

Local News

East German responds in person to students' plea for peace

By Teresa A. Parsons

Students in Anthony Marino's seventh-grade religious education class at Holy Cross Parish didn't expect responses when they wrote 136 letters last March to leaders of countries around the world.

They simply presented a plea for world peace.

"We have been raised in an age where world destruction could come at any time," the students wrote. "There is no intelligent reason for this. We are all brothers and sisters on this earth with one God and should share its fruits with one another, not threaten all of our existences."

"The future of the world rests in your hands and hearts," their letter continued. "Our prayers and hopes will be behind you every day and the dreams of every person on this planet will be the strength to guide you."

Marino and the 15 members of his class were pleasantly surprised in May when replies in Spanish, French and the King's English began arriving from kings, presidents, ambassadors and correspondence secretaries of such nations as Botswana, the Philippines, New Zealand and the Netherlands.

"We never expected to see any response," Marino said. "We were just hoping to plant a seed."

Their surprise gave way to astonished excitement earlier this month with the news that a representative from the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) planned to visit Holy Cross to present his country's response in person.

Peter Vincenz, first secretary of the East German embassy in Washington, arrived in Rochester Monday evening, Nov. 30, expressly to deliver a letter from Horst Sindermann, president of the German Democratic Republic's People's Chamber (a parliamentary body).

On hand to greet Vincenz were not only Marino and his former students, but also a gymnasium full of parents, Holy Cross parishioners, students and staff from the parish school, and representatives from the diocesan Pastoral Center and Rochester City Council.

First Secretary Vincenz presented the letter by reading it aloud. "We in the German Democratic Republic hold out our hands to all people who are guided by reason and good will, in order to promote trustful cooperation on behalf of lasting peace on earth and in outer space," he read. "I wish to assure you that the German Democratic Republic will do its utmost in order to stave off a nuclear inferno that would destroy everything created by man in the course of history, in spite of all hardships and sacrifices endured."

The audience responded with warm applause. But moments later, when children were offered a chance to question Vincenz, one youngster asked what the German Democratic Republic was actually doing to bring peace to the world.

"We are already doing everything that we can as a small country (on behalf of peace)," Vincenz replied. "Germany is divided, and the



East German First Secretary Peter Vincenz fields questions from seventh-grade religious education students at Holy Cross Parish during his visit to Rochester November 30.

two mightiest military alliances ever formed are facing each other on German soil!"

Because Germany's history is colored by the devastation of two world wars, he pointed out, East German students are perhaps even more concerned than many Americans are regarding prospects for peace. "We feel very badly about (our warlike history)," Vincenz said, "but we have to study it and form lessons out of it."

On September 1, 1987, for instance, thousands of East Germans participated in a peace march along their country's border with West Germany, he noted. The march, which extended from the Baltic seacoast to Czechoslovakia, commemorated Olof Palme, the former Swedish prime minister, but also demonstrated support for a proposed nuclear-free corridor along the borders of the two German states.

Other children questioned whether East Germans are allowed the freedom to travel and to worship as they wish.

"There are some restrictions," Vincenz conceded, "but travel is getting much easier." As for religious freedom, he explained that while church and state are separated by law in East Germany, the government's constitution guarantees freedom of religion.

Asked to describe his impression of the

United States, the first secretary replied that although he admired the country's accomplishments, he was also disturbed by its extremes of wealth and poverty. "This sometimes makes me glad to be from where I am from," he said.

Only once before, to Vincenz' knowledge, has the East German embassy responded personally to a letter such as the one from Holy Cross Parish. But government officials frequently receive such letters, he noted. "Young people all over the world are thinking about their situation and writing about it," he said. "It is very important for the younger generation to think of their future."

The threat of war and world destruction was the almost unanimous reply of Marino's class last March when their teacher asked them to describe what world issue concerned them most.

"We all felt (peace) was something that needed improving," explained Dave Weissinger, who's now an eighth grader. "It was a challenge."

Marino and his class spent nearly six weeks crosschecking names, addresses and formal titles to produce a mailing list of 136 heads of state. They paid postage costs "a nickel at a time" with the refunds from/donated cans and

bottles.

And although to date the class has received fewer than a dozen responses overall, most members agreed with their pastor, Father Thomas H. Wheeland, that the effort was worthwhile. "You have learned a very, very important lesson — that one person, one class can make a difference in a very, very large and seemingly insurmountable problem of world peace," Father Wheeland said.

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