

Features

Birth of religious-education program renews Bath parish

By Lee Strong

When St. Mary's Parish in Bath closed its school last June, Jim Gallagher, a member of the parish school board, said "Catholic education is over in this area because there's no way for people to get to it."

Just nine months later, Gallagher has changed his mind.

"I was a very angry at that time," he acknowledges. "I don't feel that way now."

What caused his change in attitude, Gallagher says, was "a new sense of life in a community that was once dead." This rebirth began last June with the arrival of Father Robert Hammond as St. Mary's new pastor.

Father Hammond found himself in charge of a parish that had been demoralized not only by the loss of its school, but also by the recent death the previous pastor, Father Albert V. Ryan.

Shortly after he arrived, Father Hammond held an open meeting with the school parents. The feedback he received at the meeting coincided with the results of a questionnaire about parish spending priorities, which Father Ryan had sent out before his death. The results indicated that the parishioners "saw children as the number one priority — far outnumbering anything else because (the parents) were so concerned about their children," Father Hammond explains.

In light of the parish's desires — and his own ideas — Father Hammond put a priority on developing a religious-education program. The school's former principal, Sister Agnes Zimmer, RSM, who had become the parish's religious-education administrator, and Kathy Francis, who had taught at the school for seven years, worked with him to create a five-part religious education program.

The three revamped the traditional Sunday school classes offered for grades kindergarten through 12, providing a standard text and teacher training to the teachers — neither of which had previously been available to St. Mary's catechists. In addition, the program was structured so that each class is now team taught.

They also added a sacramental preparation program involving both parents and children. The program is similar to programs offered in other parishes, but had not been available at St. Mary's before.

The third program they introduced is a monthly family Mass incorporating family-centered activities into the liturgy. During the Mass, each family sits together at a table in the school auditorium. Each family Mass has a theme, and following the homily, parents and children work on projects based on the given topic.

At the most recent family Mass, for example, families made mobiles on which they displayed their family's Lenten promises. When the projects are completed, the children join the celebrant at the altar for the consecration. At Communion, one member of each family brings the bread and wine to the table to be

distributed to other family members. And when the liturgy is over, everyone takes part in a pot-luck dinner.

One original element of the religious-education program Father Hammond introduced is the optional "in-week" classes. Students in grades one through six come to the school once each week for an hour and a half of religious education above and beyond the instruction they receive on Sundays. The in-week program is coordinated with the Sunday school program to supplement, not duplicate the Sunday lessons.

Another original element of the parish's religious education program is the periodic "Super Saturday" sessions for children in grades one through eight. These Saturday-morning programs divide the children into four age-level groups, each of which is led by a parish

teaching reading, writing and arithmetic," the priest remarks. "This is still a school — a religious school."

Father Hammond also points out that the resuscitation of the religious-education program has led to new life for the parish. Attendance at Sunday Masses has increased, the parish has had to add new Masses and communion services during the week, and the Sunday collection has doubled.

Articles written about the parish at the time of the school's closing had "talked about death," he recalls. "I honestly think Catholic people believe in resurrection. I believe this was a resurrection."

He is not alone in that belief. "People feared that when the school closed, things would end, go down the drain," notes William Grimmer, the parish's youth minister.

'You have to decide what's important. If 20 years from now your child is having emotional upsets, (and) you think they'll be able to resolve them by dribbling a basketball or doing a pirouette, fine. Most of us have found Jesus is the answer to our problems, and to our growth and maturity.'

Father Robert Hammond

teenager. Each group discusses and creates craft projects based on a liturgical theme. On the most recent "Super Saturday," the fifth- and sixth-graders made banners based on the stations of the cross.

The Super Saturdays culminate with a prayer service in the church. In addition, some part of the day's program is incorporated into next day's the Sunday liturgy. For example, the stations of the cross banners made by the fifth- and sixth-graders were later hung as decorations in the church, where they currently remain.

In addition to creating a varied religious-education program, the parish hired two professional teachers to work with Sister Zimmer. Kathy Francis now serves as the program's education coordinator and as a full-time teacher for the in-week classes, and Carol von-Hagn, a teacher at St. Joseph's School in Wayland, was hired to teach part-time.

The response to the programs was immediate. On Sunday, Sept. 26, 400 people signed up to be religious education teachers. The Sunday school program grew from 20 students to 129. The family Masses regularly attract approximately 120 people in 35 families. The optional in-week program has 46 students registered.

In contrast, only 49 students had registered for the 1987-88 year at the parish elementary school before the parish decided it should close.

Father Hammond, however, prefers not to say that the school closed.

"We didn't close the school, we're just not

Instead, he says, "there's a broad-based enthusiasm and support for parish activities that didn't exist before."

Grimmer attributes the enthusiasm and support to the arrival of Father Hammond.

"A new pastor brings new ideas, gets more people active and generates enthusiasm," he suggests. "It starts from the top and permeates down."

Father Hammond's strength, Grimmer observes, is that "he lets people take off with ideas, lets them develop them."

Betsy Almeter, who directs the parish folk group, agreed with Grimmer. "(Father Hammond) has been the vehicle," she remarks. "I think there's been a lot of people with many talents that they weren't able to use before. Now they can use them."

Almeter cites the family Masses as typical of the new enthusiasm in the parish. "My kids are eight, six and three," she says. "After we have a family Mass, they ask when the next one will be. They even invite non-Catholic friends to come. They're doing ministry and evangelization just because they enjoy the Masses."

Virginia Stanton, diocesan consultant for religious education for the Southern Tier, likewise observes that Father Hammond had

helped to energize the religious-education program. "He had a lot of great ideas, and he's made religious education in the parish a priority."

Stanton sees two strengths in St. Mary's program. "First of all, they are taking a multifaceted approach to religious education," she explains. "We come to faith and understanding of faith in different ways, and their approach provides a variety of ways."

The second strength is that parishioners involved in the program are attending continuing education classes and receiving training, Stanton notes. "That's part of the secret behind the renewal. That kind of background gives the people a focus. A lot of places have great ideas, but don't know how to go about it."

The school building has become central to the religious education program, as well as other parish activities. Keeping it open is a financial burden, however, which has caused concern among some parishioners, according to Rebecca Desrosiers, a member of the parish council. The parish has had to add a second bingo night to meet expenses, and some members of the parish are displeased by the situation, she asserts.

In addition, Desrosiers notes, "some people feel as if (Father Hammond is) moving too fast" and that some of the additional programs are not needed. "There's a lot of people who feel that Sunday is enough."

Father Hammond acknowledges that some people in the parish are not comfortable with the changes. "I don't think change is ever comfortable for anyone," he says. "Was it necessary? Yes, and I think the parishioners know it."

After the programs had begun, Father Hammond points out, he held an open meeting to give people a chance to complain. Only 20 people showed up, and most of them came to praise the programs, he recalls.

Father Hammond also acknowledges that the programs, the professional teachers, and keeping the school open has added to parish expenses, forcing the parish to hold two bingos. "It's an expensive program, but if you believe in children, it's worth it," he asserts.

"You have to decide what's important. If 20 years from now your child is having emotional upsets, if you think they'll be able to resolve them by dribbling a basketball or doing a pirouette, fine. Most of us have found that Jesus is the answer to our problems and to our growth and maturity," he explains.

The pastor also points out that some programs are still being developed and refined. "We've been flying by the seat of our pants,

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