

The Baptismal Call

Third in a continuing series

Former nurse finds faith and laughter the best medicines

By Emily Morrison

The great Southern Tier flood of 1972 was a watershed of more than one kind for Elmira resident Mary Jurusik.

Members for many years of St. Casimir's Parish, Jurusik and her husband, Donald, found their family particularly besieged by the infamous deluge. Not only were the homes of both Mary's father and brother destroyed by the raging Chemung River, but a number of other memorable events also occurred that fateful year, which Mary refers to with a sense of almost biblical theatrics as "1972, the year of the flood."

Mary Jurusik helped to rebuild her brother's house, attempted to salvage her father's and ended up selling it, made a Cursillo with Don in Rochester, and managed, in the midst of both spiritual growth and physical exhaustion, to hold down her full-time job as an operating room nurse at Arnot Ogden Memorial Hospital, a position she held for 19 years.

In addition, the hospital expanded its O.R. wing that year from three to seven operating rooms, in order to add open heart, total hip, and plastic surgery to its surgical repertoire. "That was in 1972, the year of the flood," Jurusik prefaces a classic "O.R." story, "when I managed to insult our new plastic surgeon." Dr. James Marshall, as Jurusik tells it, walked into the operating room looking for a scrub coat. "We had no idea yet of what we were going to have (after the flood)," says Jurusik. "He walked in wearing dungarees and a torn sweatshirt, and I said, 'Who the hell are you?' That was the beginning of a marvelous relationship."

Although Jurusik retired about a year ago, she still finds occasion for the infrequent professional encounter with her esteemed former colleague, albeit on the receiving end of his ministrations. As recently as October 9, Jurusik found herself a somewhat impatient emergency room patient, after a tumble she took while walking her two grandsons in the park. Kevin, 3, had been given permission to ride shotgun on the back of one-year-old brother Patrick's stroller.



Mary Jurusik

"Kevin took the bump," Jurusik relates. "Someone had to take the fall, and it was either him or me. The first thing I knew, I was in the emergency room." Little did she know that the laceration to her forehead was to be stitched up by none other than Dr. Marshall, who drove in all the way from Alpine, some 20 minutes away.

"It probably took him all of two minutes to stitch it up," laughs Jurusik, "because I lectured him on how to do it. As I said, we do have a good relationship."

If the ministry of good humor were to have been mandated by the Second Vatican Council's document on the laity, Mary Jurusik would undoubtedly have spent the past 20 years perfecting its finer points, while practicing the thankless though angelic ministrations of her still-revered profession.

Laughing all the way to the bank may be the secular cliché of choice these days, but for those to whom spiritual riches are more important than material ones, laughter, as Mary Jurusik could surely affirm, is indeed the best medicine — not to mention the currency most likely to get its adherents into the kind of heaven we'd all like to think is up there.

"I have been noted for two things, as far as the O.R. goes," jokes Jurusik. "One is my rosary beads, which I always carry in a small pouch. If there was something difficult being done, someone always said, 'Get Mary and the beads.'" When open heart surgery was added to the operating room's list of services, staff members were understandably apprehensive about mastering the technicalities of this complicated procedure. "One of our first anesthesiologists in open heart hung beads over the machine for security," Jurusik deadpans, "and he's not even Catholic."

As for the other characteristic feature of Jurusik's nursing career, "I'm also a reader," she says. "Most of the books I was into reading while I was there were spiritual meditations," including such volumes as *Bread Broken and Shared* by Paul Berner, SSS, and *My Daily Bread* by Anthony J. Paone, SJ. "A couple of the anesthesiologists liked the same books I did," points out

ministrations and personal spiritual renewal, during a difficult time in the history of the community around her.

Mary and Don Jurusik served on St. Casimir's original parish council some 10-15 years ago, and helped draft a constitution. They also taught CCD classes, both on the elementary and junior high school levels, for a number of years. After they made their Cursillo in 1972, both Jurusiks continued to share in the community of faith they'd found during the intensive three-day weekend in Rochester.

They have participated on a weekly basis in a permanent "fourth day" group that meets to share the "piety, study and action" of individual members. In addition, the Jurusiks join periodic "ultreya" gatherings of all of the permanent Cursillo groups in the Elmira area.

"My piety, my study and my action are basically my family now, since I have retired," says Mary Jurusik. "At one time, we were involved with a group of lay people who conducted a liturgy service at Elmira Psychiatric Center, on a rotating basis, before the center got a chaplain." Now, according to Jurusik, she bears witness to her faith largely through interaction with her church, her husband, her three daughters, and her two grandchildren.

