



ccepero@news=press.com

St. Leo the Great Catholic Church in Bonita Springs was reborn Easter Monday with the rededication of an expanded, renovated house of worship.

Diocese of Venice Bishop Frank Dewane led the Mass, flanked by St. Leo's pastor the Rev. Stan Strycharz and about 15 white-robed diocesan priests.

People of all ages and various backgrounds filled the pews.

The church previously sat almost 1,000 and now has room for more than 1,500.

"It's not about the walls," Dewane told the people. "You are the church."

The bishop began by sprinkling holy water on the people, the walls and the altar.

Ken, 71, and Joan Weyker, 69, have belonged to St. Leo for 22 years. They noticed people having to stand about six years ago, and today, almost 2,200 families make up the parish.

Jose Antonio Garcia, 35, his wife, Luz Janet Garcia, 31, and their sons, Alexis, 5, and Yael, 4, joined a year ago when the expansion began.

"It was an honor to have the bishop here. It's something very important that took place," Jose Antonio said. "It was a very moving Mass."

Dewane anointed four sacred areas of the church by making crosses with oil. He burned incense to send the people's prayers up to the Lord. Strycharz lit small candles and a large

candle signifying the light of Christ. The children's and adult choirs led the congregation in song.

The \$3.9 million project - which includes new air conditioning, sprinklers, sound and lighting systems and the expansion of the parking lot by 265 spots to fit almost 900 vehicles - is paid off, thanks to member contributions.

St. Leo's first Mass was held in 1962, and the existing building opened in 1986.

At the entrance to the church, a plaque to the left announces the church's dedication Nov. 9, 1986, by Bishop John Nevins and the Rev. John Foley. On the right, another plaque marks Monday's rededication.

Dewane said: "The church, while it has changed in appearance, will always be about the presence of Jesus Christ."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.