

## Fresh-fish Fridays pack area church to the gills

### Tradition draws crowds for secret-recipe fish, brings in thousands of dollars for Our Lady of Victory

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When Our Lady of Victory parishioners Mike and Peri Vargo and Dick and Emilie Miller approached the church's pastor, the Rev. Tom Cadden, in 1991 with the idea of starting a parish Lenten fish fry, he gave the proposal his blessing -- with one proviso.

"He said he was willing to do it as long as we called it 'the first annual Vargo-Miller Fish Fry,'" Mike Vargo said. "I asked him, 'Why wouldn't we call it the Our Lady of Victory Fish Fry?'"

"He said, 'Because when it flops, I want you guys to take the blame,'" Vargo said, chuckling.

As the founders of the annual event, the Vargos and Millers should take credit, because the fish fry has become a community tradition.

The Vargos and Millers retired from the fish fry in 2007 and 2008 respectively, although Dick Miller continues to prepare his special "secret" recipe for the breading each year.

Over the past two years, the couples each were presented with the church's volunteer service award in recognition of their years of service.

In its first couple of years, the fish fry largely was a family affair, with the Vargos and Millers and their children doing much of the work; a small group of volunteers also lent a hand.

"That first year, we served 216 adults and 60 children and had a profit of \$753.10," Dick Miller said.

Last year's fish fries, held each Friday during Lent, served more than 4,000 fish dinners with more than 100 volunteers helping to prepare the meals.

By 2006, the fish fries had raised more than \$194,000 for the church, and about \$20,000 has been raised each year since.

"We were interested in having a fish fry to help support the parish," Dick Miller said.

The first year, the proceeds were used to purchase a sprinkler to water the parish lawn, Peri Vargo said.

Since then, the profits have been donated to the church's general fund and used for a variety of purposes, she said.

"It makes you feel good to be a part of something that's done so much good for the church," she said.



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**Emilie and Dick Miller (left) and Peri and Mike Vargo founded Our Lady of Victory's fish fry in 1991. The tradition continues Feb. 15 through March 22.**

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"Probably half of the people who come to the fish fries are not members of our parish," Miller said. "They come from all over: Grove City, Westerville, Reynoldsburg, Gahanna, Marysville -- you name it."

The secret to the event's success is that "we use only fresh fish, not frozen," he said.

The special breadding Dick Miller whips up, featuring crushed saltine crackers, also helps draw people in, his wife said.

"It's really delicious," Emilie Miller said.

"When we started this, we decided we really wanted it to be very good food and make it a fun social activity for the parish and the community," Peri Vargo said.

In 1991, the couples were longtime friends and neighbors living on the same street in Upper Arlington.

"We just became really good friends. We had children about the same age who attended school together," Mike Vargo said.

He and Dick Miller were avid fishermen who often traveled together to Lake Erie to fish for fresh perch.

"It kind of made sense for us to think of doing a fish fry for the parish," Mike Vargo said.

Over the years, they created a system for ensuring that no matter how long the lines get at the fish fries, no one has to wait very long to be served, Miller said.

That system remains in place today, said Jesse Oddi, the chairman of this year's fish fry.

"People have come up with suggestions for things we could do differently, but why fix something that isn't broken?" he asked.

The menu remains the same: fresh ocean perch, choice of potatoes or rice, salad or slaw, beverages and an array of desserts prepared by parishioners. The cost is \$9 for adults, \$5 for children, and carryout is available.

The fish fries will be held from 4:30 to 7 p.m. Fridays, Feb. 15 through March 22 in the Parish Life Center at Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church, 1559 Roxbury Road in Marble Cliff.