

Changing ethical climate challenges Church-spo

By Teresa A. Parsons

Last weekend, Corpus Christi Parish held all the cards in what was perhaps the most crucial game of chance in the history of Corpus Christi School.

On Sunday, Nov. 22, members of the parish voted whether to allow the school community to continue operating twice-weekly bingo games in the church hall. At stake was more than \$70,000 in income — one-third of the school's annual budget.

The vote might have marked the climax of an emotional issue that for several years has pitted parish idealism against the school's struggle to survive.

Instead the results were inconclusive. Sixty-four percent of voters favored allowing bingo to continue in the hall — 2 percent short of the majority required by parish policy to resolve the issue, according to Peg Haslip-Rubley, a parishioner and chairwoman of a committee appointed six months ago to study the bingo issue. Furthermore, many of those who voted in favor of bingo did so under certain conditions, such as stipulating that discussion of the issue continue, she said.

"What that means is that things will remain as is for the time being," Rubley explained. "What I think the committee is now going to say is, 'Let's at least do some cleanup; let's have some better communication . . . and ask the bingo folks for some accountability, and let's not have (the hall) as primarily a bingo hall.'"

"What it came down to, I think, is that people thought the school should stay open with no interference, and bingo should be out of the church hall. But those options are opposed (to one another)," observed Corpus Christi's principal, Sister Eileen Daly, SSJ. "It didn't come to the point where people were saying; 'I don't want bingo in the church, and I don't care about what happens to the school!'"

Corpus Christi's bingo committee was established in response to long-simmering discontent among parishioners who object to the church basement serving as a bingo hall on grounds of principle as well as practicality.

"There has been a group of people who did not think bingo fit into Corpus Christi's vision," Haslip-Rubley said. "It had been brought up three or four times at parish meetings, and always generated heated debate, but nothing ever happened. Finally, someone took the bull by the horns and put a committee together."

The committee's goal was to develop a proposal on bingo to present to members of the parish. Composed of school and parish representatives, the committee began by studying Corpus Christi's recent history — how the school incorporated separately in 1977 after the parish could no longer support it, and how school parents took over bingo games operated by the parish prior to 1978.

Committee members soon realized that although the parish and school share buildings and a parking lot, the people on either side had become virtual strangers.

Only about half-a-dozen school parents are also members of the parish, according to Sister Daly. Whereas most school families are black and live in the immediate neighborhood, parish families are predominantly white and are drawn from a broader area.

Since 1977, school parents and staff have struggled to establish and maintain stable sources of income. Bingo supplies more than one-third of the school's nearly \$250,000 annual budget. Aside from grants and donations, much of the remainder comes from 130 school families, who pay tuition and support other fund raisers.

"We don't want to have bingo either, but we have no choice," said Phillip Malone, a longtime school supporter. "It's almost impossible to go door-to-door and raise \$80,000 a year. You just can't pay teachers that way."

The parish, on the other hand, has edged steadily further out on the limb of faith over the past decade, relying on tithing and sacrificial giving to support an ever-expanding range of outreach programs.

In 1978, Corpus Christi became one of the first diocesan parishes to drop bingo on grounds of principle. Not only did parishioners abandon a proven fund-raiser, but at the same time, they decided to tithe 10 percent of the church's income to outside ministries.

"We agreed that God feels more comfortable in a parish that's generous," explained Father James Callan, pastor. "We found out that you can't outdo God. As soon as we started giving money, more came into the collection."

Dozens of parishes throughout the diocese have since begun tithing programs, but few have followed Corpus Christi's lead in abandoning



The majority of diocesan parishes that support schools pin their financial fortunes, at least in part, on proceeds from bingo, raffles and other forms of gambling.

bingo on principle. One of the only similar instances occurred a year prior to Corpus Christi's 1978 decision, and in a neighboring parish — Blessed Sacrament.

The Monroe Avenue church faced a financial crossroad in the early 1970s: whether to consolidate its school or find a new source of funds to maintain the school independently.

The parish council appointed a three-member committee to study the likelihood of taking over a bingo game, which at the time was being operated in the school hall by an outside organization.

