Need,” a food drive benefitting a local food bank, and an annual toy drive for Portland’s Emanuel Children’s Hospital.

The school also conducts a penny drive during Catholic Schools Week. The past two years the money was raised for a school in Uganda to help its parish put a roof on its church and install flooring.

Parish history

Father Lazzeroni said “good liturgy, good faith formation and a real sense of hospitality” best characterize the parish that celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2002 while under the direction of its fifth pastor, Father Hans Olson.

According to its history, the parish’s pastors have been a “succession of priests that were best suited for the job at the time.” Archbishop Connolly gave the task of establishing the parish to Father Thomas J. Pitsch, described as a “gregarious man of action.”

Father Pitsch oversaw the construction of the convent and St. Joseph School, which was staffed by the Sisters of Providence with Sister Beatrice Ann as its principal as well as the first superior of St. Joseph Convent. In 1964, Father Anthony Domandich succeeded Father Pitsch respectively, guiding the parish in its implementation of the changes ushered in by the Second Vatican Council including creation of lay consultative bodies and liturgical practices.

Father Olson oversaw expansion of the new church built during Father Haydock’s pastorate, as well as construction of a new wing of the school.

“The [pastor/honors] have had here a tradition of pastors who had a real care for really good liturgy,” along with a “deep commitment to learning the Catholic faith” and “an amazing sense of hospitality,” Father Lazzeroni said.