

Alumni Newsletter

Honor Our Past. Build Our Future.

Faith Formation at St. Francis of Assisi



Michael & Sue Ann Saltarelli

Sue Ann Saltarelli, one-half of the Faith Formation staff at St. Francis Parish, leads a very full life. On a recent Sunday, she was in her office by 8AM after taking care of things at home and spending some quiet time in prayer. We caught up with her as she was setting up the coffee for the reception that would follow the Early Childhood Center (ECC) Mass at 11:00AM. After Mass she stopped by the reception for a few minutes before joining her husband, Michael, for a *Fan the Flame* session already in progress.

Michael and Sue Ann Saltarelli are the Faith Formation Coordinators at St. Francis of Assisi Parish. They work closely with Fr. Mike Uebler in planning and implementing the Faith Formation Program.

Most of the Faith Formation programs they run are family based, which can include your relatives, close friends or your “church” family. They believe that building community among the parishioners at St. Francis Church is essential for the church to grow and flourish. Their hope is that people will be inspired to take leadership roles in the Church and St. Francis will remain a vibrant Catholic parish in the Tonawandas for years to come.

Because faith formation is a lifelong learning process they started with the very young and designed their Faith Formation Program to include a variety of subjects and issues that span a range of ages and interests. The list of ministries that fall under their responsibility is extensive. Hopefully, in this article, we can give you a snapshot of what they do.

Early Childhood Ministry

Moms, Tots and Dads is a monthly meeting for parents of young children who meet to discuss topics of interest such as, Christian parenting, baptism, etc. Child care is provided so the parents can have uninterrupted time for conversations with peers.

SueAnn teaches a religion class for the 3 and 4 year olds in the Early Childhood Center (ECC) on a weekly basis and helps plan the monthly ECC Mass. Her age appropriate lessons encompass Christian and character building values such as caring and respect, as well as, some of the seasons and observances of the Church. She presented the Stations of the Cross to them as “Jesus’ very hard day.” ECC families are invited to attend the monthly Mass and join in fellowship afterwards. The children usually participate in the Mass in some manner, such as, carrying palms in the Palm Sunday procession or singing a song.



Father Mike and St. Nicholas at an Early Childhood Center Mass

Sacramental Preparation



Children of St. Francis of Assisi Parish
on the day of their First Eucharist

The Saltarellis are responsible for sacramental preparation for *Reconciliation and First Eucharist* and provide guidance to parents in preparing the children for the sacraments. At an initial “kick-off” meeting, groups of 4-6 families are given lesson plans and home study materials to prepare the children. The families meet in study groups for a few weeks to learn and grow in their faith as they instruct their children. Following the study period, the children attend a retreat to focus on what they have learned and to make final preparation for the sacrament. One positive outcome of these sessions is that families establish relationships and continue to meet and

hold reunions long after the sacraments have been received. The Diocese of Buffalo is very interested in the St. Francis model of family-based sacramental preparation and is considering its adoption.

Confirmation for high school students is a separate course of study coordinated by Mike and Sue Ann with help from many volunteers. Confirmation preparation usually starts at the beginning of 9th grade and ends 13 months later in October when the sacrament is celebrated at St. Francis of Assisi Parish. The candidates study together, perform a required number of service hours and have to earn 9 points by participating in activities chosen from a list with assigned point values. The candidates attend two retreats, toward the end of their year of study prior to receiving the sacrament.

Teen Ministry

The non-denominational Christian youth group for high school kids, *Young Life*, and the middle school group, *WyldLife*, serve as the youth programs at St. Francis of Assisi. Michael has been involved in Young Life for 42 years with Sue Ann joining him about 25 years ago. Young Life “Club” meets in the St. Clare Center at St. Francis and WyldLife meets at Salem United Church of Christ. The young people come together for fun, fellowship and a short Bible-based talk and sharing. On average thirty kids from the Tonawanda churches join in the weekly meetings.

Another facet of *Young Life* is “Campaigners” a weekly Bible study for teens. Imagine this scene: every Friday morning, that’s a school day, between 15 and 25 high schoolers including many from St. Francis, arrive at the Saltarelli home at 6:30 AM for breakfast and Bible study. Stop for a moment and realize this gathering is optional and the teens are present because they want to share their faith with their friends and Young Life Leaders. They leave for school filled with a hearty breakfast and enriched by prayer and knowledge of the Bible.

For the past 5 years, Sue Ann and Mike have run the mission trip to El Salvador in cooperation with the Young Life organization. This trip gives high school students the opportunity to visit an impoverished country and volunteer their time and talent in service to the less fortunate. The students fundraise during the year to pay for their transportation, and then give up their February break from school to go on this mission. All of them say the trip was “life changing” and you can be sure the experience will have a long-lasting effect on their lives.



Sue Ann in El Salvador

Keeping Connected to Our Faith



GOF Families

Changes is another unique ministry under the umbrella of Faith Formation. In this case, the focus is on young people away at college or in the service of our country. The purpose is to keep this age group of people connected to their faith while away from home. Cards and little packages are sent to those away from home to let them know that St. Francis Parish cares and is keeping them in our thoughts and prayers.

Fan the Flame is a fellowship and faith community for young adults who want to grow in their faith. The group meets on Sundays after the 11:00 AM Mass to share light refreshments and gain a deeper understanding of God's Word.

By the way, the 11:00 AM Mass is the Contemporary Mass and the music is lead by Michael Saltarelli. The Saltarelli's join together as a family to plan the liturgy since most of their children are members of the Contemporary Group and serve in other ministries of the church. *Children's Church* is also held during the 11:00 AM Mass. Volunteers take the children downstairs of the church to their "Church" before the First reading until after the Homily. The children have an age appropriate faith-based lesson and an activity while the parents have a peaceful time to listen to the Word.

