

Authors mix religion and humor to entertain

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

CORNING — Remember the days when you wondered if sisters had hair beneath their veils?

When Limbo was more than a dance? When you considered making room in your bed at night for your guardian angel?

Mary Jane Frances Cavolina Meara, Jeffrey Allen Joseph Stone, Maureen Anne Teresa Kelly and Richard Glen Michael Davis did more than remember those days: They wrote about them.

The resulting book, *Growing Up Catholic: An Infinitely Funny Guide for the Faithful, the Fallen and Everyone in-Between*, topped the best seller list for several months in 1986. A sequel, *More Growing Up Catholic*, was published in 1986, and the two books together have sold more than one million copies to date.

Kelly believes the reason for the book's continuing success is simple: "It's a testimony to the size of Catholic families."

She and Davis were in Corning Saturday, April 1, to participate in All Saint's Academy's fund-raiser, "Growing up Catholic — a Gala Event." Along with an hour-long performance of material from the books by the two authors, the evening included a speech by Monroe County Executive Thomas Frey, a graduate of Corning Catholic schools, and a raffle. Altogether, the evening netted more than \$20,000 for the academy.

Impetus for the fund-raiser came last fall when the three parishes that support the school — St. Mary's, St. Patrick's and St.

Vincent DePaul — found their portions of the budget too much of a burden. The budget was revised, and the school faced the task of raising an additional \$20,000.

A Fund Development Committee formed in December to find ways to raise the money. In a community the size of Corning, however, the committee faced competition from dinners, raffles and fashion shows offered by such established charities as the Rotary, the Lions Club and the United Way. "It's difficult to find something a little different," said committee member Mary Lanahan.

While looking through a speakers' bureau catalogue, committee members discovered that the authors of *Growing Up Catholic* were available. Several committee members had read the book, and convinced their colleagues to hire the authors to speak, and to make "Growing up Catholic" the theme of the evening. "We really wanted to entertain people ... instead of getting a speaker who would put a hush over the evening pushing the idea of Catholic education," Lanahan said.

Kelly and Davis didn't disappoint the committee, Lanahan said after the performance. "I think everyone had a good time," she remarked.

The two authors noted that on the whole, audiences react positively to their show, just as readers responded well to the books. "The whole thing about *Growing up Catholic* is that it's a shared experience," Davis said. "We just sort of relive it with them."

"Reliving" their own experiences of growing up Catholic is, in fact, how the



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier
Maureen Kelly and Richard Davis, two of the authors of "Growing Up Catholic," were in Corning recently.

four authors came to write the first book. While working for the same book publisher in the early 1980s, they spent get-togethers and after-work parties parties growing up as Catholics during the 50s, 60s and 70s. "The thing we found interesting is even though we were from different parts of the country, it was remarkable how similar our experiences were," Davis said.

At the same time, such books as the *Preppie Handbook* were on the bookstands, so the group decided to write a Catholic handbook. They discovered more

than enough material. "So much had changed in the church," Kelly said. "We were in the cusp."

Work on the book took a year. The four began by outlining topics they thought should be included in a Catholic handbook, ranging from birth to what happens after death. Each author then worked on several sections, sharing what they had written at weekly or bi-weekly sessions, offering suggestions and additions, and editing one another's writing to ensure a consistent style.

In gathering stories and memorabilia, such as report cards and First Communion pictures, for the book, the four talked to members of what Kelly described as "the old Catholic network." They also tested the manuscript with "grandparents and school nuns" to make sure that nothing they had written was offensive, she explained. "We wanted it to be gentle. There's always a danger when you mix religion and humor."

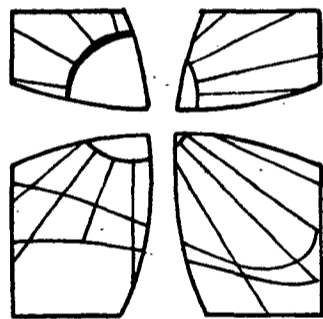
In writing the book, Davis said, the authors were careful to avoid outright mockery or doctrinal matters. "We're not theologians, and the church is eternally grateful for that," he remarked. As an example, he pointed to the section of the book on the Mass, which talks about "the trappings of the Mass, not the Mass itself." Thus they focused on such topics as where the organizer's husband, parish council members or unsuccessful salesmen might sit, or what to do if you can't find your pew after Communion.

