

Local radio programs fulfill faithful's needs

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Almost every evening for the past 39 years, Monsignor Joseph Cirrincione has walked from the former convent where he lives to another small building on the grounds of St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Rochester.

Once inside, he turns on the broadcast equipment, and at 6:30, as taped music plays, says, "Good evening dear friends."

Thus begins another edition of "Family Rosary for Peace." Since March 4, 1950, Monsignor Cirrincione has led more than 14,300 recitations of the rosary on the air. The show is broadcast not only on Rochester station WWVG-AM, but also in Buffalo, Seneca Falls, Auburn, Syracuse, Horseheads and Elmira, and by cable to Binghamton, Corning and Hornell.

The "Family Rosary for Peace" is a survivor of an earlier era when Catholic programs on radio and television drew national audiences. Catholics who grew up in the 1930s might remember listening to Father Charles Coughlin, the "radio priest." And television viewers in the 1950s watched as Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's show battled — and sometimes defeated — Milton "Mr. Television" Berle's program for top ratings.

Although religious radio and television programs with a Catholic slant seem less prominent these days, they still exist. Such weekly programs as "Christopher Closeup," "On this Rock," and the "Sacred Heart Program," are carried on hundreds of radio stations. In addition, Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Television Net-

work reaches more than 10 million cable television viewers.

Locally, television and radio offer a variety of Catholic programming. In addition to radio and television Masses, people in the diocese can tune in to such radio broadcasts as "Listen," a weekly program featuring talks by Father Albert Shamon on current issues and Catholic teachings heard in Auburn, Seneca Falls and Geneva; the similarly formatted "Magnify the Lord," which is heard weekly in Hornell, Corning, Newark, Dundee and Austen, Minnesota; "Rainbow Bridge," a Sunday-evening call-in show for teenagers, broadcast in Bath; or "Good Morning, Lord," carried every Sunday at 6:30 a.m. on WHAM-AM, with Father George Norton and Sr. Joan Sobala, SSJ, sharing hosting duties.

According to Kevin Doran, who for many years produced "Magnify the Lord," the Catholic Church has a need for more such religious broadcasts. "The fundamentalists and evangelicals have really done a better job than we have," he said. "If we could have the major media in the hands of dedicated Catholics, we could turn the country around."

Monsignor Cirrincione has been trying to turn around not only the country, but the entire world with his rosary program. He was inspired to do so by the message of Our Lady of Fatima, who called for the daily recitation of the rosary as a way to achieve world peace.

After a 1948 visit to the Fatima shrine in Portugal, Monsignor Cirrincione began broadcasting a series of weekly broadcasts



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier
Father George Norton prepares to tape the radio show "Good Morning, Lord," which airs every Sunday. Father Norton and Sister Joan Sobala, SSJ, share hosting duties.

over WSAY in Rochester about Fatima. In 1950, he was invited to start a nightly rosary program instead. At the time, he noted, there were a number of such programs on the air across the country. His program caught on, and has been on the air since.

The program has survived switching stations and time slots, and even the changes wrought by Vatican II. "The miracle is that we were able to survive after the time of the council when devotion to Mary declined," he observed.

Indicative of the program's continuing popularity is the 8-9,000 pieces of mail Monsignor Cirrincione receives annually.

"Three-quarters of the mail has to do with intentions," he noted. "You get a pretty good idea what's happening in people's homes when you open the mail. It seems to be an outlet for some people to write to someone to explain their problems."

The letters also contain donations — enough to keep the program on the air throughout western New York. One of the problems frequently faced by religious radio broadcasters is lack of money, Doran acknowledged.

At one time, Doran said, "Magnify the Lord" was carried on 11 stations, including several in Florida, Iowa and Kentucky. "We cut down on the stations because more stations require payments," he said. "I just feel sad that we're not on more stations. (But) that requires a lot of time and effort because of the cost involved."

Even with a limited market, the program fills a need, according to regular listener Dolores Lamb, a parishioner of St. Ann's, Hornell.

"I listen to it because it's inspirational and because it addresses contemporary problems," Lamb said. With Fathers Paul Cuddy and Ronald Antinarelli alternating commentary duties, Lamb said, the program draws a wide audience, dealing with church teachings and expressing "a variety of opinions."

Father Albert Shamon likewise tries to present church teachings in "Listen." During the 15-minute program, he deals with such issues as abortion, sex education and Medjugorje, or touches on scriptural themes.

The radio program began under Father Shamon's brother, Father Edward Shamon, who died in 1980. Father Albert Shamon took over the show — changing the name from "On Guard" to "Listen" — at the request of Dorothy Kalina, a long-time supporter of the program. Kalina delivers the tapes to the various radio stations that broadcast "Listen," and even pays the fees because she believes the program is important. "I think it's a lot of basic Catholic doctrine that sort of reminds people of the importance of faith," she said. "I think if one person comes back to the church (from listening to the show), then it's worth it."

