

Order bids farewell to 'hallowed ground' after 60 years

By Teresa A. Parsons

They still proudly claim the world as their parish, but Rochester is no longer among the dioceses where Divine Word Missionaries are found.

On July 1, without fanfare, Father Richard Thibeau, SVD, left the diocese to study Spanish in Mexico. He was the last member of the Society of the Divine Word to serve in the diocese since the closing and sale of the former St. Michael's Seminary and Mission House in Conesus.

A news release from the order's headquarters in Techny, Illinois, cited changing priorities as the reason for Divine Word's withdrawal. "Commitments to more than 20 parishes and a high school, college, and major seminary for training Divine Word priests and brothers required the community to opt for reorganization and relocation of available personnel," the release stated.

Last August, the Divine Word order sold approximately 50-60 acres, including the former seminary buildings, to the Trinity Institute and Christ Church of the Restitution.

Brother Bishop Whitlock, the founder and operator of the non-profit religious education institute, said its 15 local members are not affiliated with any particular religious denomination.

"We believe there's an answer in the Bible for any person who wants it," he explained. The group believes that physical illness stems from spiritual causes and that the world is now seeing the realization of what is prophesied in the Book of Revelation. Besides the Conesus community, Brother Whitlock claims his organization has branches in Phoenix, Ariz., Lewiston, Calif., New York City, and Chickasha, Okla.

At present, the group is offering week-long ministry sessions once a month at the Conesus site, according to Brother Whitlock.

Once the seminary buildings were sold, the three remaining Divine Word members — Father Paul Thunich, Father Thibeau and Brother Joseph — moved to Webster, where they lived at 411 Thomar Drive for nearly a year. Brother Joseph and Father Thunich left the area in June, 1986. The order still owns several hundred acres of property surrounding the former seminary in Conesus, according to Father Randall McGraw, a spokesman for the order.

Located on 900 acres overlooking Hemlock Lake, the seminary's imposing buildings once housed hundreds of young men training to serve as missionary brothers and priests throughout the world. Faced with declining vocations from the 1960s on, the order gradually moved its high school, college and novitiate programs to other locations in the U.S.

Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid originally purchased the Conesus property in 1872 and founded the O-Neh-Da Winery, which produced altar wine for use throughout the diocese.

The property became known as the Bishop's farm — a name that persisted even after the Society of the Divine Word purchased it from the diocese in 1924 and established it as a seminary in 1936.

Over the years, the winery also produced an assortment of table wines for sale. Later, it was leased to other producers, although several Divine Word brothers continued to work there.



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Last August, the Trinity Institute and Christ Church of the Restitution paid nearly \$600,000 for the former St. Michael's Seminary and Mission House, according to Brother Bishop Whitlock, the institute's director. The Society of Divine Word Missionaries had owned the buildings for nearly 60 years and still own much of the surrounding property.

The seminary property is also home to a collection of grottoes that depict the mysteries of the Rosary and other devotional scenes. Built by Swiss Brother Fridolin Iten, SVD, they include one series of stone shrines, which line a tunnel through a hillside near the seminary buildings and emerge onto a small valley. Stained-glass skylights illuminate some of the shrines.

Brother Iten managed to complete grottoes dedicated to the joyful and sorrowful mysteries of the Rosary, Our Lady of Lourdes, St. Theresa the Little Flower and the Stations of the Cross. But when he died in 1939, the glorious mysteries remained unfinished. "It was kind of a place of pilgrimage for a time," Father Schifferli said.

Once it closed as a seminary in the late 60s, the order offered the property for sale. Potential buyers ranged from the Xerox Corporation, which considered using the property as an executive "think tank," to an ecumenical religious group seeking to establish a drug treatment program.

Instead, in 1974, the order decided to convert the buildings for use as a retreat center. Divine Word brothers and priests mounted a large-scale renovation project, remodeling the seminary's rooms and restoring the statues and grottoes. They envisioned adding a religious goods store, conference rooms, a movie room and a set of mission displays illustrating the work of the order throughout the world.

Residents also planned to farm the property, raising cattle and crops, including grapes.

Their dreams died hard. "They attempted to run it as a retreat center, but they weren't able to make a go of it financially," Father McGraw explained. "Approximately three years ago, it appeared that it would not be a viable ministry. There was just not enough interest to support it in the area."

The order explored other alternatives, but none appeared to be feasible, Father McGraw said.

Although the seminary has been closed for nearly two decades, one-quarter of the order's American members were trained there. "Conesus is hallowed ground, as many religious vocations were started and nurtured there," the order's statement said. "Divine Word



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Scattered throughout the grounds of the former seminary are shrines and grottoes built by Divine Word Brother Iten Fridolin some 50 years ago.

priests and brothers take with them many wonderful memories and owe a tremendous amount of gratitude for the generosity of the diocese, the area clergy, and the loyal and faithful supporters and friends of St. Michael's Mission House and Divine Word Seminary."

Their presence will be sorely missed in area parishes. "They were good friends, they were good company and they were excellent and necessary help," said Father Jerome Schifferli, pastor of nearby St. Joseph's Parish in Livonia and its mission church, St. William's in Conesus. "They made friends among the clergy and the laity alike . . . They were just good people to be with."

Father Schifferli already depends heavily on Father Robert Kress, retired priest in residence, to serve the two parishes. In addition to the departure of the Divine Word Fathers, the closing of St. Margaret's Parish in Livonia Center several years ago has meant fewer priests and fewer Masses for local residents.

"They were very gracious and very kind in helping to alleviate the priest shortage," Father Schifferli said.

Although 1986 marks the end of the order's ministry in New York state, it is also a new beginning for Father Thibeau. In his late 50s, he is preparing for a new mission assignment in Mexico. That's not unusual, according to Father McGraw.

"We're kind of a strange breed that way. We just pick up and go on to new things," he said.

The Society of the Divine Word was founded in 1875 in Steyl, Holland, by Father Arnold Janssen. Its first U.S. foundation was established in 1900 at Techny, Ill. Today, mission brothers and priests work in more than 50 countries worldwide, including 10 recent foundations in Third World nations. In the U.S., the order staffs Black, Hispanic and Appalachian parishes and serves in hospitals. Members also serve as counselors and work in broadcast ministries.

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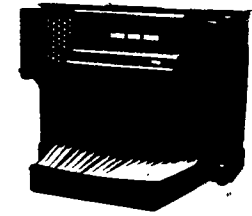


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