

Features

Basilian fathers still shape Fisher

By Rob Cullivan

Father Joseph Trovato, former chaplain at St. John Fisher College, lived on the second floor of Ward Dormitory when it opened in 1963 to house the college's first residential students. Down the hall resided Father John Cavanagh, Fisher's first director of residence and a fellow member of the Congregation of St. Basil.

As Father Trovato recalls, the duties of the two priests were clearly delineated. "He would call (students) on the carpet, and I would comfort them afterwards," Father Trovato quipped.

Combining academic and social discipline with an attention to each student's individual needs has been the goal of the Basilian community since the college's founding in 1948. In its 40 years, the college has changed from a Basilian institution to an institution influenced — but not operated — by the congregation.

Fisher's founders — a coalition of numerous civic and business and religious leaders spearheaded by Basilian Father Hugh J. Haffey and Rochester's Bishop James E. Kearney — established the school for young men unable to leave the Rochester area to pursue higher education. In his book *The Beginnings of St. John Fisher College*, Haffey wrote that he had dreamed of such a college while teaching at Aquinas Institute in the late 1930s and early '40s as a male counterpart to Nazareth College, which had already been founded in 1924 to serve the women of the diocese.

Father Cavanagh, a professor of English, arrived at Fisher in 1956. He recalls that students and faculty would meet at 4 p.m. each day in the cafeteria in the basement of Kearney Hall, the school's only building at the time. Sharing coffee and doughnuts, the students and faculty would converse in a lively manner. "I did as much teaching there as I did in class," Father Cavanagh said of the Kearney coffee hours.

The college's second president, the late-Father Charles Lavery, impressed his fellow Basilians with his vigor and enthusiasm. Along with Father Joseph Dorsey, the dean, Father Lavery helped the campus expand from two buildings to 12, change its board of trustees from a Basilian body to one composed of various lay and religious leaders, and become a co-educational institution.

"Father Lavery had a real good insight as to where to go," observed Father John A. Poluikis, professor of mathematics and computer science. Father Poluikis, also a Basilian, noted that the establishment of Monroe Community College in the early '60s signaled the end of commuter-student dominance at Fisher. "A lot who went to MCC would have gone to Fisher," he said, noting that this fact gave Father Lavery an incentive to push for a dormitory on campus.

Fathers Lavery and Dorsey were both good public speakers and formed an effective combination, noted Father Poluikis, who pointed out that the administrators' official duties weren't their only concern. "In spite of their busy schedules, they were always generous with their time," counseling students both day and night.

One of those they counseled was a commuter student from 1963-67. A young idealist, Norman Tanck participated in the college's efforts to become more ecumenical in response to the mandate of Vatican II. The young student would travel into the city of Rochester to take part in ecumenical prayer services at Protestant churches. "Even going into a Protestant church was a really momentous thing," the former student recalled.

Despite the college's all-male, mostly Catholic makeup, Tanck found it liberal in ideas and experience. "I think there's a myth about all-male Catholic colleges," he said. "I found at Fisher opportunities to break out of my world into other worlds."

One of the worlds Tanck broke into was the

Basilian community, which he decided to enter in his senior year. He returned to Fisher as a deacon in 1973-77, and today he is Father Tanck, Fisher's dean of students.

Throughout the 1960s, Fisher experienced the alienation from traditional values that shook other campuses, yet Father Cavanagh credits the Fisher students of that era with demonstrating restraint unheard of at other schools. "(Students) directed their anger at the Vietnam War effort, not at the campus," Father Cavanagh recalls.

Nonetheless, the war and students' fear of the draft made teaching difficult. "It's pretty hard to dwell on metaphysics and calculus if your mind is on something else," he said.

Father Trovato remembered the war as a time when he would comfort bereaved families of Fisher students killed in combat. "It was awfully hard to find out in the middle of the night that one of our graduates was killed," he said.

As the sixties closed, the college ceased to be a Catholic institution, becoming a private school in 1968 in order to qualify for state aid. Other changes included the end of the dress code in 1969 and the admission of women in 1971.

