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Catholic Parishes Flourish

By John Davis

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Only four years after the Archdiocese of New York created the parish of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha in LaGrange, ground will be broken this spring for a new 1,000-seat church at the site on Route 82.

The new Catholic church is needed to handle an explosion of growth in the young parish from 320 families in 2002 to 1,100 now.

The current church, which holds four Masses on Sundays and one vigil Mass on Saturday evenings, seats 315 individuals.

Except for the 7:30 a.m. Mass Sunday, "the seats are filled and people are standing," said Monsignor William Belford, the Blessed Kateri pastor. "We are almost a poster child for growth."

Cardinal Edward Egan, the diocese archbishop, remarked on the growth in Blessed Kateri and two nearby parishes — St. Denis in Beekman and St. Columba in Hopewell Junction — in his December column on the diocese Web site.

Egan characterized the area of the three parishes in southern Dutchess County as one of several in the archdiocese "where Catholic presence is skyrocketing."

Egan pointed out that in 1992 St. Denis parish, with 5,000 families, was divided and a new parish was created in Hopewell Junction: St. Columba. Ten years later, St. Columba was divided and Blessed Kateri parish was established.

The growth in the religious education program alone at Blessed Kateri reflects the need for more space. In 2001, when Blessed Kateri was still a mission church and part of the St. Columba parish, 294 children attended religion classes. Now, 720 attend classes in the basement of the church.

"I don't think anyone dreamed it would grow this fast," said Mary Biasotti, religious education director at Blessed Kateri.

With the building of a new church on the 81-acre former Wright Farm, the worship space on the ground floor of the current church will be renovated into more classrooms.

The \$12 million construction project at Blessed Kateri is being undertaken not merely to meet current needs. Rather, the archdiocese anticipates growth in the rural area of LaGrange, where farmland continues to be transformed into upscale subdivisions.

"There's a strong feeling it's almost a field of dreams — build it and they will come," Belford said.

Debbie Scianimanico, a parishioner at Blessed Kateri since 2002, is looking forward to attending Mass in the new larger church.

"I think it's going to be very, very nice," she said. "I've seen the growth since I've come here."

In his recent column, Egan said, "The numbers continue to climb, not only in Dutchess County, but throughout this ever-expanding diocese of ours."

The cardinal's observation was made in reporting on an ongoing study to realign the diocese according to recent growth patterns. The outcome of the study could result in parishes being merged and churches closed.

"We have been looking at all 10 counties," said Joseph Zwilling, archdiocese spokesman. "We are looking at the entire diocese and can't rule out anything anywhere."

Due to a steady migration of Catholics northward from the New York City metropolitan area, most of the faithful in Dutchess and Ulster appear to have little to worry about as far as church closures.

"We would be looking more to the lower part of the archdiocese," Zwilling said of possible parish consolidations.

That lower part includes Manhattan, which has 97 parishes, the Bronx, 67 parishes, and Staten Island, 35 parishes.

"You could have literally three parishes in a five-block area," Zwilling said of Manhattan.

In contrast, Dutchess has 24 parishes and Ulster has 21.

Belford, who also is the vicar of Dutchess, said although new ground is being broken in LaGrange, he would not rule out a church or two being closed elsewhere in the county. That decision, though, will ultimately be made by the archdiocese hierarchy.

"In Dutchess County, the story is growth. That doesn't mean you couldn't have closings," Belford said. "We are not wedded to a building or a piece of property. We are here to serve the people who are willing to come."

2 NYC parishes combined

In 2002, the archdiocese merged two Manhattan parishes — St. Bernard's on West 14th Street and Our Lady of Guadalupe, a block away — to balance a decline in the Irish but growth in the Latin-American population of the neighborhood.

Zwilling said some other Manhattan parishes that once attracted 1,200 to 1,500 on Sundays and now draw maybe 200 could be consolidated.

The closing of churches is always a hard thing to do, Zwilling said, because of the emotional attachment longtime parishioners have for their churches.

"This is extraordinarily complex when you are trying to balance all your resources," Zwilling said.

