

# The Baptismal Call

## Ordinary evangelist spreads faith by example

By Teresa A. Parsons

Bernie Cohan is, by his own description, not extraordinary.

He's a 46-year-old Owego resident with a wife and two grown daughters. A native of New Hartford, N.Y., near Utica, he works as a civil engineer in charge of highway maintenance for the state's Department of Transportation in Tioga and eastern Chemung counties. Since he's of Irish descent, it is a happy coincidence that he belongs to St. Patrick's Parish in Owego, where he serves as a Eucharistic minister and a member of the building and grounds committee.

Given that average profile, it's hard to define why people in trouble should turn to him.

But they do. Sometimes the person in need has been a co-worker with a marital or alcohol problem. Other times it's an employee or friend who's frustrated or depressed.

He's not even sure why they choose him, but he's got a few ideas.

"I guess I really can't speak too much for other people, but one of my philosophies is trying to show I care about people as individuals," he said. "That seems to kind of open some doors as far as being able to talk ... I guess people must have felt that they could come to me and talk and that it was confidential."

When they come, Cohan doesn't claim to offer them anything outstanding — just his own experiences and perceptions. "We just have some good talks," he said. "I listen and I try to share my perspective on what it's about to be a Christian."

Nothing extraordinary — yet the framers of Vatican Council II found it necessary to devote an entire decree, more than 30 pages of the document, to what Bernie Cohan does.



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Thanks to post-Vatican II renewal movements in the Church, Bernie Cohan has found support for his efforts to integrate faith into his daily life.

mission in the post-Vatican II renewal movements of the Church — specifically Marriage Encounter and Cursillo.

Cursillo is a leadership movement that originated in a Spanish monastery nearly 40 years ago and came to the Diocese of Rochester in 1967. A progressive course of three-day spiritual exercises is built around a central three-day gathering or cursillo. The movement's objective is to change the world by remaking it according to the mind of Christ.

Cursillistas (as those who take part in the movement are known) work toward salva-

Cursillo differ in focus, Cohan is living proof that they can work together in building a strong overall spirituality. "The principles of both are ultimately leading you to the same place," he observed.

"I think that people who've experienced those renewals have the awareness that God has given them some gifts and that we really should those gifts to promote our faith," Cohan said. "I think they've made many people aware of the fact that they can't really sit home and go to church on Sunday, that practicing their faith involves a lot more than that."

In the 10 years since his first Cursillo weekend, Cohan said he hasn't lost sight of the precepts he learned. "I just try to apply them to the things that I do and the relationships that I have with people," he said.

Looking back, he recalled that weekend as "a very profound and very uplifting experience, one that ... surpassed what I really expected."

"I think for me that was a turning point, where my faith really became alive and meant much more to me," he said. "I thought so much of the experience that I got involved in post-Cursillo activities right away."

He has since served as a team member and rector for several weekends. "Each is a real spiritual growth experience, and I think that's one reason my wife and I have remained active," he said.

Because of that continuing support, the Christian identity so many people pull out only on Sunday burgeoned outside the

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'I think the renewal process has helped us recognize the importance of spreading your faith even to people you don't know, of maybe taking that extra step to know somebody and to talk with him about God or Christianity.'

Bernie Cohan

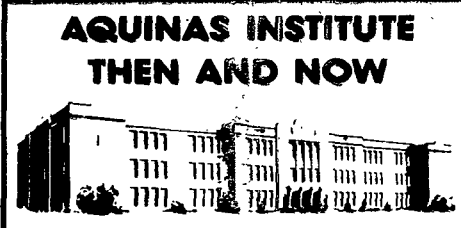
In their decree on the apostolate of lay people, members of the council wrote: "The very witness of a Christian life, and good works done in a supernatural spirit, are effective in drawing men to the faith and to God; and that is what the Lord has said: 'Your light must shine so brightly before men that they can see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.'"

The words are powerful, but it's taken more than words to convince Cohan that his life is a mission for Christ. Just as the Church was and is renewed by Vatican II, he has consistently found support for that

tion through active involvement in parish and community affairs. They support and encourage one another in these efforts through frequent gatherings — or ultreyas — where they witness to Christ working among them.

Marriage Encounter also began in Spain in 1958 and had made its way to the diocese by the early 1970s. A 44-hour weekend retreat, it aims to provide couples with a means of communication that will enhance their spiritual growth — to turn good marriages into great marriages.

Although Marriage Encounter and



### AQUINAS INSTITUTE THEN AND NOW

— A series of articles to appear semi-monthly commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the school.

Support for the church's home and foreign missions has always been a prominent feature of student life at Aquinas. Prayers and sacrifice for the missions are encouraged; prize fighting, in the Mission Bouts, is a part, and so too, financial support from daily collections. Today, according to Fr. Mitch Dowalgo, director of the Aquinas Mission Crusade, mission support is "integrated into the life of the school community, to help students realize their Christian commitment to help other people."

According to Fr. Albert Shamon, whose master's thesis in 1952 details the origins of Aquinas, student support for the missions began to blossom after 1925. A student mission society appeared, and a newspaper, "The Aquinader", was published. Martin Moll, '38, presently vice president of St. John Fisher College for development and communications, was president of the Aquinas Mission Crusade for two years. "We were the number one high school in the U.S. in terms of per capita giving", he asserted with some pride. The diocese of Rochester, under Fr. John Randall, director of the Propagation of the Faith, hosted a nationwide Catholic Students' Mission Convention during Moll's tenure as national president. Mission support at the time, Moll added, was for diocesan missionaries with special emphasis on Aquinas graduates in the field.

Roy Scalera, president of the Mission Crusade in 1959, remembers there was "a lot of spirit in those days" for the missions. Dollar days, Yogi Bear identification cards and the Mission Bouts all helped to raise \$18,902.00. Richard Agostinelli and Thomas Dillon were other officers. Brian Gibson was editor of "The Aquinader" and Mr. Bill McCarthy, director. Fr. Michael Biondi was named missions moderator that year.

The Mission Bouts are still held every year at the school. Dominic Arioli, '73, Director, is scheduling them for Friday, March 7 in the gym.

Under Fr. Dowalgo's leadership, and with the help of Peer Ministry students, Tracy Swetz, Bridget Crossley, Ed Emucane and Fran Barber, Aquinas students have raised close to \$4,000.00 this year. Some of the funds go to local projects like St. Joseph's House of Hospitality. Students, faculty and parents regularly prepare and serve a meal at the House. Sixteen other charities, including Basilian Fathers Missions, Orlam America, St. Joseph's Villa and St. Michael's workshop, shared in the nearly \$6,000.00 Aquinas students raised for the missions last year.

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