

The Baptismal Call

Canandaigua Teacher Blends Personal Faith, Public Witness

This week the Courier-Journal embarks on a 12-part series of profiles of average Catholics throughout the diocese who demonstrate their faith in every aspect of their lives. The series, suggested and coordinated by the Task Force on the Laity of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, is written by Emily Morrison, a freelancer for the Courier-Journal and several other local publications. It will explore the varied ways in which Catholics interpret and carry out the call to ministry of all baptized persons.

By Emily Morrison

For Marie Fischette, a Canandaigua public school educator and lay minister, faith is a matter of both personal witness and public service.

Not only does Fischette serve as a Eucharistic minister for St. Mary's Parish and the ambulatory nursing home facility of Thompson Hospital, but also lives her convictions daily through prayer, meditation and an intentional assimilation of Christian teachings into the ordinary moments of an exemplary life.

Such an integration of personal faith and witness in the world at large, she admits, doesn't always add up to a harmonious marriage. One of four reading teachers who conduct an individualized developmental reading program for seventh and eighth graders at Canandaigua Junior Academy, Fischette appears at times to find herself frustrated on a purely personal level by the restrictions imposed by the separation of church and state.

"I would say it's more implicit than explicit," she responds to the question of whether she is able to successfully express her call to witness during school hours. "In terms of an attitude, I think maybe that's where it's more important. Over the past several years, when kids have come to me with problems, I've taken those problems to prayer," she adds. "Sometimes I wish I could say something more specific about faith, but in a public school situation, I can't do that — and that, for me, creates a personal tension."

"Typically, kids in this club are not those who are academically turned-on." Some of her students, she finds, are able to work through academic difficulties by participating in club activities and creative projects, even when behavioral problems may hamper their progress.

That tension appears to resolve itself through such professionally acceptable outlets as a candlemaking club Fischette sponsors for interested students. Through this channel, she is able to reach out to kids who may not necessarily have happy or productive home lives. "It allows for creativity within the kids," she explains.

"I think if there's anything that challenges me in teaching right now, it's patience with kids," Fischette admits. The onset of adolescence, she theorizes, has crept steadily downwards in recent years "in terms of the way society, culture, and peer pressure have impacted on kids. Things kids were doing a few years ago at 13 or 14, they're now doing at nine or 10. The challenge for me is learning how to deal with more sophisticated kinds of behavior, which in a sense are a mask for a lot of insecurity about growing up too soon."

Fischette meets this challenge, as she does so many others in her life, by turning to prayer as well as the support of trusted colleagues and friends she's encountered through both her ministry and her private quest for deepening a faith that seems to grow and intensify each day. As Eucharistic minister for Thompson Health-Related (Thompson Hospital's facility for ambulatory nursing home patients who need some degree of supervision), Fischette conducts Sunday prayer services for patients. "I feel that the people at Thompson Health-Related have given me more than I've given them," she says. "The patients there have asked me to pray for specific concerns of theirs, and they've reciprocated. So we've supported one another, and that's been a real gift for me."

Her lay ministry in St. Mary's Parish has involved working with the parish education committee, helping parents with concerns about the confirmation program, and supervising various special projects. The parishioners as a group have evinced an



Marie Fischette

extraordinary degree of commitment to community cooperation on such projects, as Fischette discovered one Christmas when she and other committee members decided to set up a "gift-giving tree," a project the group didn't act on right away.

"We decided that if we received a commitment for a Christmas tree, then we would go ahead with the project," she explains. "I personally took that as a sign of trust and as a sign of faith as well." Within 10 minutes, she adds, the group had a commitment from a parishioner for a subsequently donated tree.

"We had about a week to organize the project, and made up a coded list of needy children," she relates. "We decorated the tree with 85 Christmas ornaments (bearing the coded names of children to whom the parishioners would later give gifts), and virtually every ornament was gone after the first weekend Mass." Fischette and another committee member volunteered to make two more sets of ornaments in time for three more Masses to be held the following day.

"At the end of the noon Mass," she goes on, "both of those sets were gone. I can still remember being in utter amazement." They took up a challenge from another parishioner to repeat the process the following weekend, and every last ornament was once again taken.

"The question we had was whether everyone who had made the gesture to take an ornament would actually follow through on the commitment. The week before Christmas was the Sunday we (simultaneously) had a collection for Ethiopia, the canned food drive, and the returning of the ornaments and Christmas gifts," says Fischette. "We were astounded by the generosity of the people. Virtually every ornament was returned, the needed canned goods were provided, and the parish had the largest second collection on record for the Ethiopian fund."

This "little miracle," as Fischette fondly terms it, provides a vivid illustration of what she believes is possible when those in positions of leadership trust in God to help individual lay people respond to the call to witness in their everyday lives.

"People have to be shown how to minister to one another, and that they are the people of God," she offers. "I guess I see ministering as just not what I do in school. I think we need to educate kids in how to be human beings, and that's what I'm able to do at school. In the parish, there's a strong need to educate adults in how to integrate Christian values and attitudes into daily life. The mentality I see across the board is this perception left over from pre-Vatican II days that Christian education ended with confirmation."

The prevalent notion that "you didn't have to do anything else," other than attend periodic sacramental instruction, says Fischette, led to a stagnation in the faith lives of many Catholics as they reached adulthood.

"How do we, as a Church, educate people that there's a need for ongoing development of their spiritual responsibilities?" she asks rhetorically.

Fischette found her own answers to this consuming question through alternative channels to those she felt were available in her parish. "I would say that a Cursillo and our pastoral assistant were the first avenue," she elaborates. "Then came some books I read by a priest named Carlo Caretto, and that led me into making several retreats at the

Cenacle in Rochester." Other pursuits included enrolling in a series of workshops and informal courses, as well as availing herself

of spiritual direction offered by one of the Cenacle sisters.

"Every step challenges me to more questions, and a deeper search for my relationship with God and others," she concludes. "How do I most effectively live out those professed Christian values and attitudes?"

For Marie Fischette, the search is a process that continues, if all goes according to plan, "until the moment we die." Her personal evolution of faith, needless to say, should remain in progress for many fruitful years to come.

GRHC GENESEE REGION HOME CARE ASSOCIATION OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES TO

Become a Certified Home Health Aide and provide assistance to physically disabled people in their own homes.

How can you help? Assist with personal care, physical therapy, occupational therapy, meal preparation, etc.

LOCAL JOB INTERVIEWS

East Rochester
First Presbyterian Church
109 East Ave.
Monday August 12th
9:00 a.m.-12:00 noon

Penfield
Town Hall (Auditorium)
3100 Atlantic Ave.
Monday, August 12th
1:30 p.m.-3:30 p.m.

Irondequoit
Pine Grove Center-West Wing I
154 Pinegrove Ave.
Wednesday, August 14th
9:30 a.m.-11:30 a.m.

Webster
Village Office
28 West Main St.
Wednesday, August 14th
2:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m.

Greece
West Ridge Community
Education Center
Room 50
200 Alcott Rd.
Tuesday, August 13th
1:30 p.m.-3:30 p.m.

Brockport
Municipal Building — West
Court Room
18 State Street
Thursday, August 15th
2:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m.

Full and part-time positions available days and evenings. Automobile and telephone are required.

- Free training provided
- Stipend while training
- Competitive wage scale
- Health insurance
- Paid Holidays
- Auto mileage reimbursement
- Shift differential
- Double time for Holidays
- Paid vacation

BONUS PAID TO CERTIFIED AIDES

HELP US CARE...



For Information:
**Jean Arnold; Personnel
Administrator — 325-6101**

A United Way Agency