After the book's publication, a lecture agent contacted the authors about speaking. Kelly, Davis and Stone agreed, and they put together a show including material from their books and from current events. When Pope John Paul II was in the United States, for example, they included more pope-related pieces. Currently, they describe a mock letter from a bishop about pop-singer Madonna, who recently drew flack for a video showing her dancing in a church while dressed in black lingerie.

As part of the performances, Kelly dresses in a plaid school uniform while Davis wears a uniform-like blue suit and white shirt. In addition to material from the book, the show includes pop quizzes with such questions as "What does *et cum spir-*

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Challenge to regain baptism's symbolic richness



GROSS OF GLORY LIFE IN CHRIST

By Father Robert J. Kennedy
Guest columnist

When my young friend Collene was baptized as an infant 10 years ago, only her parents, godparents and I knew ahead of time that she would be baptized by immersion. So when the ceremony reached that moment, her family and all who were gathered watched wide-eyed as her mother and I lowered Collene into the water — which was at mother-approved temperature, of course. As if on cue, Collene splashed and kicked while I spoke the words of baptism.

Immediately after the rite was over, her maternal grandmother, who is always up-front about what she is thinking and feeling, exclaimed: "She really died and rose!"

Those few words and her wonder caught the essence of the act of baptism, and echoed the words spoken centuries before by one of the bishops of the early church. "The font is the tomb in which you were buried; it is also the womb from which you were born." In the chaotic waters of baptism, we die with Christ and are buried with him — one of the meanings of "to baptize" is "to drown." In the living waters of baptism, we are born anew. As the Holy Spirit hovers over the baptismal waters, we are given birth as the new creation in Christ.

Paul also summarizes this in a few words: "Are you not aware that we who are baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Through baptism into his death we were buried with him so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the

glory of the Father, we too might live a new life" (Romans 6:3-4). "If anyone is in Christ, that one is a new creation. The old order has passed away: now all is new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

But how are we to be drawn into and understand this rich and joyous meaning when the symbolic actions of baptism are so impoverished? Can dying with Christ and new birth in him be experienced if we pour only a trickle of water on the foreheads of the baptized? Can we have any sense of the living waters by which we enter eternal life if there is not a single font in our church large enough for the immersion of infants?

When the revised rites of baptism began to be published in 1969, immersion was restored as the preferred form over the affusion or pouring, because it is "the fuller or more appropriate symbolic action of baptism." Immersion means going into the water, although not necessarily under the water — "submersion." By reinstating this method, the church was not "becoming like the Baptists," as I heard one person complain. We were returning to the earlier and longer tradition of the church, which the Baptists may have been preserving better than Roman Catholics.

Since the restoration of immersion, parishes have tried a variety of means to reintroduce the practice. There has been a run on large plastic salad bowls used in restaurants so that infants may be immersed. Collene was baptized in one of these. And everything from hot tubs to cow troughs have been used for the immersion of adults at the Easter Vigil. However, these "solutions" are half-hearted and embarrassing. It is time for all the parishes in the diocese to place fonts in their churches which allow for infants to be immersed and adults to at least have water poured over their entire body.

A font is as necessary to a church as the altar and lectern. Like the altar and lectern, it should be designed with grace and beauty and be placed appropriately and permanently. For these three points — the Font, the Table of God's word, and the Table of the Body of Christ — are the central focuses of the faith community's identity and action: we are members of the Body of Christ and we serve as midwife at the birth of new

members into our community; we are both hearers and proclaimers of the good news; and we are one in communion with Christ as we go forth to feed the hungers of the world. But without a font in our midst, we lose touch with our identity, and our role as evangelizers and servants is not watered and refreshed.

Our life in Christ is born in the font and so the baptismal spaces in our churches ought to symbolize the mysteries celebrated there. The restoration of immersion was called for 20 years ago. Which will be the first of our churches to meet, at long last, its challenge?



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