

Parishes make evangelization a top priority

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Last January, Frank Rossignolo opened the door of his Rochester home to Joseph Guido and Sister Campion Bush, SSJ, the evangelization coordinator for St. Augustine's Parish.

The duo was visiting every house in Rossignolo's neighborhood, hoping to find former parishioners who had stopped attending church, or Catholics who didn't belong to any parish.

Busy working with his son-in-law on a plumbing problem upstairs, Rossignolo directed Guido and Sister Bush to his wife, Lois, who was sitting in the living room.

"(Sister Bush) spent quite a bit of time with my wife, sharing the Scriptures," Rossignolo recalled. "My wife ... wasn't Catholic at the time," he added.

Sister Bush followed up her initial visit with several more in the next few weeks.

Lois Rossignolo, a lifelong Methodist, died two months later from cancer, but before she passed away, she was baptized a Catholic. Meanwhile, her Catholic husband, who had not attended Mass regularly since 1940, began going to Sunday services at St. Augustine's.

The Rossignolos' story is one of the more dramatic accounts of successful Catholic evangelization. Yet within it are elements common to many of the church's current efforts to spread the Gospel to inactive Catholics and unchurched people.

In its broadest sense, evangelization involves every single activity of the church, from the administration of its schools to the dispersion of its good will through social-ministry programs. All these efforts contain attempts to

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share with the world the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ.

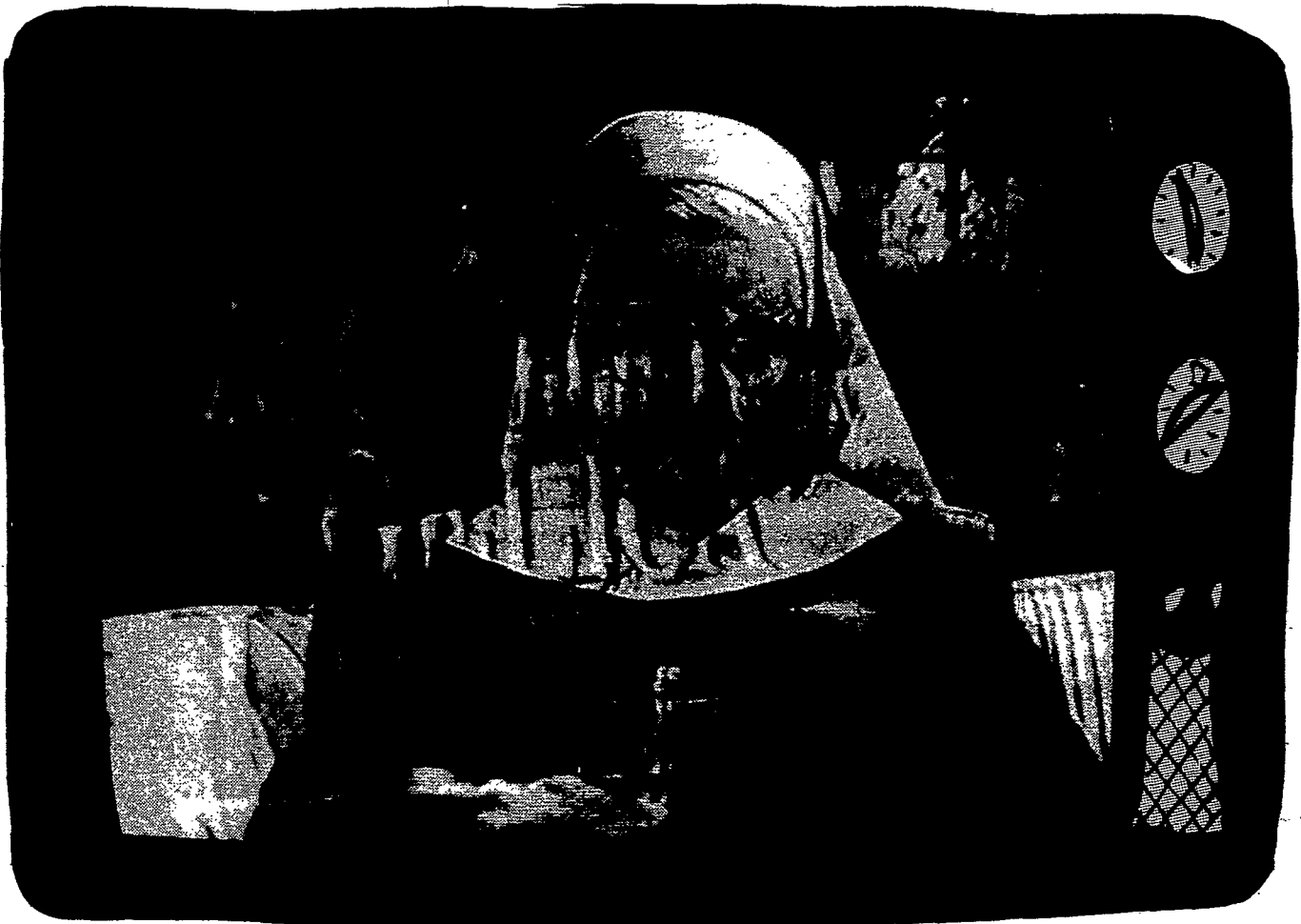
But if one defines "evangelization" as the spreading of the Gospel to those who are not active in the church, the picture that emerges of Catholic evangelization consists of a loosely connected network of parish evangelization committees throughout the nation. These committees are indirectly and directly assisted in their efforts by two major Catholic television networks.

