

For 25 years, they have prayed without ceasing

Ed Langlois, Of the Catholic Sentinel

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GERVAIS — Around the clock for 25 years, members of Sacred Heart-St. Louis Parish here have been adoring Jesus in the Eucharist. Mostly, this contemplation has happened inside a chapel. But on Sunday, the people took their prayer to the streets.

Celebrating a milestone for one of the longest perpetual adoration efforts in Oregon, parishioners processed on a hot late summer day through their neighborhood, following Father Ron Nelson as he carried the Eucharist. These devotees want everyone to know that continual prayer in the Lord's presence has changed them.

"It's got me through a lot of really awful times in my life," says Toby Saalfeld, a retired mail carrier who's taken her turn in the chapel since it started in 1986.

Saalfeld, 64, lost her mother and her husband in that time and raised eight children. "I'd kneel down and say, 'I can't figure this out, you're going to have to do it,'" Saalfeld says.

"Having an hour each week that I can dedicate to praying for my family, friends and fellow parishioners reminds me how much we depend on each other for intercessory prayer," says Connie Schlechter, the parish business manager who takes an hour each week in the middle of the night. "I've brought many a difficult situation before the Lord during my adoration hour, and I always leave feeling his peace in my heart."

In 1981, Pope John Paul began perpetual adoration in a Vatican chapel. He urged Catholics worldwide to do the same, saying such prayer could make reparation for evil in the world.

In Gervais, Father Eugene Heidt began the perpetual adoration, inviting experts to speak and renovating a church storage room. Adoration began in September 1986 amid ringing church bells and an outdoor procession. Townspeople looked on in awe.

In 1995, when the old Sacred Heart Church was demolished, adoration moved to the rectory's single car garage and then to its present chapel in the new church.



Catholic Sentinel photo by Ed Langlois
Father Ron Nelson leads eucharistic procession on streets of Gervais.

They've prayed from the start

Individuals and/or families who have been adorers for 25 years:

Edward Adelman, Ed and Maxine Bashaw, David and Rhonda Brown, Gerald Bennet, Vera Bernt, Bob and Doris Ditter, The Contreras Family, Mel and Nedora Counts, Teddy Davidson, Gertrude DeConnick, Ralph and Vivian Duda, Andy and Jeanette Eder, Julie Espinoza, Cy and Anita Ferschweiler, Leonard and Pat Ferschweiler, Lloyd and Kathleen Ferschweiler, Ernie Grabski, The John Grassman Family, Brenda Howard, Joe and Esther Messer, Val and Dolores Miller, The Jerry Owen Family, The Dan Palmer Family, Margaret Partsch, Marge Pranger, Carl Prantl, Rose Rush, Virginia Reed, Rocco Reed, Carlene Roecker, Steve and Cassandra Ross, The Don Saalfeld Family, Zita Steinkamp, John Steinkamp, Marlene Tesch, Mary Tesch, Bill and Ann VanSmoorenburg, Ernie Zellner, John Zellner, The Robert Zielinski Family

Pope Benedict bestowed a papal blessing on the long-running prayer group. Father Nelson, pastor of the parish, presented the certificate Sunday to applause.

"Prayer sustains ministry, but is also is key to who we are as a Christian people," says Father Nelson. "The most important thing a person can do is work on his or her spiritual life."

People of all ages show up for adoration. One 95-year-old man spends four hours per week.

Jeannine Eisenbacher brings her seven children to the chapel, even the infant. "That's our God," says Eisenbacher, who has taken part in perpetual adoration for 13 years. "He is visible right there. What a feeling of peace."

Members of this 450-family parish step forward when needed. When one man slated for an hour of prayer had to go to the hospital, multiple friends came to take his place until he healed.

Almost 40 families or individuals have served as adorers for the entire 25 years.

In addition to those who live in and near Gervais, regularly scheduled adorers come from Mount Angel, Salem, St. Paul, Silverton and the Woodburn and Aurora areas.

The only time the chapel has closed is in treacherous weather, when the roads are icy. During Mass, when the focus should be on the altar and the community, the Eucharist is removed temporarily. Adoration is suspended each year from after Holy Thursday Mass until the Easter Vigil.

During the rest of the year, two monstrances are used in rotation, one belonging to Sacred Heart, the other to St. Louis Parish in nearby St. Louis.

Some parishioners credit eucharistic adoration for saving the parish school, a rarity in a rural district. Students from Sacred Heart School pray before the Eucharist for an hour every week.

"I believe it has benefitted Sacred Heart-St. Louis and all who have encountered it in ways that will not be understood this side of heaven," says parishioner John Gallagher. "I know my family and I have been blessed beyond measure by the strength of eucharistic adoration and the prayers of those who attend."