



Staff photo by Robert Willett

The Rev. Gerald L. Lewis stands in the sanctuary of the St. Raphael Catholic Church, which is being remodeled

Remodeled Catholic church to be largest in Eastern N.C.

Light filters into the new St. Raphael Catholic Church sanctuary through a raised skylight and an arch of windows that bends above the pulpit and frames a crucifix. The suffering Savior hangs high enough above the sanctuary that it does not dominate the room.

Instead, the focus is on the room's center, which is nearly circled by rows of pews. When completed, the 1,000-seat sanctuary will be one of the largest in Raleigh and the largest Catholic sanctuary in Eastern North Carolina.

From the priest's chair at one end of the center altar area to the pulpit at the other, an elliptic marble floor stretches 68 feet. The priest will walk the distance during services to be among the surrounding parishioners.

"There are no spectators," the Rev. Gerald L. Lewis, the pastor, said in an interview last week. "We're all participants. This is the family of God gathered around the altar. We hope it's going to help us understand that we are the community. That we are the people. I really hope the building will enhance who we are as a community."

Members of St. Raphael, at 5801 Falls of the Neuse Road, will celebrate their church community by dedicating the \$2.5 million sanctuary Nov. 1. The parish will hold special services throughout the following week. For example, there will be services in the black tradition and in the Hispanic tradition as well as an ecumenical service for the general public.

"We are basically a white church, and we've got to do these special things to emphasize that we are universal," Lewis said.

It was the same spirit of outreach that prompted the Catholic church to establish a parish in rural Raleigh in 1964, Lewis said. St. Raphael's first meeting hall was built by 1966. At the time, Falls of the Neuse Road

was a two-lane street that ducked past farms en route to a Neuse River swimming hole. Only 150 households were members of the parish then, but International Business Machines Corp. was to move into Research Triangle Park and there were signs that the area would grow.

Now about 2,000 households are members of St. Raphael. All but about 70 have joined since the church's founding.

The church's growth prompted planning for the new sanctuary as early as 1978, Lewis said. Members have brought their traditions, and they have been blended together to create the church's personality. That blend is obvious in the structure and details of the sanctuary:

- The windows and skylights in the foyer that invite light and worshipers in from the world outside and draw them back to the world when the service has ended.

- The picture of the Holy Family to be displayed in the foyer. Mary will be holding Jesus in her lap while she is reclined in Joseph's lap — a show of family togetherness not often found in paintings of the three.

- The free-standing, hollowed out cornerstone at the mouth of the sanctuary. The inscription on it reads, "No one can lay a foundation other than the one that has been laid: namely, Christ Jesus." Parishioners will symbolically join Christ as the foundation of St. Raphael by placing mementos in the cornerstone before it is sealed. Every week, bread and wine to be used during Mass will be kept on the stone before it is blessed and distributed.

- The materials used to build the sanctuary. There is marble from Italy, North Carolina granite and wood from a pecan tree torn down to make room for the sanctuary.

— KEMA SODERBERG