

The Family That Learns Together Prays Together

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY LAURENCE E. KEEFE

Religious education used to be a nun and the Baltimore Catechism.

Times have changed a lot since the Second Vatican Council, and religious education has changed with them. But in many parishes it still means second graders going to classes with second graders, high schoolers all sitting in front of the same teacher, and adults sitting home.

A radically different way of teaching religion to the whole family was designed by the people of St. Catherine of Siena parish in Ithaca, and it has proved successful beyond all expectations.

It's not surprising that St. Catherine's would come up with an exciting way to teach religion. It is a modern parish of about 500 families, located on Cavuga Heights overlooking Cayuga Lake. Monsignor William Roche is pastor.

The parish used to have a more traditional type of religious education until last summer, explained Mike Stanley, who works full time as coordinator of religious education for the parish. Meetings were held all last summer, producing a series of plans for educating the family as a unit.

Families, age 10 and up, come together in groups every other Sunday to discuss the topic of their choice. Separate classes are held for preschoolers and high school students, since the latter designed their own course.

The groups this year have scrutinized such topics as whether confusion is necessary in the Church today, basic questions of the Catholic faith, the liturgy and the Gospel of St. John. The groups vary in size from six or seven people to near 30; some are all adult, others are children with adults.



Msgr. Roche, center, leads the talk in his own group.

How do parishioners like the change?

Attendance has been good, say both Mike Stanley and George Van Son. A local college teacher of speech, Van Son also chairs the Christian education committee of the parish council. They estimate that 120 people attend the classes regularly, down somewhat from an early peak of 200.

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Mrs. Mary Ellen Cummings, left, leads drawing session as part of class preparing paper murals on the events of Holy Week. Looking on are Eric Hermann, Dan Cummings, and Mrs. Elaine Buchanan.