

School closing stirs up simmering conflicts

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Some have deemed them heroes for standing up to their pastor, but one person considers them "crybabies," and another bemoaned their actions as an unnecessary delay of the inevitable.

"They" are the six parish council members at St. Anne's Church, Rochester, who have vehemently protested the diocesan-approved closing of the parish school. The closing continues to divide the parish, and has brought to the surface a bitter and long-standing conflict between the pastor, who sought diocesan approval for his plan to close the school, and several council members.

Before Masses during the weekend of March 11-12, parish council members who opposed the closing passed out a statement claiming the pastor, Monsignor William Roche, had depicted them as "irresponsible and emotional" to the parish, and that he had accepted "no responsibility for any problems leading up to our present situation."

The statement also asked parishioners to attend a meeting scheduled for Wednesday evening, March 15, in the school hall to discuss the situation. The statement was signed by Joan Powell, parish council president; Ronald LaMagna, parish council vice chairman; and council members Thomas Cantin, Jerry Reynolds, Ruthann Hassett and Carol Bernard.

On Feb. 25, the diocese announced that St. Anne's School would close in June. The decision was made despite the fact that on Feb. 13 the parish council had voted 6-3, with three abstentions, to keep the school open through June, 1990.

Parish council members said they wanted the school to remain open through next year in order to have it considered in the reconfiguration of the southeast quadrant, one of four quadrants that make up the Monroe County Catholic School System. The Southeast Planning Board, one of four groups planning the future of Monroe County Catholic schools, has yet to release its consolidation plan.

But keeping the school open through June, 1990, would only increase parish indebtedness and declining enrollment, according to Monsignor Roche. Following the council's vote to keep the school open, Monsignor Roche went to the diocese for approval to close the school.

On Feb. 18, officials from the diocesan Division of Education and the office of Bishop Matthew H. Clark met with the pastor and four other parish representatives, including council president Powell. At that time, the diocesan officials received separate proposals from the pastor and the council. According to Father John Mulligan, moderator of the Pastoral Center, the diocese chose Monsignor Roche's proposal over the council's based on a realistic assessment of the school's future.

"The size and location of St. Anne's made it unlikely that it would be factored in the plan of the southeast quadrant," Father Mulligan said, noting little would be gained by keeping the school open through next year.

The presence of asbestos in the school, while presenting no immediate threat, could be also be a problem in the future, Father Mulligan remarked, noting that the diocese conducted testing in the school prior to the Feb. 18 meeting.

Among other reasons for the closing were diocesan officials' belief that enrollment would decrease following enactment of a proposed tuition increase included in the parish council's plan.

Currently, children from St. Anne's are being encouraged to register at St. Thomas More and Our Lady of Lourdes/Seton Junior High in Brighton for the next school year. According to Monsignor Roche, the parish will have to pay a subsidy of \$80,000 to the Brighton schools, a figure

which, when subtracted from the \$140,000 subsidy the parish is currently contributing toward its own school, would mean a savings of \$60,000.

On the other hand, the six council members claim that by closing the school, the parish would lose a substantial amount of the money now raised by bingo, and other fundraising efforts. Carol Bernard, one of the council members opposed to the closing, also oversees the parish's bingo operations, an endeavor she said is threatened by the school closing. Bernard said more than half her volunteer workers have indicated they will quit once the school is closed.

The six parish council members said they would have accepted the school closing had it come as part of a move to consolidate the southeast quadrant, but that they wanted one more year to allow for a smooth transition from the parish-based school system to the quadrant-supported school system.

The school might not have been closed this year if the diocese had not been prompted by Monsignor Roche. Father Mulligan said, although he noted the parish's financial problems would have concerned the diocese. The pastor's actions, and the diocesan support for them, have infuriated the six council members who wanted the school to stay open.

Those six members feel they have been snubbed by their pastor and by the diocese in the decision-making process and, in their statement, they accused Monsignor Roche of violating the parish constitution when he overrode the council's decision.

According to parish council member Jerry Reynolds, Monsignor Roche ignored certain steps he should have taken following his decision to oppose the council. First, Reynolds said, the constitution states that the pastor must tell the council of his decision within one week of the council meeting. Then, he must submit a written statement explaining his move one week before the next scheduled council meeting. Finally, if two-thirds of the council vote to appeal the pastor's decision, it must go to the bishop for arbitration, he said.

Reynolds said that when he confronted Monsignor Roche with the matter, the pastor "just brushed it aside." Monsignor

Roche has declined to comment on the matter.

But the pastor's defenders have not remained silent. Charlie Lalka, chairman of the parish financial committee, called the parish council members "crybabies," and challenged several assertions the members made in their public statement.

The council members' statement claims that Lalka told the council at an October, 1988, meeting that the parish had no major financial problems. Lalka, however, said he did not attend that meeting. He also said the parish budget contained a deficit of about \$27,000 for fiscal year 1988-89, and that, even with increased revenue from tuition and fundraising efforts for the school, the parish would incur another deficit of about \$26,000 for fiscal year 1989-90.

Lalka said the two consecutive deficits are reason enough to close the school. Citing a line from the parish council release — "The pastor has chosen to abandon your school" — Lalka commented: "I don't see where it's abandonment. I don't see how you can handle two deficits in a row." The school could only remain open by "totally wiping out" the parish's savings, he said.