"It's not that we weren't good Catholics

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Jurusik, who frequently loaned her books to other staff members.

In retrospect, Jurusik views her years as an O.R. nurse as among the most fulfilling of her life. "Nursing is one thing," she explains, "but if you're going to go into a specialty field like O.R., you have to be a certain kind of person. I loved it. I wouldn't have done anything else but be an O.R. nurse."

A propensity for prayer is a special prerequisite of the job, for such a dedicated Catholic. Reassurance, comfort, and occasional laughter come with the territory, no less in the instance of a nurse who factors in unselfconscious lay witness as an indivisible part of the equation.

That type of dedication might lead a less driven person to job burn-out, but Mary Jurusik approached her profession in much the same way she does many other areas of her busy life: with good humor, faith, and an unflinching ability to shoulder difficult work, a talent always tempered by a measure of quiet humility that helps such unselfish people to follow the tenets of their faith without fanfare or self-congratulation.

"The O.R. is a country in itself," Jurusik observes. "You very rarely get outside to see the rest of the world, unless it's an in-service (training program)." Yet Jurusik managed to step outside the all-consuming microcosm of her field to participate in parish ad-

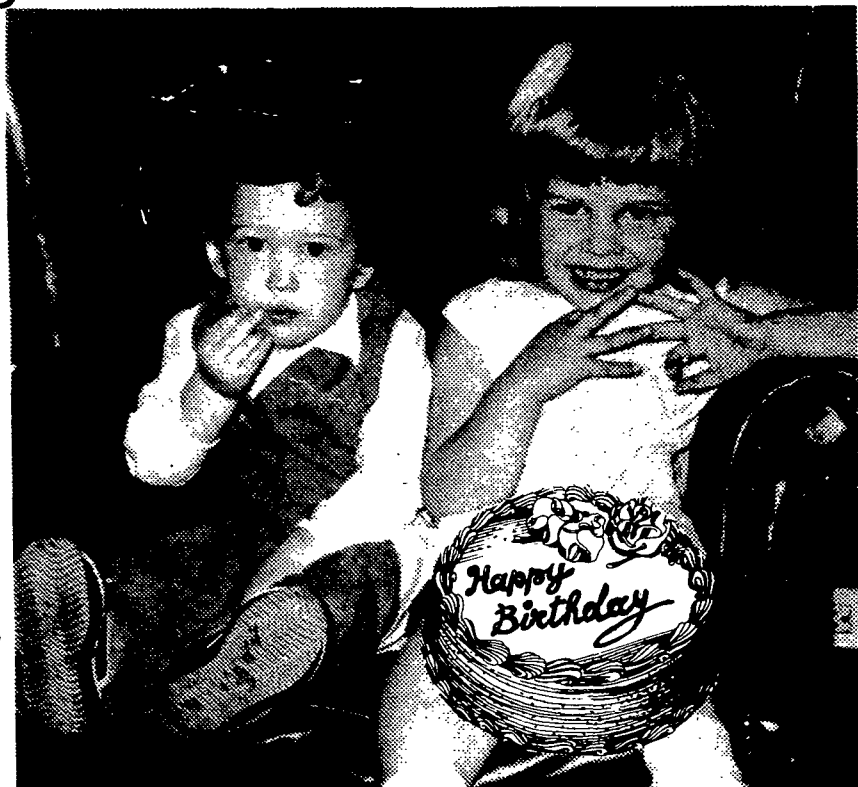
ministrations before the Cursillo," Jurusik allows. "But there was a very definite change." Even her oldest daughter, Mary Theresa Duffy, mother of Patrick and Kevin, has remarked on the difference. "You're a different kind of parent than my friends have," Mary Theresa once told us," says Mary. "Church and God have a different meaning to you than they do to most of my friends' parents."

"I'm not saying we always make the right decisions," Jurusik adds. "It's an ongoing thing. We do believe in it. We don't preach it, but we do believe in it."

Mary, Don, and the couple's youngest daughter, Alice, hold hands around the table when they say grace before the evening meal. After dinner this winter, they'll add a special family devotion that has become a hallmark of the family's baptismal witness. "We're sporadic now, because the winter hasn't really set in," explains Mary. "In the winter months, after Donald's seven o'clock news, we have half-hour scripture readings in the evenings. It's a good, quiet time, a family time. Alice calls it 'the meditation time.'" In the spring, listening to tapes by Thomas Green will become a family Lenten project.

Mary Jurusik's faith life has been inspired, she says, by Joe Barnaski, who sponsored Mary and her husband on that fateful Cursillo, the year of the flood. Those

continued on Page 16



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