

The Chemung Catholic Schools: A Unique Approach

First in a Series

By MARTIN TOOMBS

Elmira — Innovative methods for dealing with the problems of declining enrollments, a shortage of teaching sisters, and rising costs have become part of Catholic education. That innovation has included shared schools, upper and lower elementaries, and schools with all lay faculties.

Confronted with these problems, the Elmira parishes banded together, forming the Chemung County General Education Board, to operate the county's schools. The resulting five schools (now four), supported by nine parishes became the Chemung County Catholic School System, possibly the only such city-wide Catholic school system operated by an elected board in the country.

The consolidation did not occur without controversy. Most observers believe that the consolidation was necessary at the time, to avoid collapse of some if not all of the schools. But many question the way it was done, and how it is paid for, with the greatest objections coming from parishes that have had their school buildings closed.

Now in its sixth year, many persons instrumental during the consolidation have moved on, and a new leadership has emerged. The Courier-Journal interviewed several of those who were or are now involved in the school system, to examine how the school system came into being, and what its leaders see for the future.

In September 1965, there

were 2,433 students in Elmira's Catholic elementary schools. By September 1970, the enrollment had dropped to 1,413. Consolidations had occurred between St. Cecelia's and Ss. Peter and Paul, and St. Anthony's and St. Casimir's. The schools had undergone an average annual enrollment decline of 10.3 per cent, and no end was in sight.

In July 1970, the "Donovan" Report was released. The report, written by Sister Patricia Donovan, a former principal of Notre Dame High School, made several suggestions concerning the consolidation of parishes and schools in Chemung County. The furor the report raised in the Elmira area, and the formation of a diocesan Education Task Force, caused the Chemung County School Board, which had served in an advisory capacity since 1965, to ask permission to form a coordinating committee to plan the future of Elmira's Catholic schools. Dr. Thomas Curran, DDS, president of the board at the time, described the board's action as an attempt to "beat them by picking up ball and running with it."

Intensive meetings took place from September 1970 through November, and resulted in the plan that was aired publicly on Dec. 3 and approved by the board a week later. That plan has been the basis for the operation of the schools since.

Dr. Curran noted how important it was to act at the time, as some of the county's schools were "living from hand to mouth," he said, and if some major repair to the school

building was necessary, it might have forced the closing of the school.

In September 1971, the consolidated system opened. St. Anthony's and St. Cecelia's students, the schools closed by the consolidation, and the students from St. Patrick's, joined those at St. Mary's, Our Lady of Lourdes, Ss. Peter and Paul, and St. Casimir's. The most significant change was the opening of the junior high at St. Patrick's, encompassing all of the seventh and eighth graders.

Parents apparently reacted favorably to the changes, as the enrollment decline that September was six per cent, the lowest figure since 1965. Since that first year, the average annual decline has been 4.7 per cent, during a time when enrollment has also declined in the Elmira city schools.

The schools are operated by the school board, consisting of two representatives from each parish, the school principals, and the pastors. The board elects officers, prepares budgets, and determines tuition and assessment charges. Each parish pays an assessment to the school system, determined by a formula based on parish income and the number of students. The budget is done each Spring for the following year, and the assessments are determined based on that year's enrollment figures, and the parish income for the previous fiscal year.

Only one year old, the school system was tested by the Agnes Flood in June 1972. When it became apparent that no aid would



Music instruction at St. Casimir's

be forthcoming for the Catholic schools, Dr. Curran traveled to Washington to contact Church and elected officials, and got an amendment attached to a natural disaster bill then in Congress. That action proved successful, and a similar action in Albany resulted in the repair costs for the schools being paid, and \$143,000 being available for operating expenses, according to Dr. Curran. That money came to the school system in the winter of 1972-73. Dr. Curran noted. The funds were "sequestered by the parishes," Dr. Curran said, and placed in the next year's budget, and used to lower parish assessments to the school system. The money should have either been placed in a crisis fund, or used to reduce tuition for that year, Dr. Curran said. Instead, Curran pointed out, tuition went up that year. Those who objected to

saving the funds emphasized that the state had supplied the funds because of need, and said that it would have been morally wrong not to spend the money.

Also at the end of that first year, St. Mary our Mother in Horseheads, an original member of the consolidation, withdrew, citing cost, according to Dr. Curran, as the reason. The move was a blow for the consolidated system, as a disproportionate number of Chemung County's upper middle class families live in Horseheads. The unfortunate situation of declining enrollment in the consolidated system, and a waiting list for some grades in Horseheads also exists.

The closing of Ss. Peter and Paul in June 1976, reducing the school system to three elementaries, caused problems that have yet to be resolved. The

closing meant the end any school in the Eastside — Elmira's inner city and the area hit hardest by the Agnes Flood and Urban Renewal. The population of Ss. Peter and Paul parish has been dropping rapidly, and the enrollment of the school was 97 students when the decision to close was made.

