

# COURIER-JOURNAL

## Southern Tier-Auburn Geneva

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### Evangelization Goal:

## Proclaim the 'Good News' to the Unchurched

By Martin Toombs  
Southern Tier Editor

Corning — Paulist Father Alvin Illig, director of the national Office on Evangelization, spends most of his time talking to active Catholics, but that, too, is an evangelization process, as he works to convince his audiences of the need for them all to become evangelizers.

And while citing Vatican and NCCB documents urging Catholics to become evangelizers, he also points out the advantages the Catholic Church has in its efforts to reach out to the 85 million unchurched Americans.

Interviewed the morning following the Steuben Region's evangelization

workshop, Dec. 11, Father Illig had just finished celebrating Mass in St. Mary's Church, Corning, which was a special event, as his parents were St. Mary's parishioners as teenagers, before they moved to California. He was in Corning visiting relatives.

Father Illig noted that a goal of the nation's bishops in setting up the office he heads is to raise the awareness of the 50 million active Catholic about the 85 million unchurched in this country. The unchurched are more approachable than many think, he noted. Of that number, only about five percent are committed atheists. Fifteen million have a Catholic heritage, he pointed out, and nearly 80 percent want their children to receive religious education.

Of those who enter the

Church, he noted, 10 percent join due to the efforts of parish staff; 10 percent enter as the result of Church programs. The remaining 80 percent were baptized as the result of the work of a lay Catholic.

"That's why we stress so much the role of the laity as evangelizers," he stated.

But the Catholic Church is a "sleeping giant," he said, pointing out that in 1950, for every 1,000 Catholics, there were slightly more than four converts. That figure has dropped to slightly more than one. And 30 years ago, for every Catholic lost through a mixed marriage, three were gained. Now it is about even, he said, a loss for each gain.

He suggested two reasons for the decline: the turmoil

within the Church, and a "false application of ecumenism." He explained that in addition to the justified respect for the beliefs of other Christians, ecumenism also incorrectly became a reason not to promote the Catholic faith among those with no faith.

"I'm deeply committed to ecumenism," he stated, but when speaking to a person who belongs to no Church, he speaks of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."

And while the turmoil in the Church after Vatican II caused problems, it also established a definition of Church as the laity, rather than the hierarchy. That new understanding has strengthened evangelization efforts, he commented. He

also pointed out that the turmoil seems to have bottomed out, as the percentage of Catholics who attend Mass each Sunday has recently increased from 46 to 50 percent, after years of decline.

He is "optimistic about the next 10 years," he said, observing that the "agony and the ecstasy" of Vatican II is over, and "we pruned the tree and now fresh growth is starting to come."

Catholics don't realize the value of the framework of parishes and institutions across the country, Father Illig told the workshop participants in Bath. While everyone is familiar with the efforts of Jehovah's Witnesses, there are only 550,000 in the country; one for every 1,000 Catholics. And while it seems there is a McDonald's

restaurant on every corner, he said, there are 5,300, while 18,800 Catholic parishes serve the country.

"I know we've got problems," he said, "but let's look at the good side." When considering the need for evangelization, "it's staggering what's out there now," he concluded.

By 1990, he hopes that 12,000 of the nation's parishes will have evangelization committees, and that 20 percent of the nation's active Catholics will be evangelizers.

That would mean that 10 million Catholics would be actively proclaiming the "Good News," he pointed out. If half that group met with success with one person, five million people would join the faith.



Participants in the Steuben Region's evangelization program during the workshop on evangelization through the family.

## Father Illig Keynotes Evangelization Program

Bath — While the term "Catholic evangelizer" may be a new one to many, the director of the national Committee on Evangelization emphasized the need for "Catholic evangelizers," and the strong foundation they have for their work in his talk at the Steuben Region "Superstar-Nite" at St. Mary's parish Dec. 11.

Father Alvin Illig, CSP, executive director of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Evangelization and of his order's evangelization office, admitted to the 175 persons at the program that the "evangelizer" title can take some getting used to.

His parents couldn't understand his 20 years in publishing, Father Illig said, but they were even more surprised when he told them he was going to become an "evangelizer." His mother, he related, asked if he had become a Jehovah's Witness.

