

Features

Parish blends spiritual, material ministry to neighbors

By Rob Cullivan

In the last two years, St. Augustine's at 420 Chili Ave., Rochester, has evolved from a traditional parish complete with school and convent to a center for community outreach, evangelization and ecumenical cooperation. The parish, which celebrates its 90th anniversary this year, has created a working blend of spiritual and material ministry fostered by neighborhood-oriented approach.

On Monday, Aug. 22, the parish finalized the sale of its convent on Hobart Street to The Women's Place, a program for homeless women, which is operated under the direction of the Catholic Family Center. The agency, a crisis center serving the needs of young mothers and children with no place to stay, was the idea of Sister Eileen Conheady, director of More Options Really Exist, a separate program that assists women prostitutes in finding alternative lifestyles.

A former resident of St. Augustine's Convent, Sister Conheady approached the parish about purchasing the convent building, which had closed in July, 1986. The parish agreed to sell the convent to the family center, which obtained a \$361,000 grant from the New York State Homeless, Housing and Assistance Program in November, 1986, to purchase and rehabilitate the building.

Zoning law forbade the building's use as a boarding house, but Sister Conheady, St. Augustine's pastor, Father William Trott, and the parish council combined efforts to convince the city planning commission and the city council resolved to re-zone the area around the convent in March, 1987, to allow for its use as a shelter. The actual permit to open it as a boarding house was granted in January, 1988.

"We're grateful they (the parish council) waited for two years as opposed to selling it to the highest bidder," Sister Conheady said.

The Women's Place is tentatively planned to open in February, 1989. It will accommodate as many as eight women and five children who will be assisted by a full-time staff 24 hours a day. Sister Conheady noted that The Women's Place will help any single mother being forced to leave a living situation, such as with family or friends.

According to Sister Conheady, the parish will provide whatever services it can to The Women's Place, and Father Trott commented that the parish will be available "spiritually," although there are no specific plans for cooperation.

Another major change in 1986 was the closing of the parish school, at 420 Chili Avenue, which had operated for 80 years. Declining enrollment combined with lack of funds to force the school's demise, but the parish council decided not to sell the building and began seeking tenants for it that summer. Mary Ellen Fischer, who was on the parish council member at that time, recalled that many groups were interested in the facility, but generally only wanted to rent a few rooms. The city school district, however, wanted to open a special-education center on the city's west side, and the school, which is on a bus line, seemed like the ideal location.

"It was the biggest building they could see," Fischer said.

The parish leased the school portion of the building, which also houses the Duffy Memorial Chapel, to the school district, and the building reopened as the Westside Adult Learning Center in August, 1986, with June Rousseau as its coordinator. Four hundred students are now enrolled in four different programs in adult, refugee and remedial education. Rousseau is enthusiastic about the relationship between the center and the parish.

"Father Trott, our landlord, is just marvelous. Any time we need extra space, he tries to help us," she said, noting that the parish also lends chairs and cooking utensils when needed.

The parish continues to use the building for weekly bingo, and some of the learning center's students volunteer to work at St. Theresa Center, the parish's neighborhood outreach house at 370 Chili Ave., next to the church.

Although the parish has actively aided community programs with which it is not officially associated, St. Theresa Center is the focus of the parish community's social concern. Coordinated by parishioner Paula Dumont, St. Theresa's occupies a house once inhabited by parish employees.

According to Dumont, Father Trott, who regularly welcomes homeless and needy men into his rectory for whatever assistance he can offer, felt that dividing his time between administering the parish and serving its needy was becoming too stressful. St. Theresa's was devised to enable the parish's laity to work with



Volunteers and clients share the hospitality of St. Theresa's Center, as Madeline Schrieb (left), Pat Bauman and Vernon Carter gather around the kitchen table for some coffee and a chat.

the poor. It opened in June of this year, and several parishioners have volunteered to help on a regular basis.

Like the rectory, St. Theresa's emphasizes hospitality. Most of its clients are women 35- to 55-years-old who have children and are suffering from such problems as illiteracy, drug and alcohol dependency, mental illness, homelessness, unemployment and financial difficulty. Many have been physically and mentally abused, and have been unsuccessful in dealing with the social-service system because their problems hamper their ability to deal with people and to take advantage of what the system has to offer.

A smaller number of men also come to St. Theresa's, though most don't stay for long, given their long histories of alcoholism and joblessness.

"They get a meal to tide them over to their next drunk," Dumont said, noting that St. Theresa's helps all who come to it in a non-judgmental manner, hoping that eventually they will respond.

For those who do stay, St. Theresa's offers a varied program designed to help them to break the poverty cycle. Each weekday, workers give clients food, sell them clothing at minimal prices, help them with problems in dealing with social-service agencies, aid them in obtaining medical care and give them friendship. When a need cannot be met, the center will refer a client to an agency or charitable organization that is better ready to handle it.