XLT-Exalt Praise and Adoration is held on the first Friday of the month in the St. Francis Chapel. It is open to all ages and is an opportunity to spend time praising God in song and prayer as well as in silence during adoration. Light refreshments and fellowship follow in the St. Clare Center.

Neighborhood Angels and Saints meets once a month on a Sunday afternoon to make soup and bake bread to deliver to people in the community in need or homebound. Anyone is welcome to join this group, and it is common to see whole families working together to make homemade noodles for the soup. It is both a learning and bonding experience for the families and a great lesson in community service for the children.

All are welcome to attend *Growing Our Faith* (formerly, Generations of Faith), a once a month experience for the entire family and the parish. GOF is a multigenerational gathering for Mass, a meal and faith formation. Growing Our Faith has all the features of the type of program the Saltarellis favor; it is family based, the format lends itself to faith communities and it provides a means for life-long faith formation.

The Saltarellis continually promote the concept of small *Christian Communities* (small groups) and have organized book clubs for adults and children, prayer and bible study groups that run year-round. As a convenience, the sessions for children are held during the summer.

Mike and Sue Ann introduced *Discovering Christ* to St. Francis Parish at the beginning of Lent. It was a seven-week experience that brought over 100 people together to hear the Good News and develop a personal relationship with Jesus. Participants shared a meal, prayed, heard a presentation and took part in small group discussion with the same group of people over the 7 weeks. Friendships developed which allowed people to feel comfortable in sharing thoughts and feelings on the topic of the evening. The overall response to *Discovering Christ* was overwhelming and positive.

In addition to running the Faith Formation programs listed above, Sue Ann has served on the Bishop's Commission for Evangelization for the past 3 years. Her term is expiring so Michael will take over her position for the next term. She also manages the *Virtus, Protecting God's Children* program for the parish. It involves making sure all individuals, staff and volunteers, who have contact with the young people of the parish, are certified and up to date with their *Virtus* training. Michael, because of his computer background, is in charge of technology for the parish campus.



Many parishioners and friends attended *Discovering Christ* run by Michael & Sue Ann

All are Welcome

It would be remiss not to mention the few faith formation ministries not under the Saltarelli's purview. Baptisms are arranged with Fr. Mike who counsels the parents and administers the sacrament. Marriages are also arranged through Fr. Mike. He and the marriage sponsor couples guide the couples in their preparation for marriage. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is arranged through the parish office and candidates undergo intensive training with St. Francis staff. The course of study begins in the fall and ends, in most cases, with the Easter Vigil. This year we welcomed 12 new members of the Church at the Vigil.

St. Francis is privileged to be able to provide religious instruction and sacramental preparation to special needs children. The class is held on Sunday mornings and staffed with trained volunteers to address the variety of learning styles of the children. This year we have 17 children in the class.

The reader has most likely surmised that Faith Formation is alive and well at St. Francis of Assisi Parish. The reason for the vibrancy of the program lies within Sue Ann and Michael. The list of extra things they do is endless. How they do it? If one spends a little time with them, it becomes evident, by their speech and actions; they live and breathe their faith. They have an energy for doing God's work that seems to know no bounds. Everything they do is for the Glory of God!

Faith Formation certainly has something to offer everyone and can be a perfect setting for one to become involved with the parish. For example, a person may join a Bible study or help with sacramental preparation and finds they want to be more involved in the parish. It is common to see people who attended GOF or another group become lectors or Eucharistic ministers. Faith Formation is truly a gem at St. Francis of Assisi and is waiting to be discovered by many parishioners. To learn more about the Faith Formation programs at St. Francis of Assisi, check out Faith Formation page on the parish website at www.stfrancistonawanda.org or call the office at (716) 694-5342.

The Importance of Legacy

The lifeblood of charitable organizations, endowments and most not-for-profits is a steady stream of generosity from believers and supporters. Anyone can leave a legacy. Meaningful donations can come from anyone and, in any size, not just the very wealthy. However, most people never stop to consider the greatest potential source of giving that lasts beyond their lifetime. Since most never know how much of their nest egg they will need, they may err on the side of caution during life with their charitable giving. Nonetheless, it is now that people should consider making bequests or gifts, which can be planned well in advance, with the express intent of favoring their church, endowment, or other non-profit group. The bequest could be defined in your will, but much simpler methods exist for life insurance, investments, CDs, IRAs, etc. Few people commit their entire estate to charitable causes, but it is very fulfilling to share a small part of what you have with your favored cause. For assistance with ideas and help on "how to actually make it happen," please contact the St. Francis of Assisi Endowment Committee at (716) 693-1150.

Engaging Youth Ministry

This ministry was created by Father Mike in order to have special activities for the young people of our parish. Aside from running events like our Halloween Carnival, Breakfast with Santa, and Breakfast with the Easter Bunny, the ministry team has developed a "Bonanza" program which invites all youth to participate in evenings of faith, fun, and friendship.



In the photo above, 4th-6th grade students at our *Balloon Bonanza* enjoyed many games built around the theme, "We are filled with the Spirit!" To date, over 100 students have participated in these events created by our Engaging Youth Ministry Team!



Our Storybook Bonanzas are for students in grades PreK-3 through third grade. In the Storybook Bonanza pictured above, students learned about Joseph and his coat of many colors! They found that having a thankful/forgiving heart like Joseph can lead to great things. They played games, made a Joseph snack mix and even created their own coats of many colors!