

# BREAKING BREAD — AND BARRIERS



THOMAS E. FRANKLIN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Joe D'Arrigo, 8, of Saddle Brook working with the Very Rev. John R. O'Connell during a Communion rehearsal for children with autism.

## Kids with autism learn Communion

By **JOHN CHADWICK**  
STAFF WRITER

Janet Sullivan never thought her 9-year-old son, Matthew, would receive Holy Communion like other Catholic kids.

Matthew has autism, a neurological disorder that makes it difficult for him to socialize, pay attention or follow directions, let alone sit in a packed church or understand a re-

ligion class.

"Everything with him takes a lot of work," said Sullivan, of Midland Park. "So when I saw kids his age starting their [religion] classes a few years ago, I just sighed and said, 'Here's another thing he isn't going to do.'"

She was wrong.

On May 19, Matthew and six other children with autism will walk down the center aisle of the Church of the Nativity, clasp their hands prayerfully in front of them and consume the consecrated bread that Catholics believe is the body of Christ.

The children's participation in one

of the Catholic Church's holy sacraments will cap an unprecedented, 16-month effort. The parish held a special religious education class, and parents conducted patient, painstaking sessions at home in which children practiced making the sign of the cross and eating bits of unconsecrated bread from the church.

"We would start out with a crumb — and reward them for their effort,"

See **AUTISM** Page **A-11**



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# Autism

From Page A-1

Sullivan said. "Some of us did it every day."

Autism affects the brain's development in early childhood, hindering the ability to learn, communicate and form relationships. One in every 94 children in New Jersey has autism — the highest rate ever documented in the United States, a federal study recently concluded.

Nativity's program, which comes as religious institutions are casting about for ways to include people with special needs, was a grassroots effort driven by parents, church volunteers and clergy.

"They basically did this on their own," said Anne Masters, who oversees programs for the disabled in the Newark Archdiocese. "Here was a parish that met people where they were, opened up to what their needs were, and figured it out as they went."

The congregation, which is in Midland Park, began holding monthly Masses in late 2005 for people with special needs. After realizing there were growing numbers of children with autism unable to receive Communion with their peers, the church started the special class in early 2006.

Nativity's pastor said he sees it as meeting a religious obligation.

"If Jesus did anything, he welcomed all types of people," said the Very Rev. John R. O'Connell. "I think these people who are differently abled or disabled have been pushed to the fringes of society for too long."

O'Connell said that having the special Mass means families can worship without worrying that their children's behavior will disturb parishioners.

"If a kid jumps up and screams, it's not a problem with me," O'Connell said. "I expect it's going to happen. This is not my house — this is God's house and I'm just the custodian."

No one jumped up or acted out during Sunday's rehearsal for the Communion. The children, after practicing for more than a year, seemed at home in church surroundings as they worked through the ceremony, some in silence, others chatting giddily.

After taking the host from O'Connell, they walked with their beaming parents to the pews.

Matthew Monaco, an 8-year-old Waldwick boy, said he was particularly excited about wearing his navy blue suit next week. His older brother had worn the suit several years ago during his Communion.

"We didn't know whether it would ever get used again," said his mother, Dawn Monaco. "This is a big deal."

The church's effort resulted from a chance encounter several years ago between Sullivan and a religion teacher from Long Island. The



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Matthew Monaco, 8, of Waldwick taking Communion with his mom, Dawn, in the rehearsal.

teacher asked whether Sullivan's son was going to participate in first Communion. The response was automatic.

"I just told her there are so many other things we have to work on," Sullivan said. "And she told me he deserves to make the sacraments, and that I shouldn't let the autism stand in the way."

Sullivan followed up that conversation by talking to church workers and other parents of children with autism. She discovered the parents were frustrated that their kids couldn't partake of religious life. The parish was receptive to their needs.

Cindy Oliver Wellekens, a former special education teacher with two autistic kids of her own, prepared the Nativity kids for Communion, using pictures, short stories and lots of repetition. The class reflects the wide spectrum of autistic symptoms, with some children ap-

pearing relatively high-functioning and others unable to speak.

"We broke everything into teeny little parts," Wellekens said. "They don't see the big picture. ... They need to look at the different components. Just making the sign of the cross took weeks of practice — up, down, left, right."

Although the kids may not fully understand the story of Christ, parents are thrilled that their children are participating in the church and, in some cases, understand that God loves them.

Parent Joe D'Arrigo said he and his wife, Nancy were overcome with emotion while watching their son, Joe, try on his suit for Communion.

"He looked at us and said, 'What's the matter, do you have a stomach virus?'" said D'Arrigo, of Saddle Brook. "I said, 'No, it means we're happy.'"

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