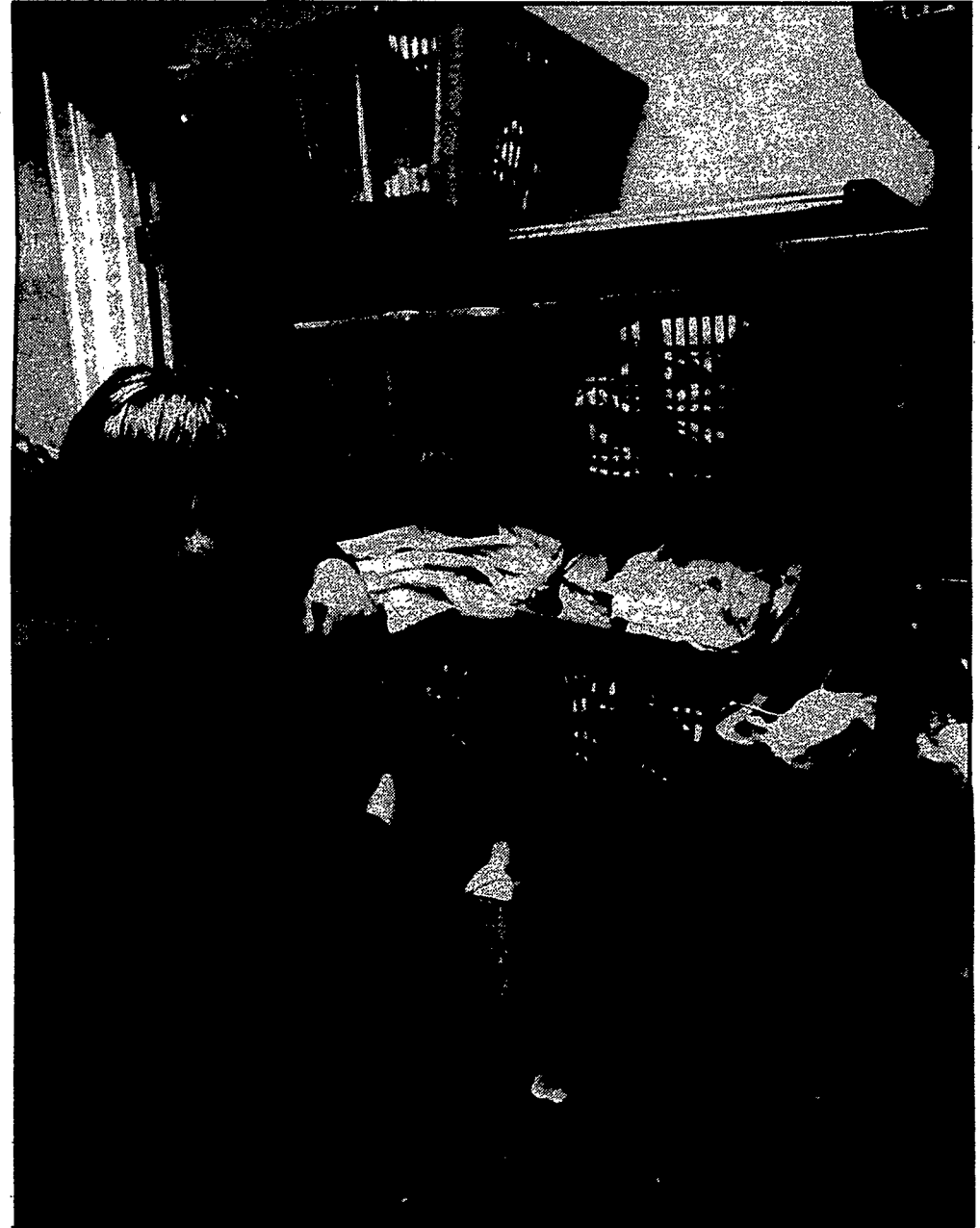
All able clients are asked to help with such housekeeping duties as folding clothes, cleaning the kitchen and doing yard work. In this way, the clients are active participants in St. Theresa's work, some of them eventually becoming regular volunteers themselves. As soon as a client has mastered a task, he or she is encouraged to teach it to another newcomer in order to create a cycle of learning and teaching in which all may participate.

Clients and volunteers meet each day to discuss issues affecting their lives, and prayer is a regular part of each session, although no one is compelled to pray. But Deacon candidate David Palma, a worker who will serve on at St. Theresa's advisory board this fall, reports that most clients join in the prayer services. He recalled an emotional session in which one client offered to pray for another man present.

"He said that no one had ever prayed for him before," Palma said, noting he has often "been overwhelmed" by the character of the people who come to St. Theresa's.

"I remember one woman who was pregnant and overdue, and who walked three miles in the rain to secure food for her other five children," the deacon said.

The atmosphere of encouragement at St. Theresa's does not only extend to its clients, as the case of volunteer worker Madeleine Schrieb attests. Dumont persuaded Schrieb to



Geraldine Vary, a volunteer at St. Theresa's Center, puts away clothing to be sold to clients at minimal prices.

pursue a high school equivalency diploma even though she had dropped out of school in her youth. Nancy Litten, another volunteer, tutored Schrieb for one and a half months before the 58-year-old woman passed the equivalency exam in July, 1987. Now she is planning to attend Monroe Community College to study human services as soon as she is assured of financial aid from the college.

Schrieb said she uses her story as an example to encourage others who come to St. Theresa's. "You're never too old to learn," she said.

"You're never too old to return to the faith," could be the slogan of St. Augustine's evangelization program, which concentrates on reaching out to neighborhood Catholics who

aren't regular church-goers. Directed by Sister Campion Bush, the program was inspired by an evangelization workshop Father Trott attended in Florida.

After studying a similar program at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, in May, 1987, Sister Bush and a parishioner, Kay Egan, returned to establish five three-person teams that go into the neighborhood twice a month to talk to newcomers to the area and Catholics who may have been away from the Church for some time. Some of the teams' visits stem from referrals by other parishioners, while others are to residents who indicated on a parish census that they no longer go to church.

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