Father Norton, who was a radio broadcaster long before he became a priest, believes that the church needs to be more involved in reaching out through television and radio. "You never know who's out there who needs encouragement in their spiritual lives or their personal lives," he said. Radio and television broadcasts, he added, can "act as a companion to people who are searching for a spiritual companion."

"Good Morning, Lord," the program which Father Norton and Sister Sobala host on alternate weekends, consists of reflections, especially on the Sunday readings.

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Broadcast Masses cultivate community bonds

ROCHESTER — Religious broadcasts on radio and television can be used to evangelize, inspire, or reach out to those who have lost their faith.

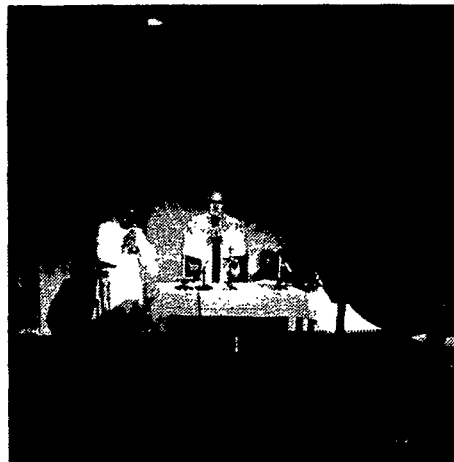
These broadcasts can also fill an even more basic faith need: providing a link between people who are kept from church for a variety of reasons and the central expression of faith in the Catholic Church, the Mass.

For these people, held in check by age, handicaps, illness, or even lack of transportation, broadcast Masses bring a sense of unity with the wider worshipping community of the church.

The oldest of these programs, the television Mass carried on WHEC-TV10 in Rochester, is co-sponsored by the Basilian Fathers of Aquinas Institute, the Daily Mass League and the diocese. The Mass began in 1967, when the Basilians, with the support of then-Bishop of Rochester Fulton Sheen, began broadcasting a weekly television Mass from the Aquinas chapel. The Mass is currently taped at the television station, with Basilian and diocesan priests presiding on alternating weeks.

According to Mark Rand, production manager, at last check the Mass was the most popular program in its time slot. Father Thomas Mull, who coordinates those programs for which the diocese is responsible, noted that the program receives letters weekly. "We've gotten letters from Toronto and Quebec," he said. "Quite often, they will be responses, or asking for copies of a sermon, or asking us to pray for people or particular intentions."

Father Mull said the program's half-hour format sometimes causes difficulties for celebrants and organizers. If a homily goes too long, for example, the show might end even before Communion is distributed. "It really is a challenge," he observed, "because it limits the freedom



Father Frederick F. Eisemann and Deacon Angelo Cocchia of Holy Family Church celebrate the taped weekly Mass for Shut-ins at the WHEC-TV10 studio.

of what can be done." Despite the limitations and the challenges, Father Mull said, the Mass provides an important service to Catholics of the Rochester diocese.

Jacquelyn Dobson, executive director of the office of Black Ministries, likewise noted that "This Far By Faith: Black Catholic Chapel of the Air" provides not only a service to shut-ins in the diocese, but also fills several other needs.

The program, broadcast every Sunday at 4 p.m. on WWVG-AM, helps give black Catholics a sense of community. Originating from Detroit, the Mass includes homilies by black priests and deacons, as well as the music of Gospel choirs. Dobson, who hosts the local portion of the broadcast, also includes brief talks about black Catholic history, inspirational messages and listings of events being undertaken by her office.

The broadcast also achieves a wider purpose, Dobson said. "I think it's a great means of evangelizing the community at large — both the black community and the white community," she said. "It

has an ecumenical outreach."

In addition, Dobson speculated, the program meets a real need in listeners. "People are, in my opinion, hungry for spiritual food," she said.

The "Radio Mass for Shut-Ins," broadcast on WEBO-AM in Owego every Sunday morning from 9:25-10:25 from St. Patrick's, also provides spiritual food to a broad audience, noted Jim Raftis, the program's announcer and producer.

The Mass reaches not only listeners in the Rochester diocese, Raftis said, but also people in the Syracuse diocese and in Pennsylvania. In addition, it also attracts a multi-denominational audience. "People of all ages and faiths listen to it," he observed. "I think I have more unchurched than I have practicing Catholics listening to it."

The hour-long program consists of the regular 9:30 Mass at St. Patrick's, as well as commentaries and reflections provided by Raftis. He noted that even people who attend other Masses at the parish tune in so they can hear the homily once again. And for those who are sick, or unable to get to Mass at the parish, the broadcast provides an important link to the parish community.

"It expands the mission of the apostolate to the home-bound, those unable to come, the unchurched," Raftis said. "Whether or not people have come back to the church because of its availability, I don't know."

The Mass has been an apostolate for Raftis himself, who began the broadcasts in Lent of 1968. The introduction of the vernacular Mass following Vatican II made the Mass a possibility, he said. And Raftis, who works part time in radio, felt it was service he could provide to the church. "This is a form of stewardship," he stated. "When you have a talent, use it."

— Lee Strong