The future of those savings and, indeed, the future of the parish, seems to be hanging in the balance. A recent finance committee meeting illustrates the tension between the opposing fractions in the controversy.

On Monday, March 6, Reynolds, Cantin and LaMagna attended an evening meeting of the finance committee. According to accounts of the meeting given by Lalka, the three council members and Powell, Monsignor Roche refused to participate in the meeting until Reynolds, LaMagna and Cantin left.

The three council members refused to leave, saying that, as parishioners, they had a right to attend the meeting. The pastor then went to the rectory, asking anyone who wanted to conduct the meeting to meet him there. Following the pastor's departure, Lalka conducted some more business and then asked Powell to tell the council members to leave.

Powell said she refused Lalka's request, saying that he was in charge of the meeting. Lalka then announced that the finance

council would go into an executive session — which is not open to parishioners — in the rectory.

Powell said she stayed behind for a while before going to the rectory, then left shortly thereafter, though she declined to say why.

Lalka attributed Monsignor Roche's actions to the heat of the moment, but said the pastor's handling of the six parish council members over the last few months hasn't always been praiseworthy. "Perhaps Monsignor could've been more tactful in the way he responded to the parish council ... but I guess it shows he's human."

Other observers are not so sympathetic. Pat Godleski, a part-time art and kindergarten teacher at St. Anne's, said that the pastor is "acting like a dictator."

"You're going to read about a parish closing in 10 years, and it's going to be St. Anne's if they keep Monsignor Roche there," she said.

Parish council members also could use a little more tact, according to one parishioner. Referring to the parish council's statement protesting the closing, Jean McClure said she was disappointed in the statement released by the parish council members. She said the parish council's actions are dividing the parish, and noted that LaMagna, in particular, "has always been very volatile."

Another parishioner, Marvin Parker, said that school closings are "happening all around us. What makes St. Anne's so unique?" Parker also said that as an older person on a fixed income, he couldn't just keep giving more and more to the school each year.

But another senior citizen had a different perspective. Jean Cutt, whose four grandchildren attend St. Anne's, said that Monsignor Roche has continually downgraded the school in his homilies, creating an atmosphere of antipathy towards its existence. She also considered the prospect of losing the school more fearsome than spending additional parish revenue on it.

"If we lose these children," Cutt said, "parents are going to go, so older people lose out in the end anyway."

Bishop approves five northeast school closings

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Bishop Matthew H. Clark has approved the Northeast Quadrant Planning Board's proposal to close five schools in its region.

However, the nine-member Commission on Reorganization of Catholic Schools still needs more time to discuss the planning board's proposal to establish a junior high program on the premises of Bishop Kearney High School, according to William Pickett, commission chairman.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help and St. Philip Neri in Rochester and St. Salome in Irondequoit will close in June. Annunciation in Rochester and St. James in Irondequoit will close in June, 1990.

The plan also establishes a uniform tuition rate for the northeast quadrant. The rate for families already registered in a northeast quadrant school is:

- \$1,095 for one child.
- \$1,295 for two children.
- \$1,495 for three children.

The rate for families that have not previously been registered in a quadrant school is:

- \$1,195 for one child.
- \$1,395 for two children.
- \$1,595 for three children.

Father George Norton, diocesan spokesman, said that for school year 1989-90, parishes may provide subsidies to families who are unable to pay the standard tuition rate. Families are also eligible for diocesan tuition subsidies.

Father Norton also noted that the com-

mission had delayed in recommending the proposal for a junior high at Bishop Kearney because the following questions remain unanswered: what the school's start-up and operating costs would be; whether it is advisable to mix junior high students with high school students; how accessible the proposed junior high would be to urban children; and whether Bishop Kearney

would be favored by students of the junior high when they chose Catholic high schools.

The commission is currently meeting with pastors and principals to explain the approved northeast quadrant plan. The commission will consider the proposed junior high program at its next meeting on March 23, Father Norton said.

Meeting

Continued from page 4

According to Cardinal Bernardin's report, one particular issue "elicited much concern and discussion" — the role of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and its relationship to Consortium Perfectae Caritatis, a separate organization of women religious who are opposed to what they consider improper reforms since the Second Vatican Council.

Participants agreed that "somehow a reconciliation must be brought about" between the two groups, Cardinal Bernardin said.

• On family issues, Cardinal Edouard Gagnon, head of the Pontifical Council for the Family, said he was generally optimistic about U.S. pastoral efforts. But he urged bishops to guard against contraceptive methods getting into church natural family planning programs. He also said the bishops should help fight school-based clinics for abortion referral and contraception.

• U.S. Archbishop John P. Foley, who heads the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, suggested religious radio talk shows and inspirational television spots among other means of reaching the estimated 70 million "unchurched" and 15 million inactive American Catholics through U.S. media.

Cardinal Szoka responded that air time is expensive and many people doubt that television really changes people's views.

Throughout the meeting, the pope listened intently — hand on chin — and occasionally asked the U.S. speakers to go more slowly so the translators could keep up, according to those present.

The pope's final talk emphasized the "faith-filled history of the church" in the United States and its "generous missionary spirit."

Archbishop John L. May of St. Louis, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, said in a closing toast at a meal offered by the pope: "These have been most encouraging days for us, and we hope that we have shown you once again our total cooperation and loyalty."