

Thanks Giving Appeal '89

# Support group serves as 'extended family'

By Sean McNamara  
Freelance writer

Divorce, separation, death and remarriage create traumatic disruptions of family life.

"When you put 20 years into a marriage and then you find it went default, and you have yourself and children to bring up, you need a support group willing to be an extended family," Angela Gallo recalled of the days following her divorce.

When her husband left her in 1975, Gallo — now Genesee regional director and Southern Tier acting director of the Council for Separated, Divorced, Bereaved and Remarried Christians — felt such a need for a surrogate family that she founded a support group at her parish, St. Christopher's in North Chili. Later she became involved in the council, a diocesan ministry sponsored by the Division of Social Ministry.

"What we supply ... is a peer-support system," she said of the council's service to those experiencing loss. "There is a sense of community and acceptance."

That sense of community is especially important in light of social stigmas that still cling to divorce and remarriage. Frequently, she noted, the divorced and bereaved only feel comfortable discussing their feelings with others in similar circumstances.

"In a peer program — when you have a commonality, a sense of belonging — you don't have to explain every detail," Gallo said, adding that group members understand each others' sense of rejection. "Other people react differently towards you. Your family can be angry at you. Performance at work drops. Friends don't call as often."

Many divorced Catholics also feel a sense of rejection from the church. "We find a kind of spiritual hunger in the people we work with. Some are angry at God," explained Carl Ritz, director of divorce ministry for the Finger Lakes region. "They need to be reconciled back to the Church. Many persons have dropped out. We are trying to bring them back in."

Gallo said the "spiritual angle" is what distinguishes the diocesan program from secular counseling services for divorced and bereaved people. Many group members are first reunited with the church during liturgy at the ministry's Single Parent Family Camp, she noted.

Yet Ritz emphasized that the ministry does not attempt to provide all the answers to those it serves. Mostly, he said, those who come to him are looking for a compassionate listener.

This is particularly true of men, he said,



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

Members of the northeast separated, divorced and widowed support group gather every second and fourth Sunday at Assumption Church in Fairport to discuss topics ranging from stress management to spiritual and social issues. Speakers are often scheduled and social activities are included in the events.

noting that many men face loss without any close friends with whom they can discuss their feelings.

"Many men think, 'I'll solve my own problems.' You have a lot of guys who are struggling. They are dealing not only with the separation but also with their own mortality," he said.

In an effort to reach out to those who don't know where to turn, the program has set up a telephone "shareline" for individuals to call each other to discuss how they feel. "It is an ear to listen and a heart to feel," Ritz said.

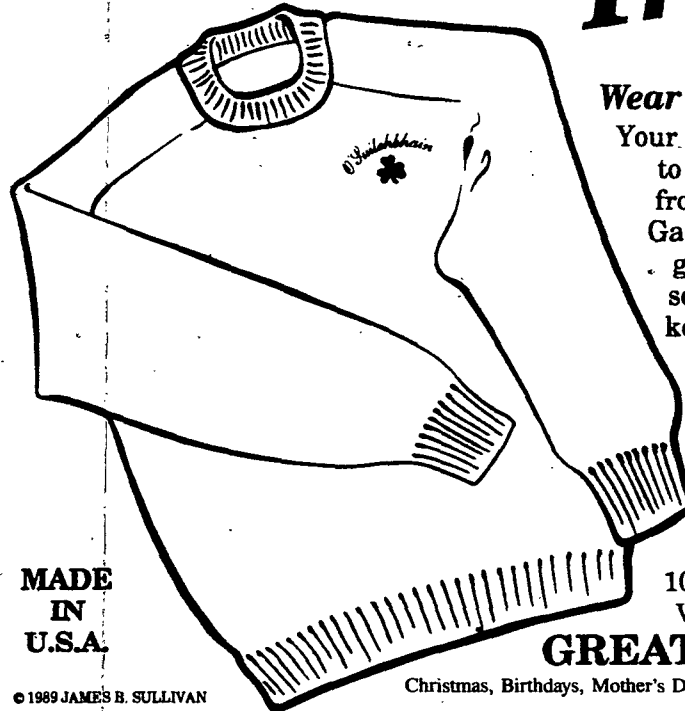
Another means of reaching those in need of support is referrals from the diocesan Marriage Tribunal, which encourages couples going through the annulment process to take advantage of the ministry's services. Often, Ritz said, peer-group counseling unveils unresolved problems that may have caused participants' first marriages to fail.

Although Gallo and Ritz are committed to their ministry, both acknowledged that it does take a toll on volunteer counselors.

"It's tough," Ritz said. "Sometimes

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