

Brothers' calling adapts to church's changing needs

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — When the doors of Cardinal Mooney High School close for the final time this June, students, lay teachers and women religious at the school will have to find new schools, new teaching positions, new ministries in the Diocese of Rochester.

But for the 12 Holy Cross brothers living at the school, the change will be even more drastic. They will have to find new places to live — in all likelihood in dioceses other than the one in which many of them have come to feel at home.

"After 27 years, it's hard to pull up stakes," observed Brother David Turmel, director of the Holy Cross Religious at the

school. "We've had some brothers who've been here more than 20 years, so we're sad. But there's nothing we could do about it."

And, in fact, acceptance of such change is simply a part of the vocation of brother.

"Your commitment (as a brother) is to serve the church wherever there's a need," explained Brother Terence Connolly, CFC. "The work is universal, so it doesn't matter where you're working."

Brothers have been committed to serving in the diocese since 1857, when the Lasalle Christian Brothers arrived to teach in diocesan schools. Since that time, brothers have not only taught, but worked in hospitals, with refugees, with the homeless, and devoted themselves to lives of prayer.

According to Brother Turmel, what sets the vocation of brothers apart from that of priests is that priests meet the sacramental needs of people, while brothers focus on addressing other needs.

"When one thinks of sacramental ministry, that's more tied to a parish," Brother Turmel said. "People need to be ministered to in other ways, in education, in social work, in hospitals. That's where we fit in."

"It's not a vocation for people who can't make it as priests," Brother Connolly commented. "It's a unique vocation, not a second choice."

Currently, 64 brothers serve in the Diocese of Rochester. The greater portion of them, 35, are members of the two contem-

plative orders, the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance at the Abbey of the Genesee, and Benedictines of Mount Saviour Monastery. The 13 Christian Brothers at Bishop Kearney High School represent the next largest group of brothers in the diocese.

Even including the departing Holy Cross brothers, religious brothers in the diocese are vastly outnumbered by the more than 1,000 diocesan priests, religious priests, and women religious who serve here. But the brothers say they do not feel troubled by their minority status.

"We are part of the local church," Brother Connolly said. "We serve the local needs of the church. One of the gifts of religious brothers is to adjust to situations, to acclimatize."

The brothers also feel welcome and supported in the diocese, Brother Turmel noted. "I certainly feel that (Bishop Matthew H. Clark) has tried to reach out to the religious and to us in particular," he said.

"I think they feel they are contributing in a vital way to the ministry of the church in Rochester, and feel that efforts have been made to include them in the vicar's office in the past," remarked Sister Dolores Banick, IHM, the diocese's vicar for religious.

Those efforts in the past have included support of the brothers in their ongoing dispute with the Vatican Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes. The congregation has ruled that orders comprising both priests and brothers — such as the Holy Cross Religious, the Capuchin Franciscans and the Cistercians — must be headed by priests. A number of the orders disagree.

"We want to be considered a fraternity," said Father Nelson Rupert, superior of the Capuchin Franciscans stationed in Interlaken. "We are a mixed order. Our superior general signs all documents as 'brother,' and he's had his wrists slapped."

"We wanted the possibility that brothers could be superiors," acknowledged Father John Eudes Bamberger, abbot of the Abbey of the Genesee. "I myself favor the idea of a non-priest being the superior. But that (rule) may change in time."

In addition to support from the vicar's office, brothers say they have also felt encouraged to provide input into diocesan operations. Brother Connolly, for example, represents religious brothers on the Diocesan Pastoral Council. "I think we can be of some service to the diocese in terms of being part of the decision-making process," he remarked.

Brothers' participation in the decision-making processes of the diocese has become particularly important in light of the changes the church has undergone since Vatican II. Like diocesan priests, religious priests and women religious, brothers have experienced the effects of those changes, including a decline in membership. Some orders have been forced to reassess their ministry and to change their focus due to changing circumstances — such as the closing of schools.

Brother Turmel, for one, is philosophical about these changes — and the future.

"I suspect ... where we are going is not clear," he remarked. But wherever the brothers of his order go, "our vocation is to serve the needs of the people of God and of the church," he concluded.

Retirement

Continued from page 8

in a crunch, but we're very happy with (Seeberg's) work," Sister LeValley said. "He's just very carefully laying a solid groundwork."

"Personally, I'm really pleased with the progress he's made," remarked Sister Kears. "He showed an understanding of where we are as women in the church and (of) our history of service."

As part of the planning process, Seeberg is developing "a case" for the collection. "The challenge is not collecting the money," he explained. "The real challenge is educating people about the need. If we can do that successfully, the charitable dollars will flow."

Studies point to a number of factors that combined to produce the current shortfalls, both locally and nationally: the growing longevity of religious; the traditionally small stipends paid to religious during their working years; increased medical costs; and decreasing numbers of vocations to religious life.

If the diocese and the orders can weather the next 10-20 years, Seeberg said, the problem is unlikely to be repeated because sisters' wages have increased and orders have instituted retirement plans. But for

now, the orders must care for the sisters who began serving before those reforms were instituted.

The Sisters of St. Joseph face an immediate need. With a median age of 63 among its members, the congregation is currently spending approximately \$1 million a year to maintain its infirmary. "We have a retirement-maintenance fund which doesn't fund our entire cost," Sister LeValley said.

Although the congregation is setting up its own development office, Sister LeValley said, members of the order don't want the office to take on the retirement-fund shortfall as its first task. She also pointed out that the order does not treat retirement funds as separate from its operating budget. "People think we run a business where there's a pension fund and we take the money out," Sister LeValley said. "That's not the way in congregational life. It's not like we have designated money that goes to the infirmary. We've tried to increase the overall income."

The Sisters of Mercy, whose median age is 58, have not run into an immediate problem, according to Sister Kears. She acknowledged, however, that the order's retirement fund is seriously underdeveloped to meet costs in the near future.

The Mercy congregation has also responded by re-examining its fund-



Therapy aide Sister Eleanor Seidewand massages Sister Regina Wolfe's leg during a recent therapy session.

development process — particularly because of the nature of some of the order's ministries. "Our purpose for being is to be in ministry — to serve the poor, the sick, and to be where there is often little or no remuneration," she said. "Our fund development allows us to stay in those ministries."

But unless the order finds additional funds for retirement, members may be forced to choose between supporting those ministries and supporting retired sisters. "It's a big tension," Sister Kears acknowledged.

Meanwhile, the order may have to consider such options as liquidating assets unless the diocesan effort and the sisters' own fund-development efforts over the next few years raise the funds needed for retirement, Sister Kears said.

Seeberg expects that the diocesan campaign, once underway, will help prepare for subsequent fundraising efforts by the orders. "We are very concerned that the case for support position the sisters to raise their half (of the needed funds)," he remarked. "We don't want to do anything in our shade of the job that will jeopardize their efforts. We've got to work together on this."

Sisters who have served in the diocese have contributed a great deal through their devotion and sacrifices, Seeberg said, and the diocese will do its utmost to help them in this time of need.

"We have an obligation," Seeberg concluded. "Just from a Gospel standpoint, we have to reach out and help others."



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