

# Parish promotes intimate faith life, service, joyful vision

By Ed Langlois  
OF THE SENTINEL

Before Wednesday morning Mass at St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, worshipers banter in a lively way. They tease and engage in a modicum of political debate.

Then all falls silent and prayer begins. There are petitions for an end to war, for the health of loved ones and for lonely people.

"We do a lot of giggling and joke-telling, but this is a very spiritual time for us," says Kathleen Karney.

After Mass, Karney and the 15 other worshipers gather at a round table for coffee and snacks. The fare includes cheese and olives on toothpicks. Some days are fancier.

Nestled in the hills of Southwest Portland, the small Catholic community tries to live out the Gospel with compassion, generosity and joie de vivre.

Whether celebrating Mass, visiting hospital patients, bringing meals to a homeless shelter or discussing theology on a summer's eve on the church lawn, members of St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish seem to carry things off with grace and panache.

Take this year's Easter Vigil for example. St. Elizabeth is one of few parishes that still has a bell in a tower. On that holy night, the bells rang out long and loud at about 9 p.m.

"Everyone knew the Lord was risen," says Paulist Father James Kolb, the gregarious pastor who worked construction before attending seminary.

After the Mass and baptisms, worshipers sat down to a sumptuous late-night potluck feast, complete with candles and cloth napkins.

"There is a good feel and a sense of celebration and it is occasionally done with flair," says Karl Smith, a retired fi-

nancial firm manager and a parishioner for the past decade. "The Catholic Church is going through a mess, but the faith of people at St. Elizabeth's has not been shaken. In fact, it's maybe even stronger. They really believe at St. Elizabeth that we are the church, and the church is not a building, that the people are the faith, and we have each other."

Smith and his wife Peggy, who came from a small parish in upstate New York, cherish St. Elizabeth because of its Gospel ethic of service.

"It's a wonderful bond with the outside world," says Peggy, who brings the Eucharist to patients at Oregon Health and Science University. "It's a mission people take seriously and it's a beautiful privilege to be able to do that."

No one seems surprised that more young people are joining. "My hopes are being lived out; I see more and more younger people coming to

church here and I see a high degree of participation," says Father Kolb, who served for decades in Alaska. In some ways, he resembles a polar bear. Ironically, the size of the community—270 households—is one of its main draws.

"In a small parish you have a chance to know more people on a more intimate basis," says Corky Fleck, a retired accountant and a parishioner for six years. "It's more by choice."

Each week, newcomers and visitors are recognized and asked to stand up. The congregation applauds.

Gale Rankin, the 85-year-old parish matriarch, is thrilled at the trend toward more young families.

"I'd like to see our parish continue to grow as it is," she explains.

The former director of nursing at Multnomah Hospital and Oregon Health and Science University lauds Father

Kolb for many things, one of which are the penances he prescribes after confession.

"He tells us to go do something good," Rankin says.

Father Kolb, who founded the University of Alaska Newman Center in Fairbanks and served there for 20 years, gets into the spirit.

The priest is well known for presiding at Mass with sneakers that have shoelaces matching the day's liturgical colors.

On the feast of St. Nicholas, he dons a miter and carries a crooked stick he found in the Alaskan woods. He even lets loose with a Germanic accent and hands out candy to everyone who attends an evening vespers service. There is a big dinner after that one, too.

Recently, one parishioner bought him a shirt advertising a coffee house. It had a photo of angels adoring the "Supreme Bean."

"I think Jesus has a good sense of humor," says the priest. "Anyone who thinks God doesn't have a sense of humor isn't looking in the mirror in the morning."

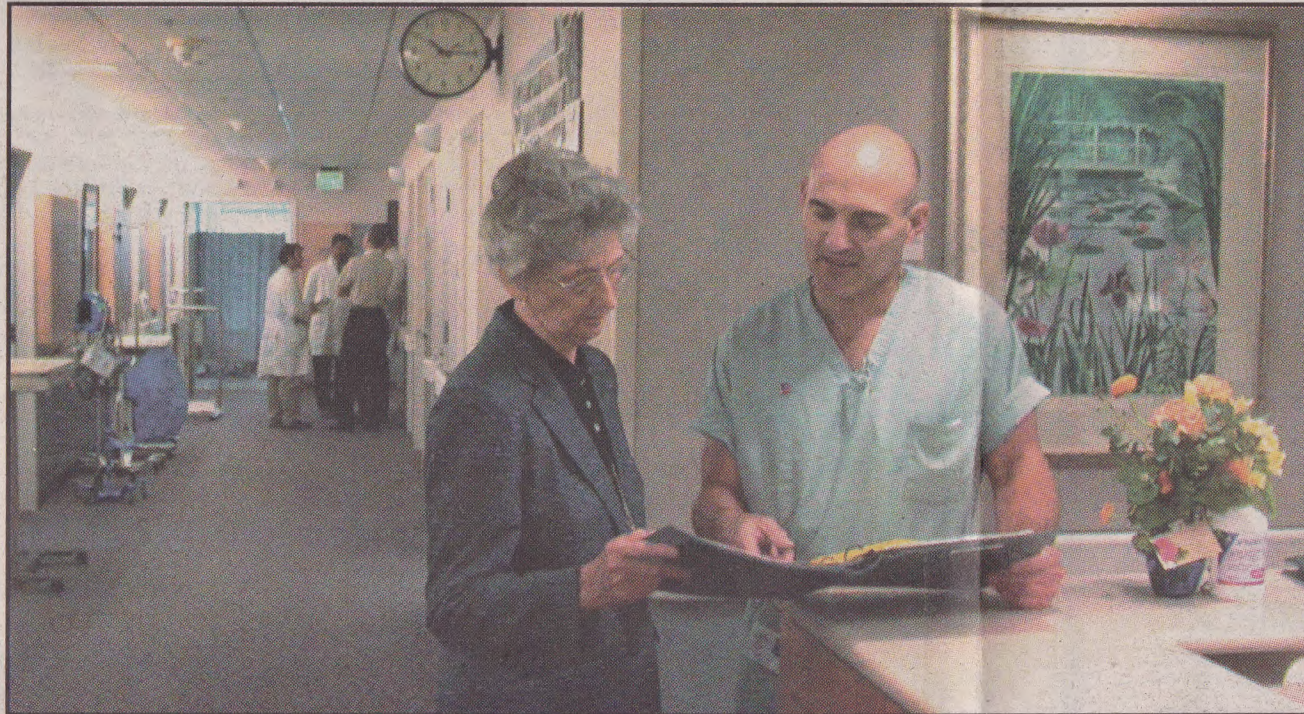
Unlike any other parish, St. Elizabeth was founded to serve hospitals.