About 30 percent of the parishes in the United States have evangelization committees, according to Father Alvin Illig, founder and director of the Paulist Fathers' National Catholic Evangelization Association. The number of committees has doubled in the last 20 years, he said, attributing the increase to the inspiration provided by Pope Paul VI's 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* ("The Gospel Must be Proclaimed").

"This is the Magna Carta for Catholic evangelization around the world," Father Illig said, noting that prior to the issuance of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Catholic evangelization efforts had fallen into disrepute and inactivity.

Following Vatican II, the priest asserted, the theological and structural arguments raging in the church turned off many Catholics to the idea of evangelical work because many did not know quite what they were supposed to preach.

The pope clearly stated the church's evangelical mission in his exhortation, Father Illig wrote in a document summary. "The center of the message is this: salvation in Jesus Christ. It is the clear proclamation that in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, salvation is offered to every human



being."

Furthermore, the summary stated that: "In its totality, evangelization consists in upholding and establishing the Church, which does not exist without the driving force which is the sacramental life culminating in the Eucharist."

Catholic evangelists are distinguished from their Protestant counterparts by that point, the priest said at an evangelization workshop at St. Ambrose Church on Sunday, Oct. 29. "You cannot separate yourself from the Holy Father and the bishops," he said. "Catholic evangelists are not lone rangers."

Moreover, Father Illig said, "all authentic Catholic evangelization culminates in the Eucharist," and "authentic Catholic evangelization has a certain Marian spirituality."

The Blessed Virgin was really the first Christian evangelist, the priest remarked, because she accepted Christ, allowed Him to live within her and then shared Him with others. In a spiritual sense, these characteristics mark every authentic Catholic evangelist, he commented.

If Jesus' mother is the ideal model of Catholic evangelization, then Betty DeBlasio and her colleagues in the Legion of Mary are her protégés.

A parishioner at St. Patrick's Parish in Elmira, DeBlasio coordinates the legion's local home visits in which pairs of legionnaires offer such spiritual services as home Communion. At each visit, the legionnaires also ask about the number of Catholics residing within the home.

DeBlasio said she couldn't specify the number of Catholics and non-Catholics who have joined the church because of a legionnaire's visit, but she did recall that one Catholic

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— who was recovering in a hospital — joined the legion after being visited by a pair from the organization.

Not all parishes have laity continually evangelizing the public, but Father Illig suggested that parish censuses are golden opportunities for evangelization.

Parish census teams in the Rochester diocese usually find that parish records fail to list about 30 percent of the baptized Catholics living within their parish boundaries, according to Father Peter Bayer, diocesan chancellor. Of that 30 percent, about 5-10 percent return to the Catholic Church following a visit by parish census workers, he said.

The personal contact embodied in taking a parish census is important to the success of Catholic evangelization,

Father Illig noted. One-to-one ministry converts and brings back more people to the faith than any other method, he said.

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The priest continued that "the role of the laity is the great hope for Catholic evangelization," because as clergy and religious decline in number, the laity will be called on more and more to aid evangelization efforts.

He acknowledged, however, that many parishioners shy away from the door-to-door work in which evangelization committees often engage. Evangelization kits handed out at the workshop emphasized a variety of methods that parishes can employ to attract inactive Catholics and unchurched neighbors.

Among the evangelical methods the Paulist priest suggested for parish use was conducting annual open houses and "Visitor Sundays," during which the public is invited into the parish for informational and social visits.

St. Patrick's hosted an annual spaghetti dinner in June to welcome the local community, according to Sister Mary Jean Smith, SSJ, the social-ministry coordinator. The parish is also exploring the possibility of presenting group sessions for inactive Catholics. The sessions would be staffed by lay couples who would encourage those attending to relate their stories of alienation from the church.

Meanwhile, Most Precious Blood Parish in Rochester is considering using the pulpit to appeal to its parishioners to evangelize, said Sister Francis Mary Rossi, pastoral assistant. During the upcoming Advent season, parishioners will be asked to invite inactive Catholics or unchurched friends to attend Sunday Mass, she said.

Sister Rossi might also take a page from the evangelization book of St. Ambrose. Up until four years ago, St. Ambrose was a model for parish evangelization, but its committee disbanded because of volunteer "burn-out," said Wendy O'Keefe, former chairwoman.

"We all kind of burned out when we didn't get any new blood," O'Keefe recalled, noting that the committee had formed in 1979 after several parishioners attended a workshop with Father Illig.

Filled with enthusiasm following their encounter with the Paulist priest, committee members hosted several renewals, added more "joyous" music to the parish liturgies and commissioned bumper stickers that asked tailgaters to "come home to the Father's House," all in an attempt to attract more people to the church.

O'Keefe said the committee's efforts attracted some new membership to the parish, and she noted that currently the parish is considering revitalizing its evangelical efforts.

If St. Ambrose chooses to do so, the parish will probably get some help from Father George Norton, diocesan director of telecommunications. The priest has been coordinating the diocese's use of programming on the Catholic Tele-

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