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# CATHOLIC COURIER

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## Pope's letter attracts mixed local reactions

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Sister Sheila Walsh, SSJ, was blunt about her reaction to reading Pope John Paul II's letter, "Religious Life in the United States."

"My blood pressure went up to 400," she said.

Sister Dolores Banick, IHM, the Diocese of Rochester's vicar for religious, summarized the reaction of diocesan religious with whom she has discussed the document as, "We've moved beyond some of the things it stated."

Other local men and women religious responded in varied ways to the letter,

tee studying religious compensation, said that by recognizing the LCWR, the letter suggests that efforts "to try to hang on to what was" are growing less effective.

"I think (the letter) recognizes that American religious are sound and committed and undaunted," asserted Sister Joan Sobala, SSJ, pastoral assistant at St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester. "(Pope John Paul) never ascribes to us any ill will and self-centeredness."

Despite her praise, however, Sister Sobala also found much to criticize in the letter. "There's something really unsettling about the report," she observed. "In these brief pages, the whole truth has not been



*"When we try to put everyone in one mold, one way of doing things, there will be a revolt. It's our diversity that is our greatest gift."*

Sister Sheila Walsh, SSJ

Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

Sisters Sheila Walsh and Shirley Pilot, real estate agents, are among religious exploring alternative apostolates.

released March 29. At best, some called it "positive" and "optimistic," but other assessments included "off target," and even "insignificant."

The papal letter was written in response to a study of religious life in the United States conducted by a special papal commission headed by Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco. In the letter, the pope said the commission was realistic in assessing both the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. religious.

Among the strengths Pope John Paul singled out were "generous and varied service, greater prayer life, eminent professional competence, a serious response to renewal." At the same time, he pointed to a number of weaknesses, including "a decline in vocations, decreasing numbers and aging membership, inadequate theological foundation, weakened presence in or absence from the traditional apostolates, insufficient public witness, cases of excessive introspection, radical feminism and polarizations."

Perhaps the letter's most significant action, according to Sister Jacqueline DeMars, RSM, was to reaffirm the Leadership Conference of Women Religious as the body that speaks for women religious in the United States. During the 1970s, conservative groups such as the Consortium Perfectae Caritatis voiced opposition to the LCWR, claiming that it was too liberal.

Sister DeMars, who served on a commit-

caught. There are issues and realities of our life that have been dealt with in a sentence or a phrase, and you don't really catch the full import, the depth of understanding that we have."

Father Norman Tanck, superior of the Basilian Fathers at St. John Fisher College, said that although the letter "pointed out some areas we needed to be cautious about" — such as spirituality and prayer life — it reveals an inadequate "understanding of American culture."

By Teresa A. Parsons  
Associate editor

ROCHESTER — Officials of the Diocese of Rochester and Cardinal Mooney High School announced Wednesday that the Greece high school will close at the end of the current school year.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark and Brother Paul Rahaim, CSC, provincial of the Holy Cross Brothers and president of the school's board of trustees, revealed plans to close the school, located at 800 Maiden Lane, during a jointly held news conference Wednesday morning, April 26.

"The decision is the result of a steady decline in enrollment over the past three years and an operating deficit of \$200,000 per year over the same period, despite efforts to cut expenses," said Brother Ra-

As an example, Father Tanck cited the pope's contention that religious in this country do not give sufficient public witness. "I think we have quite prominent public witness," he said. "I think we have religious men and women involved in the grass-roots level, and I think it's well within our apostolates."

Religious in the United States have a history as innovators, the Basilian pointed out. "We've had the freedom to move in and accomplish things. We would not have (Catholic) schools if not for religious," he said. "Our tradition is to start things, then to move on in service to the kingdom."

Sister Banick echoed Father Tanck's assertion, pointing out that religious created the Catholic schools in response to a need for education among poor Catholics. Studies now indicate that Catholics as a group are among the best educated, wealthiest groups in the country, and that their need is no longer necessarily for religious-based schools, she acknowledged.

"That's the way it's always been — to perceive the needs of the times," Sister Banick said. "At one time, that was in education. Now there are other needs."

The needs of the poor and of society have led religious to venture beyond convent and school walls into some "non-traditional apostolates," Sister Walsh said. She and Sister Shirley Pilot, SSJ, for example, run a real estate agency. "Housing is a critical need for people," she said. "The working poor long to own their own homes."

