

SAINT CATHERINE'S

CHURCH OF ST. CATHERINE MIRRORS COUNTRYSIDE, PEOPLE WHO BUILT AND SUSTAIN ACTIVE PARISH

"It's working taking a drive in the country just to see that church in the fall."

The speaker a Twin City resident, referred to the Church of St. Catherine, a rural Catholic church located six miles south of Prior Lake just east of County Road 23 on County Road 8. The tiny white church is set high on a wooded hill and overlooks picturesque St. Catherine's Lake, rimmed by woods and fields. The church and its surroundings present a picture post card scene any season of the year, but in the fall – well, as the man said, it's worth taking a drive in the country just to see it, and right now the red oaks are at their flaming best.

To many viewers of the sight of this little rural church may bring nostalgic thoughts of a similar church remembered from childhood. Questions arise – does this little white church still have all those fondly remembered "country church" qualities? Does it have the open friendliness? Does everybody know each other? Is almost everybody related? Does it have those big all-church family social gatherings? And is there that strong sense of pride in church history and tradition?

Interviews with area residents, with parishioners, and with Father Clyde Eddy, the church pastor, indicate the answer to most of these questions is, "yes."

Even in the jet-age '70's, the Church of St. Catherine has retained not only its country church appearance, but also its country church character. For generation after generation after generations the church has served families in the surrounding area. It has been and is an important and stable factor in their lives.

Young Chad Shimota, for instance, represents the sixth generation of his family that has been served by St. Catherine's. His mother, Joyce Shimota, is the daughter of Virginia Odette who is the daughter of Pat Doherty, Jr. Pat Doherty, Sr. was the son of Thomas Doherty whose name appears on the list of original parishioners.

Oh, there have been minor changes. The hitching posts are gone and so is the little stable that once stood on the premises. Gone, too, are the days when people walked to church or came in horse-drawn wagons. Some old-timers remember when Mike and Margaret Hickey came to church in a two-passenger cart pulled by a mule. And Margaret Doherty, who is now in her 80's remembers

walking over four miles to play the church organ. Now sleek new cars pull in to the church parking area on Sunday morning.

The parish was once larger in area, but less populated. It took in all of Spring Lake Township including an area that is now part of the city of Prior Lake. The parish was divided when St. Michael's Church was built in Prior Lake.

The quaint church building, however, remains almost the same as when it was built in 1896. The inside of the church is as lovely as the outside and parishioners have jealously guarded it against change. In the early days women of the church crocheted lace for the altar linens. Two of these linens are still in use today. Among those who are remembered for this activity are Bridget Ryan, Josephine Doyle, Catherine O'Hern, Catherine Shea, Carrie Casselius, Annie McMahon, Lizzy Mulkern, Margaret Doherty, and Elizabeth Geehan. (Sure, and there's something about those names that hints at the nationality of most of the early parishioners!)

Church practices and traditions have also resisted change. However, one concession to modern times is that pew rent is now paid by envelope. In the old days it was paid in cash, and according to one parishioner, the church treasurer would sometimes still be at the church at two o'clock in the afternoon "just making sure that everything was straight."

In recent years a new and unavoidable situation has affect St. Catherine's. The face of the surrounding countryside has changed. Each year more new homes pop up between old farmsteads. Most are occupied by people who live in the country and work in the city. Some of the new homes, however belong to the farmers and their old homesteads are now owned by city workers who enjoy old-time charm.

Will this influx of newcomers in the parish affect the character of the church? "Not if we can help it," said Pat Winker. "We love the church. It's like a page out of history. We wouldn't want it changed."

Pat and Fred Winker moved into the area four years ago and planned their home so that they could see the Church of St. Catherine from their windows. They and their six children are comparative newcomers to the parish and can testify to the friendliness of the people.

"We were welcomed with open arms," said Pat.

They and other newcomers are quickly assimilated into the life of the church. Pat is presently church organist.

"Actually," she said, "the parish is just putting up with me."

Pat became organist when Ambrose Eischen, the former organist became a Christian brother two years ago.

“He made it look so easy,” she said, “that I thought I could do it. The first Sunday I hit a wrong note, and I think I jumped a foot. That was the end of the music for that day.”

Pat has continued to play because she likes music at Mass and because she considers it a privilege to play on the organ, which is as quaint and beautiful as the church itself. So far, she laughed, she has seen no petitions for a new organist.

