

Perpetual Help marks feast

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — JoAnn Dixon looked around at the dozens of people eating strawberry shortcake on the front lawn of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church on Joseph Avenue and smiled.

"It's the most wonderful parish — and I've been in a lot of them," she said as she sat at a picnic table shaded from the bright sun. "The people really care about each other, and they have a deep faith, and I feel when I come here on Sunday and receive the body and blood of the Lord and see the other people and their joy, I'm good for a week!"

That seemed to be the feeling of several Perpetual Help parishioners as they celebrated the church's feast day June 26 (the actual date is June 27) and bid farewell to their pastor, Father Peter Deckman, who also was pastor of St. Michael's Parish on North Clinton Avenue. The two churches are clustered.

"I don't want to go because it's more comfortable to stay," the pastor said, noting he's been assigned to serve as parochial vicar at Holy Apostles, Holy Family and St. Anthony of Padua parishes. "It's difficult to go, to leave these people ... willing to give and commit themselves to the parish."

Perpetual Help is home to about 250 registered families, according to Deacon John Brasley, who noted the church celebrated its 100th anniversary last year. The church marked its feast day with a crowning ceremony of the statue of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, he added. In his brief farewell speech, Father Deckman noted that the parish is one of the most ethnically diverse in the Diocese of Rochester, and is the spiritual home of white, black, Hispanic and Laotian Catholics.

"Thanks for being so rich in the diversity of Jesus Christ among us," he said to the crowd.

Indeed, the parish serves both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking Catholics, and hosts a gospel Mass each Sunday, according to Rita Lewis, a staff member at House of Mercy, an outreach center located on nearby Hudson Avenue. The house organizes



Colleen White

Our Lady of Perpetual Help parishioners Elsa Martinez (top) and Gary Knights place a crown of roses atop the statue of Mary June 26 during a celebration of the parish's feast day.

the Mass, she said, and is grateful to Perpetual Help for its hospitality.

"It's a beautiful church," she said.

Fritz Hyppolite, a Haitian immigrant, said the parish's welcoming attitude was one reason he joined the church after he moved into a house across the street from it in the early 1990s.

"This place became a second home,"

he said. "If I needed help in any situation, I felt free to come in and talk to them." He added that he volunteers at the church doing such things as helping people with transportation or helping to keep the parish clean.

"When they need me, if I've got the time, I'll do it," he said.

Ellie Raff, a parishioner for the last

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four years, also likes to lend a hand at Perpetual Help by serving on the altar. She noted that when she was growing up, the Catholic Church did not allow women to serve on the altar, and she said she was glad the church had changed its attitude on the matter.

"The Lord has led me to believe that there's something there for me," she said of serving Mass. "It's just a feeling of happiness and gladness — you love to serve the Lord."

Another active parishioner is Gary Knights, who chairs both the parish life and the buildings and grounds committees, among his various volunteer activities. A parishioner since 1949, Knights said he does what he does because the parish's elders need help after serving his generation for decades. A sense of gratitude also motivates Ruth Russell, who chairs the 40-Week Club, which sponsors drawings to raise money for the parish. She serves on other committees as well, and noted that she is thankful for the support she and her husband, Bill, received after he was in a serious motorcycle accident. She credits his recovery to the prayers and support of Perpetual Help members.

"I believe my husband wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the parishioners prayers and calling and "best wishes" cards, and God's intervention and his care," she said.

Norma Bruni, a Puerto Rican Catholic, serves on various parish groups and committees as well, and tends to the parish grounds.

"I'm a gardener at home, and I'm a gardener here," she said. Like Rus-



Colleen White

Parishioners gather outside Rochester's Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church for strawberry shortcake in celebration of the parish's feast day.

sell, she credited her faith for helping her through difficult times, and noted that she, too, wanted to give back.

"You give back to the community, and God helps you through hard times," she said.

Irene Holleran enjoys the community so much, she drives all the way from East Avon in Livingston County to attend Mass at Perpetual Help. A lifelong parishioner, she moved out of the area in 1995, but is still loyal to her old church.

"This is a very friendly and loving parish, and they're open to all cultures," Holleran said. She added that she believes the parish's patron looks out for her.

"I believe in the power of Our La-

dy of Perpetual Help, that she answers your prayers if it's in your best interest," Holleran said.

Many parishioners certainly thought it was in their best interest to sample the strawberry shortcake being served by such parishioners as Kimi, Sabrina, Justin and Kevin Xaisanasy as well as Victoria Singavatdy and Maria Syouthoum, all Laotian-Americans and all related. The extended family members noted that they always enjoy helping out at church events.

"It's not just a parish," Kimi Xaisanasy said. "It's pretty much a family."

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