

A WELCOMING



Above: Barbara Quinn, pastoral associate for Christian Service, checks supplies in the food pantry.

Below: Located in southwest Albany, St. John's/St. Ann's Catholic church is a beacon of welcome to people from miles around.

Signs that proclaim “Welcome” abound at St. John's/St. Ann's Catholic Church; and the parish community stands whole-heartedly behind those words. This red brick church in Albany, New York's South End is well known as a beacon of welcome to everyone: young, old, rich, poor, black, white, gay, straight... and its parish membership is not based on geography, but on people who are committed to helping other people. The church building itself exudes life: bright colors, an open shape, beautiful stained glass windows telling the story of Jesus, and a lively, friendly energy that invites people to participate.

Although she came to Albany from New York City, Natalie Runfola, RSCJ, applied to work at this particular parish because she had enjoyed being there twenty years ago – as a pastoral associate who, among other things, handled outreach to seniors; she left Albany to serve on the U. S. Provincial Team. This time, when she applied to the Diocese of Albany, she took all sorts of tests and “felt like I was entering the convent again.” In 2007, she was appointed parish life director by Bishop of Albany, Howard J. Hubbard, who recently commented: “This is a time of opportunity to reach out to more people in more ways than ever before. Sister Runfola's parish work is a wonderful example of that kind of outreach.”

“It's my job to be a positive presence to the community of faith,” says the enthusiastic Sister Runfola. “I'm the administrator more than the hands-on outreach person. And right now, we are in the process of merging with another parish, St. James. So the task of holding it all together is a challenging one as we continue to address the needs of this community.”

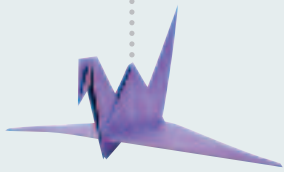
One of the ways community needs are being met is through the St. John's/St. Ann's Center, which has been in operation in one form or other since 1837. Like the church, the Center, located right across the street, is also welcoming – from access ramps and doors that open easily, to brightly lit hallways and offices, to the smiling faces on all the volunteers. Barbara Quinn, pastoral associate for Christian Service, directs the Center and says it is a “safe place where most of us (volunteers and staff) know everyone by name.”

The Center operates a food pantry, clothing program, and furniture program in addition to providing holiday food baskets and the popular Welcome Tables on Tuesday and Saturday. Ah, those Welcome Tables! About 200 people show up every time meals are served, and it's not just the food that attracts them. Everyone involved is committed to peace and justice, including the people who set up the tables and sweep the floors; and volunteers come from parishes as far as

PARISH

The work of Natalie Runfola, RSCJ in Albany, New York's South End

Photographs by Anthony Salamone



twenty miles away, from all over the Albany area, to serve people in this impoverished area of the city.

Welcome Table volunteers sit and eat with the guests; it's a served meal, and everyone is considerate of others, whether waiting in line to be seated or passing the potatoes. One volunteer decorates the hall according to the season. Another woman likes to make goody packets to distribute to the guests; "something to make the meal special" she says. Even the junior high kids who volunteer say they can't wait to come again. And one patron brings his checkerboard faithfully and is yet to be beaten! "We do not deny anyone a meal," Ms. Quinn says, "It's stick-to-your-ribs food, and the meatloaf is always the favorite."

Parishioners and volunteers at St. John's/St. Ann's say their community does things that may not be typical, that people there don't just talk about their faith, and that it's about "how they live between Sundays." One parishioner said everyone is treated like family and that they are noticed; and another said that St. John's/St. Ann's is the first church where he felt truly welcome.

In July 2010, the parish will merge with St. James, a neighboring parish, and the new parish will then be known as St. Francis of Assisi. Whatever the new community is called, a heart-filled welcome is sure to be offered to all who wish to be part of it. ✦



Above: Bright colors and a spiral of origami cranes invite parishioners into the church.



Left: Natalie Runfola, RSCJ, parish life director at St. John's/St. Ann's.