In their report, committee members noted that few of the players who attended bingo at neighboring parishes were parishioners. "Many of these players . . . are addicts of the game, traveling throughout the city to a different game each night," they wrote. "Their life's philosophy is based on wagering and luck."

"The teaching of basic Christian tenets is against gambling, and especially excessive gambling," the report continued. "How can the priests and other teachers of our parish explain Christian principles when weekly gambling takes place in our school building?"

At a meeting in February, 1977, council members upheld the committee's recommendation against establishing bingo, voting 7:2 with two abstentions. Shortly thereafter, Blessed Sacrament School consolidated with St. John the Evangelist School on Humboldt Street.

In lieu of bingo, Blessed Sacrament has developed other fund raisers, including holiday sales of Christmas trees and a biannual Next-to-New Sale that raised more than \$20,000 in 1987.

In February, 1984, the parish also adopted a program known as sacrificial giving. Based on the biblical concept of tithing, sacrificial giving encourages parishioners to "give back" 10 percent of their gross income — half to their parish, and half to other charities.

Sacrificial giving was then relatively new to the Diocese of Rochester, although it had originally been developed some 30 years earlier by Michigan resident G.L. "Jiggs" Lenzi (see related article). The program presented at Blessed Sacrament was based on Lenzi's original idea, but modified by one of his successors, Monsignor Joseph M. Champlin of the Diocese of Syracuse. Monsignor Champlin's contribution to the program was his recognition that it was far more effective when presented to lay people by fellow lay people, like John and Rita Donnelly.

The Donnellys, members of St. Monica's Parish, are one of perhaps half-a-dozen teams in the diocese trained to offer the sacrificial giving program to parishes.

The couple readily admits that they once argued over whether to toss a quarter into the collection basket. Their conversion began during a discussion with members of an interfaith prayer group, whose members reacted with shock to the couple's admission that their parish relied on the proceeds of gambling to keep church and school open. "When we thought about it, we realized that that's not what the Lord wanted," Rita Donnelly recalled.

On the contrary, bingo's proponents claim that the game can be therapeutic and that it provides the elderly in particular with much-needed opportunities to socialize in safe, supervised surroundings.

Although operating bingo is hard work, parishioners and school parents also point to the



Proponents of bingo argue that the game provides not only a source of much-needed funds, but also of

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benefit offered by the camaraderie that develops among team members.

In the case of St. Theresa's Parish in Rochester, the game has actually prompted a renewal of sorts.

Many parishioners foresaw the beginning of the end for the predominantly Polish parish on Mark Street when it lost its resident pastor two years ago and was clustered with neighboring St. Stanislaus Church.

St. Theresa's has not only survived, but even prospered somewhat, and business manager Richard Hannon credits bingo in part for the revival. Proceeds from the game now constitute half of the parish's weekly income. Bingo profits have enabled parishioners to paint the church hall, refinish its wooden floors, completely renovate its kitchen and purchase new tables and chairs. Since then, the building has itself become a source of additional income, as neighborhood groups and families line up to rent it for weddings and other social events.

More importantly, the hall has become a point of pride among parishioners, prompting them to consider a host of new parish programs and activities. "The spirit has turned around," Hannon observed. "The people have done it for themselves."

Parishes like St. Theresa's, where bingo is firmly entrenched, remain far and away the majority in the United States. According to the 1986 Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life, bingo ranked second only to Mass among the best-attended parish activities.

Nevertheless, the trend away from games of chance is hardly limited to an isolated parish or two. Bishop Warren Boudreaux of the Diocese of Houma-Thibadoux, La., has reportedly mandated that all diocesan parishes phase out bingo within the next five years and eliminate parish festivals within the next decade.

At least one of Bishop Matthew H. Clark's consultative bodies, the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC), has appointed a committee to study bingo and other parish fund-raising issues.

The committee, which is currently preparing a questionnaire to gather information from parishes was established after a meeting last May when Tompkins/Tioga Region representative Howard Enkling questioned whether such parish activities contribute to the human cost of alcoholism and compulsive gambling.

"I'm not pitting myself against anything at this point," Bishop Clark responded. "It's a good issue and a tender issue. If there are others in this body interested in pursuing this issue, I am"

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