While he doesn't agree with the theology of the Jehovah's Witnesses, he commented, he has to "applaud them for their enthusiasm" and commitment to their work.

He summarized Catholic

evangelizing as "accepting Christ into your life," and then sharing the faith with others.

Evangelization, he noted, is reaching out to the 41 percent of Americans "who have no Church family."

While it is important to witness to Christ through example, he quoted a summary of Pope Paul VI's encyclical "On Evangelization in the Modern World," that "Sooner or later, however, the Good News proclaimed by the living witness of a good life has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed."

In that proclamation, he said, it is important for the evangelizer to be positive, to be optimistic. We "don't need people to tell us we've got problems," he stated; "pessimism is not a Christian virtue. Optimism is supposed to be the Christian way of life."

Five workshops given by diocesans on evangelization programs which they have

used also were given.

Father Elmer Schmidt and parishioners of St. Margaret Mary, Apalachin, explained the use of a parish renewal weekend to evangelize. Sister Margot Mann and parishioners from Our-Lady of Mercy, Rochester, explained the parish's "Fishers" program.

Susan and Frank Staropoli and Donna and James Fitch of the diocesan Family Life Office discussed evangelization through the family. Sister Christine Lloyd of St. Patrick's, Seneca Falls, discussed evangelization through and among parish youth.

And Father Bernard Carges and parishioners from Immaculate Conception, Ithaca, gave a presentation on the formation of a parish evangelization committee.

While Father Illig later called the evening's program a "training session," his inspirational talk and the discussions also served to send the participants to their parishes with a strengthened sense of purpose to go with what they learned about methods of evangelization.

## Accepting Christ Made Him Become a 'Jew for Jesus'

By Martin Toombs  
Southern Tier Editor

Corning — "Christmas is a Jewish Holiday — or at least it should be," was one of the many pamphlets distributed by a "Jew for Jesus" who spoke at St. Patrick's Parish Dec. 10.

About 30 persons heard Robert Mendelsohn, a professional minister with the "Jews for Jesus" organization, describe how he came to join the group.

Raised an orthodox Jew in Kansas City, at one time he challenged his parents' view of their faith by becoming more strict in his observance than they were. But, he related, it was when he was studying Talmud in college that he absent-mindedly violated a rule regarding the Sabbath, and he said, realized the futility of following the myriad rules.



### Silver Tea

The St. Vincent DePaul, Corning, Parish Catholic Action Society had its annual Christmas Silver Tea Sunday Dec. 14. About 100 women were expected at the event, chaired by Theresa Rossette and Maryann Currier. The Corning East High School Chorusers, conducted by Richard Perry, performed. Pictured are, from left, Nancy Quattrini, the group's president; Father Joseph F. Hogan, St. Vincent's pastor; and Theresa Rossette.

He dropped out of school and society, he said, and "joined the hippie culture."

During that time, he met some Christians on the street who were evangelizing. Accepting the challenge, Mendelsohn said, he easily refuted their arguments, as he knew the Bible better than they. But they were undaunted, and suggested that since they couldn't answer his questions, he should go and pray to God for answers.

That conversation led to his praying in English for the first time, he related, and reading the New Testament. He emphasized what that meant, noting that Jesus "was to me like Mohammed is to most of you."

His first reaction that "St. Matthew, St. John... they are all Catholics" was tempered as he read and found that the persons in the New Testament were all Jewish. Further study brought him to

believe in the lessons of Christ, he said.

He was baptized, and, although accepting Christ, he continues to consider himself Jewish. On weekends, he noted, he attends a Jews for Jesus service on Friday evening, synagogue on Saturday morning, and church on Sunday. His son is being brought up Jewish, with the hope that he will become a believer in Christ when he is older.

Responding to questions, he noted that while his parents had had difficulty when he began observing their faith more exactly than they did, his being baptized was "like a knife in the back," and his father cut him out of his will. His parents have since softened, he said, at least partially because of their grandchild, his son.

He stated that "I don't do things to oppose my parents; I do things I think are right."

He noted that the Old Testament prophets and Jesus met with opposition, pointing out Biblical warnings that a prophet will not be well received in his own town.

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