St. Mary of the Valley Parish bursting with life

Majority-Hispanic parish will host archdiocesan men’s conference during centennial

MONROE

BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

When Father Phil Bloom arrived as pastor of St. Mary of the Valley Parish in 2009, he found it to be a “very welcoming, very supportive, very encouraging parish.”

The community, which is in the midst of celebrating its centennial as a parish, has gotten used to welcoming new members in recent decades.

“The town grew enormously, especially in ‘80s and ‘90s, and a lot of new people came here,” Father Bloom explained.

More than half Hispanic

The parish got a big bump in membership with the introduction of Hispanic ministry in the early 1990s, during the pastorate of then-Father Joseph Tyson, now bishop of Yakima.

“This is the first parish in Snohomish County that had a regular Spanish Mass,” noted Father Bloom, who said that Hispanics now make up a little more than half the parish population.

Relations between the English- and Spanish-speaking sectors of the parish community are positive, said Father Bloom, noting that annual bilingual Masses on Holy Thursday, All Saints’ Day and Thanksgiving are very popular.

And a major benefit of the large Hispanic population, said longtime parishioner Rita Barr, is that “if it weren’t for their membership, we may not have enough Caucasian laity to have a resident parish priest.”

The Hispanic community at St. Mary’s is very active, said Tania Gutierrez, who coordinates Hispanic ministry at the parish. They hold four retreats each year, which can draw about 150 participants, and weekly Friday-night prayer meetings draw at least 100 people, she said.

“We always have a bunch of activities because everybody says yes — everybody wants to help,” she said.

The vibrancy and vitality of the Hispanic community at St. Mary’s is on display at the Spanish Mass each Sunday at noon.

“You might think our Mass is loud, but it’s because we have so many kids,” said Gutierrez.

Many ministries

The rest of the parish is plenty active as well. The Generations of Faith religious education program draws about 100 people of all ages each month, said Father Bloom. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Knights of Columbus are both quite active.

The parish’s youth program has also been getting stronger, said parishioner Maggie Beatte, who served as president of the pastoral council from 2003–11.

She said she only expected a handful of youth to sign up to attend World Youth Day in Madrid last year. The parish ended up sending a delegation of 42, including about 10 chaperones.

“It’s so wonderful to see because they brought back this experience and they’re paying it forward in so many activities that they’re involved in now,” Beatte said.

Beatte also noted that St. Mary’s has “a very vibrant Bible study for women.”

Father Bloom said the parish has benefitted immensely over the last 35 years from the service of Sister Barbara Geib, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, who has been at St. Mary’s since 1977.

“We’ve had our ups and downs … but it’s always been a parish that’s warm and welcoming,” said Sister Barbara.

Upcoming men’s conference

One of the outstanding things about St. Mary’s, said Father Bloom, “is the response of the men. We have a monthly men’s group, and it’s one of the most successful ones I’ve ever seen.”

The men’s group has been active for a couple of years, he said.

And out of that men’s group has grown what will be the biggest event of St. Mary’s centennial celebration: hosting the Archdiocese of Seattle Men’s Conference on Saturday, March 2, 2013. With the theme “Iron Sharpens Iron,” the conference will feature Archbishop J. Peter Sartain; nationally known evangelist Deacon Harold Burke-Smith; musician Angus McDonell; Father Bloom; Father Ed White, pastor of St. Stephen the Martyr, Renton; and Deacon Abel Magana.

The men’s conference “just kind of evolved from a mustard seed,” said Alan Murray, a parishioner who coordinates the men’s group.

The organizers hope to draw 600 men from around the archdiocese for the conference, said Father Bloom.

Parish history

St. Mary of the Valley was established as a mission of St. Michael Parish in Snohomish in 1902. It was raised to the status of parish in 1913 and dedicated by Bishop Edward O’Dea in 1914. Many Catholics and non-Catholics turned out for the dedication.

The original parish population was about 20 families, mostly of Irish heritage, according to a parish history.

The property for the first church was donated by Ed and Stella Donovan, and the building was constructed at a cost of $801. The first resident pastor, Father D.P. Kelly, had the church enlarged to seat 140, and also built a rectory. In 1925, Father Robert Dillon purchased a hall for $500.

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