

Catholic Life

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Magic Carpets

Sawdust and faith keep Corpus Christi tradition alive for half a century

By SUSAN K. MAZUR

Imagine standing in your ordinary church parking lot and seeing dozens of brilliant colors glitter off the pavement, each one carefully arranged to form an intricately detailed picture.

Hard to visualize? Then you haven't experienced the feast of Corpus Christi with the faithful of Holy Martyrs Parish in Tarentum, Pa.

Armed with sawdust and vegetable dye, the parishioners of Holy Martyrs reinforce and often relearn their faith while celebrating the Body and Blood of Christ.

This year marked the 50th anniversary of the Corpus Christi tradition in Tarentum, a unique display of "carpets" made of colored sawdust and fashioned into religious symbols and biblical scenes. The exhibit took place in the parking lot of the Sacred Heart/St. Peter worship site.

The carpet tradition is of German origin and was adopted by the faithful of Sacred Heart Church in 1943.

Two Holy Ghost priests, Father Julius Zehler and Father James McNamara, assigned to Sacred Heart at the time, suggested that the Holy Name Society begin the project for Corpus Christi as a way to help strengthen and solidify their faith during the difficult years of the Second World War.

It began simply. The dozen or so members of the society took exclusive control, overseeing preparation, and designing and building five or six carpets.

As the boys in the parish matured, fathers and grandfathers encouraged their participation in the event, participation that, throughout the years, has expanded to include mothers and daughters, parishioners and non-parishioners, Catholics and non-Catholics.

Skip Culleiton and his wife Ann are two parishioners who have carried on the tradition for generations.

"I began working the carpets in 1956," Skip recalled. "My dad had worked on them several years before that. At that time, only the men of the parish worked on carpets."

"Nineteen fifty-six was a significant year because... until then we had only done simple designs using two or three colors and some stencils. In 1956, my dad did a picture of the Sacred Heart. That was the first time we made a figure in the carpet," Culleiton said.

Today, the 12-by-15-foot carpets are much more elaborate. Often, detailed figures with lifelike features are sculpted from the sawdust. This year's largest feature carpet measured 12 feet by 30 feet and depicted the Last Supper with startling realism. Thirty-three carpets were created for this year's feast, six more than originally planned.

In charge of planning was Jim Huey. With former chairman Dave Kuniak and several men of the parish, Huey was

According to Huey, the group has the preparation down to a science. Approximately 10,000 pounds of pine shavings were purchased this year. The men began the dyeing process one week before the celebration. Small electric cement mixers were used to hold the sawdust and dye and to mix the colors. Each batch of sawdust was dyed twice, Huey said, to create vibrant hues that must withstand the sun and heat.

At the site, Huey and his helpers marked off the areas for each carpet, then kept a steady supply of sawdust available to the builders. Interested newcomers were encouraged to build their own carpets. Though the celebration always ends with more carpets than had been planned, Huey noted they have never run out of sawdust.

The colorful displays seem to amaze everyone who sees them, especially Father Joseph Grosko, administrator of Holy Martyrs. This year marked his first experience with the event.

"I'm startled and stunned by the vibrant colors, by the tabloids (carpets) and by the energy and enthusiasm they've created in the parish," Grosko said. "That has been outstanding. And what I was especially touched by was the number of young children involved. It's more than I've ever realized a family affair."

The Scanga family can attest to the togetherness the feast day and the carpet display have created. Carl and Mary daughters and sons, daughters-in-law and sons-in-law, fiancés and sweethearts come from as far as Maryland and as near as Butler to participate.

One of the Scangas' carpets depicted the various names given to Christ in Scripture.

Daughter Mary Beth, who designed the carpet, explained the significance of the idea.

"We put together this carpet with different symbols of the titles of Jesus. We thought this would be a good family project to do because each person had their own little block to work on. It turned into a learning experience because I was able to explain to everyone what their block meant and they were able to relate to that title of Christ."

Fr. Grosko agreed with the educational significance of the tradition. "Building the carpets forces people to reflect and to try to understand what the tabloids are about," he said. "It's very educational. As I go around and watch, [the builders and spectators] reflect. It makes people stop and ponder their faith."