Despite the changes, Fisher maintained its tradition of concern for its students. Mitchell Dowalgo attended Fisher from 1970-74 and, like Tanck, was inspired to join the Basilians following his graduation. The Basilians' emphasis on respect for the individual impressed him. "I didn't feel I was going into a community where I would be drowned," he said. Today, he is Father Dowalgo, Fisher's director of campus ministry.

As the era of student activism waned and the economy slumped, preparation for a job after graduation became more important to students than expanding one's intellectual base. Fisher, like many colleges in the nation, saw students shift away from majors in the liberal arts toward business and management-related concentrations. Student volunteer efforts also declined. "We fought to be on committees," Father Tanck remarked of his years as a Fisher student. "Now we beg students to be on committees."

By the beginning of the eighties, Fisher's Basilian influence was likewise diminishing. The college's faculty was increasingly composed of lay people, many of the departments



Father Joe Trovato has been with St. John Fisher for 29 years.

having no Basilians at all. Today, only six faculty members are Basilian priests and, according to Father John Lee, professor of anthropology, the few young Basilians ordained each year seem to be more interested in chaplaincies than in graduate studies that lead to careers in teaching.

"I was inspired by my teachers to become a priest — and if I became a Basilian, I would become a teacher," Father Lee said. "It's difficult to get (younger Basilians) interested in long years of study. They want to get to work right away." Interestingly, Fisher's three youngest Basilians, Fathers Dowalgo, Tanck, and Paul English, assistant dean of students, exemplify the trend Father Lee pointed out.

Coupling the low number of Basilians on the faculty with the fact that Fisher's current president, William Pickett, is a layman, one might conclude that the Fisher-Basilian connection is nearing an end. Unless, of course, one asks Father Tanck.

"I think we needed a lay president to revive the Basilian tradition," Father Tanck said, observing that the college had become "provincial and insular" during the early '80s. "We needed an outsider to change the administration," he remarked.

And according to several priests and faculty members, the emphasis Pickett has placed on reviving student volunteerism — including a tutoring program for students at Rochester's Jefferson High School — may be one way in which the Basilian tradition will survive at Fisher.



Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal
Basilian Father Mitch Dowalgo, chaplain at St. John Fisher, and campus ministry coordinator Chris Tanner discuss preparations for a special Parents' Weekend Mass.

Elmira school to set up new corporate identity

By Rob Cullivan

In a move to gain greater control over finance and policy-making decisions, Notre Dame High School in Elmira is incorporating separately from its long-time sponsor, the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester, N.Y., Inc., according to Sister Mary Walter Hickey, school principal.

Pending approval from the state education department in Albany, the new incorporation will create a board of trustees to replace the board of governors who previously administered Notre Dame. The trustees have the

right to determine school policy and the right to appoint a school principal — the latter being a power previously reserved to the Sisters of Mercy. The trustees will also be able to take out loans of up to \$100,000 for the school without consulting the congregation.

Sister Hickey believes that the decision is a sign that the Sisters of Mercy recognized Notre Dame's "coming of age."

"We should be able to have control of our own destiny," she said.

The principal hopes that local involvement in the school may increase with the new sense of local "ownership." But she also expects that the Sisters of Mercy will continue to support and be interested in the school.

Other secondary schools in the diocese are incorporated in a variety of manners. Our Lady of Mercy is still a part of the Sisters of Mercy corporation. Sister Judith Herberle, school principal, said that currently there are no plans to change the school's status. "This particular structure — for us, it has worked very well," she said.

Other high schools are also owned directly by religious orders and congregations. Cardinal Mooney in Rochester is owned by the Brothers of the Holy Cross, headquartered in White Plains, N.Y. Bishop Kearney, also in Rochester, is owned by the Christian Brothers Congregation based in New Rochelle, N.Y. The Sisters of St. Joseph own and operate Nazareth Academy, also located in Rochester.

Rochester's McQuaid Jesuit High School is an independent corporation with a board of trustees operated under the auspices of the Jesuit order, explained Kathy Kruggel, a staff member in the principal's office. DeSales High School in Geneva is a separate institution under the auspices of the diocese, which must approve any loans the school wants to take out, according to Edward Smaldone, president of the board of trustees.

Aquinas Institute in Rochester is owned and operated by a lay board of trustees who contract with the Congregation of Basilians to teach in the school, according to Father Harold Gardner, school principal.

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