

Priest's departure concludes 30 years of Fisher history

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Father Joseph Trovato, CSB, will probably be embarrassed by this article.

The long-time chaplain at St. John Fisher College has studiously avoided drawing attention to himself during his 30 years at the college. And according to friends and associates, he has consistently been uncomfortable with efforts to offer him praise.

During the 1984 spring semester, for example, students, faculty and staff began sporting buttons proclaiming "Joe Trovato for sainthood." An Ad Hoc Trovato Canonization Committee "officially" set aside March 1, the Basilian priest's birthday, as Father Joe Trovato Day, a day dedicated to friendship, resolving grievances and spreading good will. Meanwhile, friends regularly teased him that he'd won the St. Francis of Assisi Act-Alike Contest.

Lou Buttino, a communications professor at the college and one of the organizers of the canonization campaign, said the effort was intended as good-natured kidding of Father Trovato, but also to show the respect and affection the priest had earned at the college.

"He was embarrassed by the attention, and the other Basilians were jealous," Buttino quipped, then added that he himself had remained at the college for 17 years in part because of Father Trovato.

"You just don't find people like Father Trovato very often in your life," Buttino explained, "and when you do, they're like gravity — you just stay there."

But now Buttino is losing one of his reasons for staying at the college. In July, Father Trovato, who has been associated with St. John Fisher College for most of its history, will assume duties as parochial vicar at Christ the King Parish in Irondequoit.

The assignment marks Father Trovato's first in a non-college environment in nearly 33 years of priesthood. But he sees it simply as a continuation of what he's been do-

ing all along.

"Much of my life at the college has been of a pastoral nature," Father Trovato explained. "I see the ministry — whether it's at the college here or at the parish — as one of serving the people, keeping the story of Jesus alive through sacraments and the Word, by being present to the people ... and by sharing their joys, and regretfully, in their more difficult and sorrowful moments. I think I will simply carry on that pastoral ministry in a different pastoral setting."

Nevertheless, Father Trovato's departure from St. John Fisher will leave a gap that will be difficult to fill, noted Thomas Crombach, a Fisher graduate and current head of the school's biology department.

"There's going to be a void here," Crombach said. "Except for the first eight years (of the college), he's been here almost the entire time the college has been open."

Father Norm Tanck, the college's dean, superior of the Basilian Fathers stationed there and a 1967 graduate of St. John Fisher, was even more forthcoming about what the departing priest has meant to the college.

"(Father Trovato) is one of the people (who) has helped form the attitudes and values of this college," Father Tanck said. Father Trovato, he added, is one of the people who "helped create the faith community that made Fisher a real, living community."

Community is an important value to Father Trovato. In fact, it was the community spirit he saw among the Basilian priests who taught him at Aquinas Institute in the 1940s that helped inspire him to become a priest, he said.

"I just saw them as a happy group of people who were definite about a mission they had to teach, to be priests, to live in community," Father Trovato said.

Father Trovato went from Aquinas to St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto, and was ordained June 29, 1956.



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier
After 30 years at St. John Fisher College, Father Joseph Trovato, CSB, is moving on to Christ the King Parish.

He taught Italian and Spanish at St. Michael's from 1957-59, and was then assigned to St. John Fisher College.

In 1959, Fisher was an all-male commuter college with an enrollment of approximately 500. Father Trovato was to teach Italian and Spanish, and serve as director of religious activities.

By the mid 1960s, the position of director had evolved into that of chaplain. Meanwhile, the school, too, had evolved, adding new buildings, and in 1963, its first dorm. Father Trovato, with his strong sense of community, opted to move into the dorm to be with the students. He has lived in the dorms ever since.

"The idea (was) to be close to the students and to their life, and to share that life," Father Trovato said. "I saw it as part of my work as chaplain."

Early in his teaching career, Crombach lived in the dorms with Father Trovato for

six years. He recalls that the priest received a constant stream of students who came to talk about their problems, to get advice, to find someone to listen or simply just to visit. "He was always there for them," Crombach observed.

In 1985, the students presented Father Trovato with a stereo system for his 55th birthday, "so that he would feel a part of what was going on in the dormitories because that's something they would have enjoyed," Crombach said.

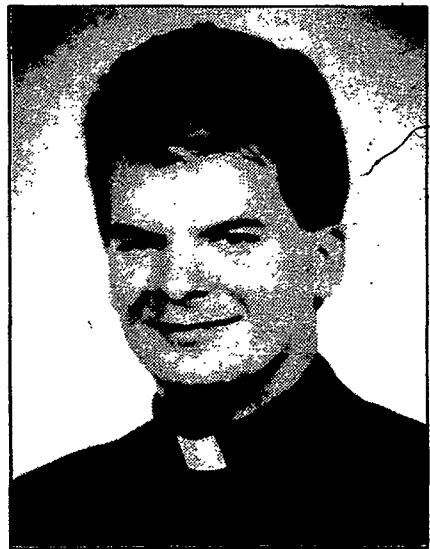
During the years at Fisher, Father Trovato said he had witnessed many changes — the political activism of the 1960s, the change of the school to a coed institution in 1971, the appointment of Dr. William Pickett as the college's first lay president in 1986 — but the students, he said, have remained essentially the same. "I think there was a consistent social consciousness among our students through all those years," he said. "I hope a lot of that social consciousness was centered in the chaplain's office."

Under Father Trovato, in fact, the chaplain's office involved students in a wide variety of social-ministry activities, ranging from serving meals at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality to building homes in migrant camps to tutoring inner-city students. The priest also instituted regular retreats held jointly with students from Nazareth College to give the students time for prayer and reflection.

Father Paul English, CSB, graduated from St. John Fisher in 1978 and was active in campus ministry and the retreats. He noted that Father Trovato was one of the factors that helped him decide to be a Basilian. He said he was impressed by the way Father Trovato treated each student as an individual filled with dignity and deserving respect. He was also drawn to the older priest because of his "prayerfulness, a deep sense of spirituality."

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