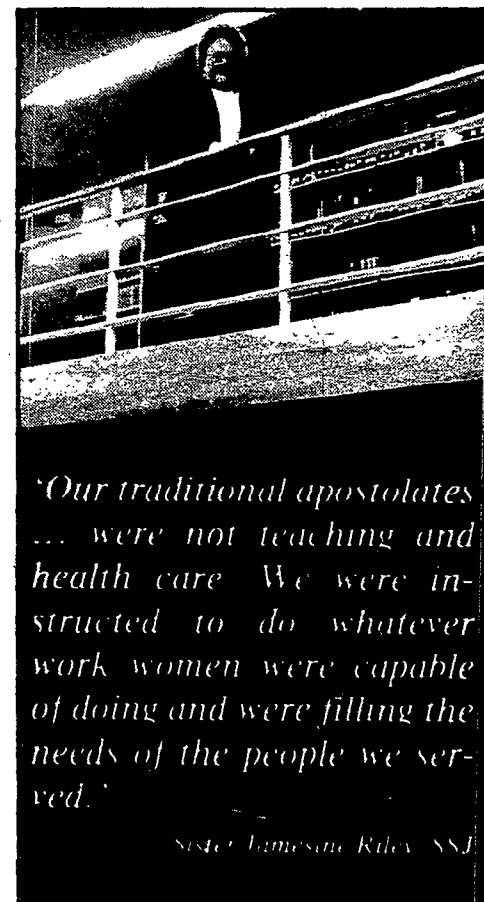
The two sisters not only help people find affordable housing, but they also provide financial counseling, Sister Walsh explained. "People have come through here who would never be able to buy a house," she said. "We try to sit down with them and help them budget, with saving money, investing, finding low rents."

Sister Jamesine Riley, SSJ, a lawyer, said she doesn't know "what the letter means by traditional apostolates."

"Our traditional apostolates, in our organization, were not teaching and health care," she said. "We were instructed to do whatever work women were capable of doing and were filling the needs of the people we served."

Her recently established law practice "fits in well with the call of the Gospel, with the call to justice," Sister Riley continued. "I think our congregation has been called to reconciliation, to heal broken lives."

Religious are pursuing new apostolates in response to Vatican II's call for orders to re-examine their roots and their charism, Sister DeMars noted. "Our charism was to be of service to women and the poor," she said. "Translate what that service means



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Sister Jamesine Riley, SSJ

Sister Jamesine Riley's legal work helps meet the needs of the poor.

today."

In criticizing the directions taken by religious orders in the United States, the pope and Vatican officials reveal that perhaps "they don't understand the whole concept of renewal," Sister Pilot suggested. "Renewal means to get back to their roots. For our order, that means going out to meet the needs of the people. Our roots are taking us back to (the people.)"

The papal document also points to declining numbers of vocations to religious life in the United States as a weakness. This trend, however, parallels a similar decline in vocations to priesthood. Sister Pilot said that one of the factors involved in the overall trend is that lay people — especially women — are able to minister in the church without consecration, and are increasingly being recognized as partners in ministry with sisters, brothers and priests.

"Perhaps the reason there are fewer vocations is because there are other forms of religious faith communities," Sister Pilot added. She cited prayer groups, service groups, Catholic Worker communities, Vista and the Peace Corps as some alternatives to religious life. "I think we've got to look at them as vocations to carry out that commitment to serve," she said. "There is no shortage of vocations."

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## Cardinal Mooney High School to close

By Teresa A. Parsons  
Associate editor

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"The decision is the result of a steady decline in enrollment over the past three years and an operating deficit of \$200,000 per year over the same period, despite efforts to cut expenses," said Brother Ra-

haim. "We had hoped that increasing next year's tuition would enable us to arrive at a balanced budget."

Instead, registration for the 1989/90 school year dropped to 454 students, 166 fewer than school officials had expected. Enrollment this year was just under 700, down from 1,302 in 1985/86.

Brother Rahaim said that Mooney administrators had worked closely with diocesan officials to explore alternatives to closing the school, including a major capital campaign two years ago. "Because it is very late in the school year, out of consideration for all concerned, students, parents faculty and staff, we felt we could not delay making a final decision on the school's future any longer," he said.

Bishop Clark said he deeply regrets the closing, but acknowledged that the school could not continue to operate under the circumstances. "For the past two years, people have worked very hard to avert this decision, but the continued decline in registration has made it inevitable," he said. "I have a deep respect for the Mooney spirit and I am sorry for the pain that this will bring to students, parents, alumni, staff and friends in the community."

Administrators from Cardinal Mooney have said they will help students enroll in other Catholic high schools, and will assist staff members in finding new employment. Working with diocesan officials, the Holy Cross order will explore possible uses for the Mooney building.