

The new church ladies of Holy Cross; that's what we call them. They are a group of women who have become a part of the fabric of their old parish. Some of them left and joined other churches closer to their homes, but return to their home parish on a regular basis. Others left the parish for a while and came back to make Holy Cross their main place of worship and still others never left at all. Some make the ride from their suburban homes once or twice or even three times a week.

When we were kids, there was a group of severe looking women, almost all dressed in black, at mass every morning and at every novena in the evening. These women decorated the altar and changed the altar linen, as well as the clothing on the many statues, such as the Infant of Prague. They never seemed to have much time for us kids, although some would give us a quick smile and tell us to be quiet in Italian and not to talk or laugh in church and to show respect both for the church and for our elders. There was one old lady who stood in the back of the church to make sure that we wiped our shoes as we entered if it was snowing or raining outside. She was scary.

These days, the modern church ladies are much more laid back. They work on altar decorations and flower arrangements, particularly at holiday time; they sing beautifully in the church choir under the direction of the talented Nancy Cannizzaro, who is also the organist and serves as the church secretary. Until a few months ago, Nancy lived in the same house where she and her twin sister Mary Cannizzaro Rizzo were born, 122 West Avenue. Now she drives in daily from Amherst.

They act as Eucharistic Ministers, distribute communion, counsel the children, write and sell cookbooks (which are a huge success), and, run baked good sales



Seated, Miss Nancy A. Cannizzaro, president of Holy Cross Ladies Society and her twin sister, Mrs. Joseph P. Rizzo, president of the Home School Association. Standing, Mrs. Michael J. Muscarella, vice-president of the Ladies Society, and Mrs. Vincent M. Andreana, vice-president of the H.S.A.

and spaghetti dinners throughout the year. Most years they prepare a fabulous St. Joseph's table, although that gets harder and harder as their numbers shrink and the table's popularity increases, as people in the church community and many others develop a fondness for the holiday and the goodies that are served.

Msgr. David Gallivan, the pastor at Holy Cross, says that he does not know what he would possibly do without the church ladies. "They work hard. They are fiercely loyal and loving. These women are living examples of the Christian message."

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Most of these women not only grew up in the parish, but also went to the elementary school, which has been closed since 1984. Many of them were classmates in the very first graduating class of Holy Cross Elementary School. They include Barbara Scanio (Vasi), a former American Airlines and AAA travel specialist and executive. This writer had a huge crush on her in seventh and eighth grades but, alas, she wouldn't give him a tumble. She doesn't come back as often as some of the others but she says it helps her remember her youth and some great times in her life when she does. Ann Rose Noto (Canazzi) and Rose Marie Verso, as well as Antonina Canazzi (Toni), Suzanne Gullo (Marranca) and Betty Cole (Polizzi) are among those who just can't cut the ties.

Ann Rose Noto was the office manager for a chemical company for most of her career. She comes back at least once or twice a week. "I do it because of the people . . . many of whom are old and dear friends. It feels right." Ann, whom her classmates knew as Anna Rose Canazzi, says there is no place like it. Most come to choir practice on Thursdays and many attend daily mass at 8:30. In part, these women love Holy Cross because, as the former Barbara Vasi told me, growing up at Holy Cross was a great period in their lives. They recall fondly being in class with Sister Mary Redempta, along with as many as 53 other classmates, where Sister ruled with an iron hand, as she would have to with a group that size. Can you imagine telling a modern teacher to work with a class that size? There would be a revolution.

Rose Marie Verso is one of the leaders of the pack. She is a retired school teacher who worked in the Kenmore schools, at Washington School and later at Lindbergh School, where she taught second and third grades for over 36 years. Rose Marie lives in Depew, New York, but she says that she cannot imagine not coming to Holy Cross. The "girls" as she calls them, are all friends. "They are my family" she says, many of whom grew up with her in the old Lakeview projects. She told me as she helped prepare the logistics for the next baked goods sale, "I've had so many good times in

this parish" and she smiled and talked about the shows they put on, including the memorable Miss Holy Cross Pageant.