Denis Giannelli, a Catholic living in LaGrange, said the archdiocese is failing in its historic mission if it starts closing churches. The church, he said, should be trying to draw into the old half-empty churches the recent immigrants settling in the boroughs of New York City.

"The whole concept of realignment is ludicrous," Giannelli said. "Let us concede that the archdiocese is correct: A great migration of Catholics has taken place. The younger generation of Catholics has left the city for the country. The overall population of the city, however, remains fairly constant. This means others have moved in to fill the void left by the migration. The question to be asked then is why the churches are empty."

The northerly migration of Catholic families into Ulster reflects that of Dutchess.

"The growth has been in the southern part of the county," said Monsignor William Williamson, vicar of Ulster and pastor of St. John the Evangelist in Saugerties.

Williamson has noted increases in the number of faithful at St. Josephs in New Paltz, St. Charles Borromeo in Gardiner, St. Mary's in Marlborough, Our Lady of Fatima in Plattekill and the Church of St. Mary and St. Andrew in Ellenville.

But the vicar said a parish consolidation somewhere in Ulster wouldn't surprise him.

"If they merge anything, it would be because of a shortage of priests," he said.

Priests part of consideration

The archdiocese is considering a steady decline in its number of priests in making its realignment decisions.

"Each one of those needs a priest if you're going to keep them open," Zwilling said of the New York parishes. "Certainly we keep in mind personnel and where we use our priests to best serve the parishes."

Like Manhattan, the City of Poughkeepsie once had a number of vibrant ethnic parishes in the space of several blocks.

Between Market Street and the Hudson River, Irish, Italian, Polish and Slovak faithful all had their own churches, said the Rev. Peter Kihm, pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel on Carmel Place and administrator of St. John the Baptist on Grand Street.

"We've seen a decline in the population of the neighborhood but an increase in the number of parishioners," Kihm said of the church on Mount Carmel Place. "Mainly, they are Italian Americans and the area is an Italian neighborhood."

What has happened, Kihm said, is many of the older parishioners who moved out of the neighborhood to the nearby towns continue to come back to Mount Carmel for Sunday Mass. Some of their grown children — with families of their own — do the same.

But the shift in the neighborhood population to one that now includes Marist College students renting apartments, has led to a decline in enrollment at Mount Carmel's Catholic grade school: from 300 students in 1999 to 160 now.

"There's no young families moving into the neighborhood," Kihm said.

A growing number of Hispanic Catholics in the area are attracted to the weekly Spanish Mass at 1 p.m. Sunday at St. Mary on Church Street in the City of Poughkeepsie.

"We have a significant number of Latino families, but they're not all from Poughkeepsie," the Rev. John Brinn, pastor of St. Mary, said.

Some of the approximately 250 who attend the Spanish Mass come from as far as New Paltz, Kingston and even Connecticut. But few have actually joined the parish.

"There's a fair number of them that are undocumented," Brinn said.

At Holy Trinity Parish on Main Street in Poughkeepsie, a slight increase in parishioners in the last several years can be attributed to new homeowners on the fringe of the city and in the town.

Twice a year, Holy Trinity holds a Mass and gathering afterwards just to welcome newcomers to the parish.

"We try to make an effort in welcoming people who come," said the Rev. Joseph LaMorte, Holy Trinity pastor.

But LaMorte said, ultimately, boosting church attendance matters less to him than ministering to those who do come.

"The Lord came to feed the sheep, not to count the sheep," LaMorte said.

In a similar vein, the Rev. Peter Vianney, pastor of The Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Port Ewen, said he has witnessed more of a spiritual growth in his flock than a numerical one.

"The deepening of the spiritual life of the parishioners is what we've experienced," he said, attributing it to religion classes that stress teaching the children the meaning of the Mass liturgy.

The announcement of the archdiocesan realignment will be soon, but the spokesman was reluctant to pin down a date.

"We want to do this as quickly as possible, but we also want to do it right," Zwilling said.

Church attendance, staffing and operating costs are not the only factors being considered.

"It's not so much the money," Zwilling said. "It's the number of baptisms, number of funerals. Does it have a school? If this had been about numbers, it could have been done in a week or two with a spreadsheet."

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