Pat also teaches religion classes. Combined classes are held weekly at the Church of St. Patrick, a sister church also pastored by Father Eddy. The list of teachers includes names, which are both old and new to the parish – Jane Hauer, Ellen She, Rita Eisterhold and Mrs. Clarence Oldenburg.

A Winker son serves as an altar boy along with Jamie and Patrick Shea, fifth generation members of the church. Scott Boeser, another newcomer, is also an altar boy. His family has lived in the parish for only a year. Such names as Odette, Efta, Dillingham, Stepka, and Hess also appear on the list of altar boys.

In many suburban churches a ten-year member is an old-timer. At St. Catherine's James Ludowese is still a relative newcomer although he has been a member of the parish for approximately that long. Nevertheless, he is one of the two trustees of the church. He serves with Lambert Seurer, and the two men are in charge of the business affairs of the church. Right now things are going well. In September a church loan was paid off. Father Eddy made the announcement in the Oct. 3 church bulletin: “Oh joyful gladness! St. Catherine is now clear and free, and we can begin to build some reserve for future needs.”

Even with new faces in the parish it is apparent that most of the approximately 160 parishioners know and care about each other. Old timers remember when Bridget Ryan would go out any hour of the night to help where there was illness. Almost all believe that, should the need arise, the same “c*** church” caring would be found in the parish today.

The question of whether everybody is related to everybody else is another answer.

“No,” said an area resident, “it's not true anymore. In fact, a lot of names aren't even Irish anymore. Still, there are all those new families with young people. Who can tell what will happen?”

The church still does have family oriented social gatherings. The annual turkey social fund raiser and there are pancake breakfasts and bake sales. Most of

these activities are planned by the ladies' Rosary Society. Present officers are Mr. Herb Efta, Mrs. Russ Egan and Rita Eisterhold.

After visiting with parishioners of St. Catherine's, no one could doubt their pride in church history. Margaret Donnelly Shea has special reason for pride, for the beginnings of St. Catherine's Church can be traced to her grandfather's log home. Mission priests first came to the area in 1857 and visited irregularly for several years. Mass was said in the home of Matt and Winnifred Donnelly, Margaret's grandparents. Marriages were performed in that house and children were baptized there. Winnifred Donnelly made the hosts for those times when communion was offered. That log cabin home still stands in the same place west of the church although it has been remodeled several times around the cabin. It is now occupied by the Gordon Diethelm family.

In 1867 a log cabin church was built on property donated by Matt Donnelly. Later Michael McMahan also donated a few acres east of the present church building. The first church burned and the present structure was erected in 1896.

Parishioners also take pride in the accomplishments of those who have roots in the St. Catherine Parish. Joe She, Sr. referred to Archbishop John Roach whose grandparents "rest in St. Catherine's Cemetery" and who father was confirmed in the church. He also mentioned Joseph Lapensky, the new president of Northwest Orient Airlines, whose mother was a Mulkern and whose aunt, Lizzy Mulkern was one of the early church organists.

Joe and Margaret She live on the east side of Carl's Lake in view of the church. Two sons, Joe, Jr. and James have built homes nearby. They and their children are the great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren of Matt and Winifred Donnelly.

The Church of St. Catherine inspires love in both old and new parishioners. Newcomer Pat Winker says, "This is the first time I have ever felt a positive affection for a church building and its premises." And octogenarian Elizabeth Geehan who now lives in St. Paul recently told an old friend, "My heart and soul are still at St. Catherine's."

Picture Caption 1: The Church of St. Catherine on County Road 8 has remained almost unchanged since it was built in 1896. Approximately 50 families attend the little country sanctuary.

Picture Caption 2: Seen after last Sunday's service are Father Eddy, center, and from left to right, altar boys Tom Odette, James Shea, Pat Shea and Scott Boeser. Names in the congregation represent families that have attended the church for decades and decades.

Picture Caption 2: Over a century ago mission priests held Mass, performed marriages and baptized children in a log cabin on a hill just north of St. Catherine's Lake. That structure, which has since been remodeled several times, still forms the core of several of the inside walls at the home of Gordon Diethelm.

Insert: TIME MAGAZINE SHOWS INTEREST

Father Eddy, priest of St. Catherine's has helped to formulate yet another news story. The morning following his interview with Mrs. Amundson, he talked with reporters from Time Magazine who are writing an article about the history of the Catholic Church in America. Father Eddy was selected primarily because of the background he has attained as librarian at S. Paul's Seminary in St. Paul. It is a position that, until June 1, he will retain on a part-time basis.

By Dorothy Amundson
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