When the carpets are complete, tradition dictates that the Blessed Sacrament be carried through the displays to two altars set up on opposite sides of the parking lot. The parish was honored to have Aux. Bishop William J. Winter preside over this year's procession, prayer service and benediction.

And after the festivities? The carpets were swept up and the sawdust disposed of. Hours of hard work disappeared in minutes, and yet year after year, families come together to begin the ritual again.

Ann Culleiton had a theory about the tradition's popularity. "It's like

The Huey children - from left, Elizabeth, Cara and Chris - display four of the 22 colors of sawdust used in the carpets. In the photo below, a crew member mists the completed carpets with water to increase the vibrancy of color and to keep the sawdust in place.



Diane Conroy, artist behind this large Last Supper carpet, adds detail to her design.



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The carpet tradition is German in origin and was adopted by the faithful of Sacred Heart Church in 1943. Two Holy Ghost priests — Father Julius Zehler and Father James McNamara — who were assigned to Sacred Heart at the time, suggested that the Holy Name Society begin the project for Corpus Christi as a way to help strengthen and solidify their faith during the difficult years of the Second World War.

It began simply. The dozen or so members of the Society took exclusive control, overseeing preparations and designing five or six carpets.

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Skip Culleiton and his wife Ann are two of the parishioners who have carried on the tradition for generations.

“I began working the carpets in 1956,” Skip recalled. “My dad had worked on them several years before that. At that time, only the men of the parish worked on the carpets.

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Thirty-three carpets were created for this year's feast, six more than originally planned.

This year, Jim Huey was in charge of planning. With former chairmen Dave Kuniak and several men from the parish, Huey was responsible for buying the sawdust and dye, for preparing the sawdust and for

more

carpets, add one

overseeing activities at the celebration site. After 17 years at the helm, Kuniak handed control to Huey this year.

According to Huey, the group has the preparations down to a science. Approximately 10,000 pounds of pine shavings were purchased this year. The men began the dyeing process one week before the celebration. Small cement mixers were used to hold the sawdust and dye and to mix the colors. Each batch of sawdust was dyed twice, Huey explained, to create the vibrant hues that must withstand the sun and the heat.

At the site, Huey and his helpers marked off the areas for each carpet, then kept a steady supply of sawdust available to the builders. Huey noted that, although the event always ends with more carpets than they planned for, they have never run out of sawdust.

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The Scanga family can attest to the togetherness created by the feast day and the carpets. Carl and Mary Scanga, their daughters and sons, daughters-in-law and sons-in-law, fiancées and sweethearts — came from as far as Maryland and as near as Butler to participate.

One of the Scanga carpets depicted the various names used for Christ in scripture, enclosed in

little patchwork squares. Daughter Mary Beth, who designed the carpet, explained the idea’s significance.

“We thought this would be a good family project to do because each person had their own little block to work on,” she said. “It turned into a good learning experience because I was able to explain to everyone what their block meant, and they were able to relate that to the titles of Jesus.”

Father Grosko agreed with the educational significance of the tradition. “Building the carpets forces people to reflect and to try to understand what the tabloids are about. It’s very educational,” he said. “As I go around and watch, the [builders and visitors] reflect. It makes people stop and ponder their faith.”

Late in the afternoon, when the carpets are complete, tradition dictates that the faithful form a procession, carrying the Blessed Sacrament right through their displays and destroying their day’s hard work. When they reach the alter that has been set up at the far end of the parking lot, they pause for prayers and benediction. This year, the parish was honored to have Aux. Bishop William Winter preside at the services.

And after the festivities? The carpets are swept up and the sawdust disposed of. Hours of work disappeared in minutes. Yet year after year, families come together to on the feast of Corpus Christi and do it all again.

Ann Culleiton had a theory about the tradition’s popularity. “It’s like working your way to heaven,” she said. “You sacrifice, you do all this hard work, and it’s torn up at the end of the day. Yet, you’re striving in your work to eventually see God.”

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