

Can the Church Help

Story by John Dash
Photos by Terrance J. Brennan

That there is discord in Seneca County over the question of peace is an established fact. The question being asked is "What is the Church's role in alleviating that discord, in reconciling the sides which have developed in the past several weeks?"

Despite a peaceful airing of grievances between townspersons and campers at the Women's Encampment for Peace and Justice last Sunday, "there are still deep-rooted emotions on both sides," said Father Michael Conboy, pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Seneca Falls.

Indeed, his associate, Father William Moorby, opened his homily Sunday with the phrase: "I'm a damned man. I'm damned if I do, and damned if I don't," meaning speaking up in the controversy surrounding the camp.

Father Moorby admitted that he doesn't like some of the aspects of the encampment, but it is now time to get down to discussion of disarmament.

A striking feature of the Women's Encampment for Peace and Justice is the presence of the Church — both at the camp itself and in the issues around which the camp was established.

Not only are laywomen and women religious from all over the country taking part in camp activities, they are also bringing the perspectives of the Church to issues the camp has raised.

Those perspectives were enunciated earlier this year when the U.S. bishops published "The Challenge of Peace," their pastoral letter which focused in part on the development and stockpiling of nuclear arms.

The women's camp abuts the Seneca Army Depot, which some claim to be the East Coast repository of such weapons; and the campers' demonstrations for the most part are against that storage. The government refuses to acknowledge that the depot is a storage site for nuclear weapons.

The question of nuclear arms has also prompted the staff of St. Patrick's to launch among parishioners a major educational effort on the bishops' pastoral and, following widely-publicized verbal attacks on the women demonstrators, to extend that effort to healing the breaches evident in the county community.

In addition, the camp has recently received a \$350 grant from the diocesan Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry to be used for educational purposes.

The camp and campers have been the occasion for extraordinary turmoil in this community. And the Church itself has been the target for crude and ill-informed attacks.

In Seneca Falls, Father Conboy, reported last week that he and his staff have noted a surge in polarization, a potential for destructiveness and a clouding of issues by emotions among parishioners.

At the same time, however, community reaction to the camp and the issues it raises is not all negative.

Following the arrest of several demonstrators in Waterloo after the demonstrators had been confronted and taunted by a group of 300 local persons, Margaret Haney, for one, pulled together an organization of area women dedicated to promoting the First Amendment rights of peaceful assembly and free speech.

She said last week that she was "appalled" that local officials should order the arrest of the women demonstrators when in her view it was the other crowd which was causing the trouble in the confrontation.

She described her "embarrassment" that her community should be seen as denying the women's fundamental rights.

"We are most concerned that our law enforcement and village officials did not protect the rights to peaceful assembly (of the women)," she said. She also said the published assertion that the 300 counter demonstrators "reflect the sentiment of the townspeople," was an "embarrassment to me and to others who believe in the right to peaceful assemblies."

The charges in those arrests were later dropped.

Father Conboy also noted this week that civilian workers at the depot "are glad the Church is speaking out, and they're trying to be objective about the whole situation."

This past weekend, St. Patrick's parishioners received a

multi-page bulletin insert about the issues of the camp and the campers' activities. The bulletin effort of the entire parish staff at St. Patrick's well received, the pastor said.

According to Father Conboy, the parish is "personally committed to honest and open discussion of these issues, but that frequently response is anger."

Sister Joan Cawley, SSJ, pastoral assistant for the parishioners "feel threatened, particularly in holding civilian jobs at the depot. They're taking it as if they're being told they're bad people threatened by... well, they are simply uninformed. Also this is a comfortable community. In any way we are."

Another question about which the demonstrators feel threatened, Father Conboy said, is "basic issue of women's rights."

"Seneca Falls prides itself on convening workshops on political issues. It is regarded as having a happy attitude toward that," he said, also Susan B. Anthony committed civil disobedience in Seneca Falls by voting.

However, that "happy and healthy attitude" is many quarters of the community today, he said.

Carol Jaeger, parish office manager, said that in the community "the focus is on the people who are Lesbians, and then they overlook a lot of other things. It's really unfortunate. We try to tell them that. That the cause they're for is bigger than that. But it's hard to get people to do that."

Sister Joan remarked that some parishioners



Residents voice their displeasure.



Some of the protestors sit in a circle last Wednesday outside the fairgrounds office during the arraignment of the 53 arrested in Waterloo two weeks ago.



Margaret Haney shows support.



Just before some scaled the fence, the protestors approached it wailing and crying as if overcome by grief.



Some gathered in prayer at the truck gate.

ES
THE
BOARD
THE
B
B
SECTH
1950
HIB
TERING
PHC
CRAWING
RESENT
ACTIVIT
CEPHI
OMMA
MATERI
LUNAI
LAEIS
Milit