Father Kolb is chaplain at Oregon Health and Science University Hospital and Doernbecher Children's Hospital. Lay volunteers bring the Eucharist to patients.

"You meet some very interesting people, and most of them are so appreciative of having us come," says Betty Corbett, 78. She and husband Joe ministered together at OHSU for 15 years until Joe died in January. She has kept up the ministry alone, spending two to three hours per week visiting hospital rooms.

Most of the time, she simply prays and brings the Eu-

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Sentinel photo by Kurt Rolfe



Jonah Bonn sings with his mother Sheryl Bonn.



charist, listening to patients if they wish to discuss their illness, family or their feelings about God.

Seeing her work as "a little kind of evangelization," Corbett plans to keep it up as long she can move.

She is fond of St. Elizabeth, which she calls "fantastic" and "charming," in part because of its small size and intimacy. She recalls with gratitude the support she received when Joe died.

Shirley Randles, 80, also subsists in part on parish life and hospital visitation.

Of the parish she has belonged to for 30 years, she says, "The openness of it and the conviviality and the friendliness seem to exemplify what Jesus is asking us to do — Love one another and help each other out." Each Monday, she spends about five hours at OHSU, which serves some of the poorest people in Oregon. She gives patients the choice of Communion, prayer books, conversation or all of the above.

"Whether I like it or not, I am to many patients the presentation and the voice and the picture of the Catholic faith," she says.

The ministry can be draining. For Randles, seeing young people suffer with cancer is especially tough.

"Many times, people ask 'Why did God do this to me?'"

she says. "It is unexplainable isn't it?" Randles says that her faith is strengthened by the ministry nonetheless.

"It makes me grateful for my health," she says.

Barbara Glidewell, OHSU ombudsman, calls it "a remarkable gift" to be so close to St. Elizabeth.

"We find that to be an exceptional opportunity for our Catholic patients," Glidewell reports. "We get great service from Father Kolb and the lay ministers. It feels warm. It feels supportive. In these times of scarce resources, that is very excellent."

For the past year, the parish has been celebrating its 50th anniversary. It has been party after liturgy after potluck.

"If you're having a good party, why stop?" Father Kolb says.

There is a 1960s home movie showing parishioners sprucing up the church grounds. In the film, men and women rake, mow and prune.

Then onto the screen comes a dog carrying a six-pack of beer in its mouth, taking the refreshments to the laborers.

That kind of can-do attitude, with a twist, has characterized St. Elizabeth of Hungary from the start. It was the influence of the founder, a 6-foot, 4-inch, Army Air Corps chaplain who once leapt into the cockpit of a crashed and

burning fighter plane to save the pilot's life.

Father Alfred Williams, after his military service ended in 1953, was named chaplain of St. Vincent Hospital as well as the Veterans Administration Hospital.

He saw need for a parish to serve the medical institutions, including nurses, physicians and other staff.

The intrepid priest raised the money himself, getting donations nationwide and securing a GI loan for the rectory.

He asked parish women to make dinners for medical staff, affairs that sometimes drew as many as 100 people. Parishioners who lived nearby could often see him praying in the rectory's chapel.

Father Williams led the parish for about 25 years, mak-

ing it a spiritual refuge and a place where medical ethics could be discussed. He appeared on radio and television, discussing Catholic moral views.

For decades, Holy Cross priests served the parish. Father Kolb arrived in 2001.

The current pastor hopes to continue expanding the bounds of spirituality until it includes all of daily life.

He would like to forge stronger bonds with inner-city Catholic parishes, Protestant churches and nearby synagogues.

The hospital ministry on which the parish was founded will abide.

"Our ideal is to have people growing in faith and growing in community," Father Kolb concludes. "We're a small parish with a vision."



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Sentinel photo by Ed Langlois

Fr. James Kolb presides at daily Mass with members of St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Southwest Portland,



# Parish Life



Sentinel photos by Kim Nguyen

Parishioners pray on a Sunday in St. Elizabeth of Hungary Church, with window portraying rose-bearing patron saint set above the altar.





Tim McCarthy directs the choir.





Sentinel photo by Ed Langlois

**Fr. Kolb thanks John Hudson with a clock for helping daily Masses start on time.**



**Jeremy Wood shakes hands with Mary Ellen Landry. Jim and Cathy Wood look on.**





A statue of Mary stands beside the church.



Delaney Bonn listens during Mass.



Jeremy Wood and Jonah Bonn receive first Communion from Fr. Kolb.