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Pastoral plan will help rural parishes to survive

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MELROSE – “St. Kevin Mission has had a stormy beginning, but it will survive.” This was what Bishop John P. Treacy wrote to Father Albert Roemer when he assigned the priest to minister to the still-churchless Catholics of the Melrose-Mindoro area in 1964.

Bishop Treacy’s words were prophetic, for St. Kevin’s did survive. The close-knit group met first at Melrose’s mortuary, then at the American Legion, and then, finally, they built a church that Bishop Frederick W. Freking consecrated for them on Nov. 29, 1970.

St. Kevin’s is still surviving today. Its 80 families helped build the church – or their parents did – and they still fill the pews for Mass on Sunday morning. Their children attend CCD, and they put in a lot of work each year to host their well-attended fall festival and chili supper.

“Things haven’t changed that much,” according to Dean Strait. A founding member, Strait grows tomatoes at his greenhouse across the street from St. Kevin’s. He has been the church’s caretaker since it was completed in 1970, and he and his wife Rose devote a good deal of time to the parish.

In many respects, Strait is correct in saying St. Kevin’s hasn’t changed much. Records from three decades ago show that St. Kevin’s had approxi-



In this historic photo, Bishop Frederick W. Freking is seen blessing St. Kevin’s Church, Melrose, on Nov. 29, 1970. From the left are Mrs. John Dunnigan, Mrs. Royce Millbright and server Eric Woods. Also from the left are Fathers Francis Heindl, Thomas Garthwaite, Joseph Keating and Bernard Kelly.

CT/file photo

mately 80 families on its rosters at that time too. However, these same records also show that approximately 75 children were then enrolled in the parish CCD program, while there are only 33 children enrolled this year.

There’s no denying that St. Kevin’s is graying. That’s not to say anything negative about St. Kevin’s, or to downplay the intense commitment of parishioners like Strait. He said he gives so much time to the parish, “well, because I love God.” Instead, St. Kevin’s graying speaks to the declining population of rural America in general.

Two years ago, the Iowa-based National Catholic Rural Life Conference dedicated

its fall issue of *Catholic Rural Life* to what one contributor called the “daunting challenges” facing today’s rural parishes. “Young people move to urban settings,” one contributor noted, “remaining parishioners are aging and pastors are stretched in their time and energy. There is an uneasy sense of what the future holds.”

Another contributor added, “As jobs move to larger population centers, high gas prices make it expensive to drive to distant jobs. The economy makes it hard for young people to stay; this in turn leads to fewer young families and fewer children.”

Wisconsin’s Department of Administration predicts that by 2030 St. Croix County’s

population will grow by as much as 67.9 percent due to its proximity to the Twin Cities. Along I-94, Dunn and Eau Claire Counties could experience population booms of more than 25 percent.

Melrose, on the other hand, is located in southeastern Jackson County – one of the diocese’s most sparsely populated counties, with only 19,100 residents according to the 2000 Census, and an estimated growth rate closer to 10 percent. In fact, a 2007 Department of Administration estimate placed Melrose’s population at 496 – down from 529 in 2000.

Father John Steiner said that it’s imperative to help these small communities survive in

the face of these adverse demographical circumstances, and that the diocese's pastoral plan aims to do just that through the creation of parish clusters. "A town like Melrose is far enough away that they really have to have their own little community," he said.

When Father Steiner was transferred to Black River Falls last summer to become pastor of St. Joseph's Parish, he was

also given responsibility for St. Kevin's – 17 miles away. St. Kevin's has never had a resident pastor. It had most recently been served from Holmen and Sparta.

However, the diocese's pastoral plan envisions a future relationship between Melrose and Black River Falls, and if the plan is implemented – something that won't happen until its protocols are es-

tablished, and then only on a case-by-case basis – St. Joseph's would become the "pastoral center," and St. Kevin's a "liturgical satellite" with Sunday Mass. In addition, Immaculate Conception, Alma Center, would join the cluster as a "church building."

In the meantime, Father Steiner has the difficult task of both fostering St. Kevin's own sense of community and of en-

couraging the Melrose parishioners to come to St. Joseph's for happenings that exceed the smaller parish's means.

So long as St. Kevin's survives, that's okay with St. Kevin's parishioners, said Rose Strait. "It'll help us to get to know the other parish better," she said. "We can go back and forth with our events. We can kind of support each other."