Since that time, Ss. Peter and Paul parish has been protesting its assessment, contending that the maintenance of the now empty school building, and a drop in the number of students from the parish now in the school system should have lowered the assessment, which increased instead. The resolution of the problem could affect St. Anthony's and St. Cecelia's, as they are also maintaining empty school buildings.

NEXT WEEK: The three big problems: enrollment, finances and parochialism.

SOUTHERN TIER

AUBURN-GENEVA

'Hug of Life'

Elmira--St. Joseph's Hospital designated the week of Dec. 13-17 as "The Gift of Life" week, and made available wallet cards depicting how to do the "Hug of Life," the Heimlich maneuver.

In luncheon ceremonies, those who played a part in the making of the educational presentation were given appreciation certificates. Thirty-seven Southern Tier residents owe their lives to the procedure.

Mrs. Margaret Geraghty of the Connecticut Yankee Inn was instrumental in

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recognizing the danger of choking deaths, and after watching a national television show on the subject, called St. Joseph's Hospital requesting an education program for the restaurant staff.

The Emergency Services Department responded through Dr. David Kaplan and Mrs. Virginia Knecht, RN, and with the assistance of the Audio-visual coordinator at the hospital, Ray Defendorf, the program was produced at the restaurant.

Sister Martha Gersbach, hospital administrator, hosted the gathering and presented certificates to Dr. Kaplan and Mrs. Knecht as well as Seymour Leven, the victim in the film, and Anthony Mullen, AART, chief of Respiratory Therapy at St. Joseph's who explains the process on the film. Sister Martha thanked the participants on behalf of all the persons whose lives have been saved as a result of the Heimlich maneuver.

Divorced, Separated Group Forming

Corning—A group for divorced and separated Catholics will hold its first meeting Monday, Jan. 10 in St. Patrick's Hall at 8 p.m. Speakers will be Sister Kathleen Kircher, diocesan Coordinator of Ministry to the Divorced and Separated, and Father James Lawlor, clergy liaison for ministry to the divorced and separated.

Forum Set For Divorced, Separated

Auburn—Divorced and separated persons, and the various avenues for readjustment Service Forum at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 12 at the Cayuga County Community College student lounge.

After a general presentation, participants can join in one of three subject discussions; the social needs of the divorced and separated, legal aspects and rights, and individual needs and resources for readjustment in day to day living.

One goal of the program will be identifying resources not now provided in the community.

Organizing the St. Patrick's group are Father Louis Vasile and Sister Agnes Catherine of St. Patrick's. Father Vasile, Livingston-Stauben Family Life Coordinator, noted that all divorced or separated Catholics are invited. He also requested that those who know divorced or separated persons who may be interested to inform them of the meeting, in case they don't see a published notice.

The divorced and separated groups provide mutual support and a forum for the discussion of the unique problems faced by divorced and separated persons.

Representatives from the Hornell and Elmira areas are expected at the meeting, to determine the need for groups in those areas.

Sister Kathleen Kircher attended Father James Young's Ministry to Minorities course at Notre Dame University last summer, and since has been coordinating the ministry to divorced and separated, and assisting in the formation of new groups. Father Lawlor is an adviser to the diocese's oldest group, based at St. Charles Borromeo in Greece.

DPC Meeting Set for Jan. 15

The Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) will meet Saturday, Jan. 15, at the Sheraton Motor Inn, Canandaigua, to discuss a variety of issues. Included on the agenda are presentations by Dr. Evelio Perez-Albuerno on the International Justice and Peace Commission, Father Jerome Robinson and Father Douglas Hoffman on the DPC response to the Detroit "Call to Action" conference, and by William Brown on the Urban School Task Force recommendations.

The council will also discuss a retreat day for the DPC Feb. 25 - 26, and a special meeting April 17 to provide their input on the "Call to Action" proposals, and a draft statement of DPC directions for the year, tabled at the November meeting.

The meeting, which will begin at 1 p.m., is open to the public.

Assembly Convenes

Seneca Falls—The Cayuga-Seneca Regional Assembly will convene at St. Patrick's School on Jan. 11 at 7:30 p.m., according to Kathie Fox, assembly president.

The assembly will discuss the diocesan "Call to Action," plans for this year's Christ Mass, and the assembly's revised constitution.

A FIRST

Nazareth College will shortly become the first area college to offer graduate courses toward a master's degree for teachers who wish to specialize in art or business education. The State Education Department has recently approved the college's proposal to offer a program for art teachers in kindergarten through grade 12 and for business education teachers in grades 7-12.

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