Betty Polizzi Cole and Susanne Marranca Gullo were 1956 graduates of Holy Cross School and have been friends ever since. They attended Villa Maria High School together and both continue to live in the City of Buffalo. They never left Holy Cross. They are members of the Ladies Society and work at all the bake sales and spaghetti dinners.

From the Class of 1955 came Antonina Canazzi, "Toni," to one and all. She had a long and successful career, first at the University at Buffalo where she was an assistant to the OB/GYN chair at the medical school and presently is court clerk to Judge Jeff Voelkl in Williamsville Village Court. Toni is a Holy Cross lifer. As she puts it, "It makes me feel good to be here."

Mary Runfola, who lives in Kenmore, is the eldest member of the choir and still works at bake sales and other parish tasks. At 85 she is at Holy Cross every Sunday. Also in the choir is 80 year old Josephine Licata, who still lives in Buffalo, now on Baynes, and still worships at Holy Cross.

Connie Andrianna was at mass every Sunday until her death a few years ago. Her husband Vince, a retired barber, still serves as an usher. Parishioners say she made the world's best crispelli. They sold out all the time.

Mary Rizzo (Canizzaro), who is Nancy Canizzaro's twin, ran the very successful Holy Cross Head Start Program for 30 years and oversaw its growth to six separate locations. She is one of two trustees of the parish, along with Dan Figueroa. She and Nancy reminisced about their old homestead. They talked about the priests who have come and gone through the years. Some now serve elsewhere, some have passed away or retired and still others have left the ministry. They talked about the parties and music shows. They recall names too many to mention, but there is no mistaking the great affection they have for Frs. Rick Reina, Anthony Caliguiri, Paul Bosse and particularly Dino Loren-

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zetti. Some of them still come to the spaghetti dinners or the community parties. Fr. Dino said, "These women have invested themselves in the fabric of the place. They are a big part of why Holy Cross is special."

The women are a little sad right now because Cassamina (call me Cassie) Bellonio will soon be moving with her sister to Hagerstown, Maryland, to be closer to family members since both are in failing health.

These women say "it's the people" which keep them coming back. It isn't just the people from the past, nor the special bond they have formed with one another over the years, although that's certainly a big part of it. But it's also seeing these new families, newly-arrived Africans and Latinos who come to mass as a family to worship and receive the sacraments. They have brought the same kind of vibrancy that the women remember filled their lives and the lives of their parents before them. They notice how hard these new parishioners work at preserving the old country customs and still position themselves to take advantage of the opportunities they could never have had if they had not been so fortunate as to come to the United States, to Buffalo, to Holy Cross.

As Father Dave Gallivan, the hard-working and dedicated pastor put it, "It's a win-win for us all."

The women talk often about Sister Mary Redempta, the Felician superior and principal of the school for five years. She was a real character and great teacher. As one of the group said "You couldn't get promoted until you showed you could spell, punctuate and diagram."

Mostly, however, they speak of the many priests who have come through the doors of Holy Cross through the years. They start with Msgr. Joseph Gambino, the founder and patriarch of the parish who always seemed to have snuff on his clothes and garlic on his breath. They laugh about Fr. Joseph Joseph, Fr. Charles Schoy, brothers Fr. Anthony and Fr. Angelo Caligiuri, and Fr. Paul Bosse, who is now at Blessed Sacrament, but still comes around now and then. Their respect and affection for these men is clear. Their fa-

vorites may be Fr. Rick Reina, now at Christ the King Seminary, and the charismatic Msgr. Dino Lorenzetti, who served as pastor at Holy Cross for seven years and is still ministering and preaching regularly at 90. Rose Marie Verso told me they admire how the present pastor, Msgr. David Gallivan, has been able to integrate Immaculate Conception Parish into Holy Cross and his great work with the Latinos and African parishioners who are strong factors in the vitality of the parish.

On Easter Sunday the old parish rocked. The big old church was full of people, families talking and socializing before and after mass (and sometimes during). The old church ladies may not have approved of all of this fun in church but Fr. Gallivan and the new church ladies love it!

The new church ladies are unique and special. They are different from the old church ladies, more sophisticated, more educated and have had careers and wonderful lives - but they are similar in their desire to do good, to help others, and most especially in their dedication to this grand old church.



"The Swinging Nun"
Sister Mary Redempta