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Path to priesthood

As he prepares for ordination June 30, Deacon Victor Bartolotta explores from an uncommon viewpoint the common threads that bind and define the ministry of priesthood. See insight, pages 10 and 11.



CATHOLIC COURIER

Diocese of Rochester Thursday, June 21, 1990 50¢ 20 pages

Parents grant quad passing grade

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — About this time last year, Thomas Bahr was distraught over the closing of Our Lady of Good Counsel/Genesis Catholic Junior High in Rochester, where he was principal.

Now he finds himself in the unenviable position of watching another school close, St. James in Irondequoit, where he now serves as principal.

This time, however, Bahr is trying to put a more pleasant face on his experience. "I don't like to talk about losses," he said of the closing, later adding, "I'd rather look forward than backward."

Bahr's attitude mirrors that of many school officials and parents in Monroe County's northeast quadrant who — at the end of the first year of school reorganization and reconfiguration — give the quadrant governing board and diocesan officials passing grades on coordinating the transition.

To an extent, some parents and parish officials still harbor resentment toward the diocese, but school officials noted that, for the most part, parents and particularly students have accepted the quadrant system.

Four quadrant schools closed last year. St. James will close later this month. A diocesan-operated junior high was also established in Irondequoit, and will open in a wing of Bishop Kearney High School this fall.

Approximately 2,100 students were enrolled in northeast schools in 1989-90; about 1,900 enrolled this year. According to diocesan officials, this year's figure was about 75 students more than expected.

A governing board made up of parish and school representatives was established last summer to oversee the schools, whose budgets were combined and financed by parishes with and without schools.

Northeast quadrant officials pointed to a parents' survey conducted last February as evidence of acceptance, and to a degree, support for reorganization.



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
St. James School students page through books being given away in preparation for the school's closing. From left, students are Shalynn Dunne, Kate Driscoll, Mariette Gordiniere and Heather Siebert.

Questionnaires were sent to the homes of all parents in the northeast. In addition to asking about the need for quadrant governance information, the questionnaires also sought feedback on the experiences of both parents and children over the last year.

About 30 percent, or 412 surveys, were returned — a response that the diocesan Department of Communications claims is high. Of those who returned the survey, 77 percent stated that their children had not changed schools due to reorganization, while 23 percent had sent their offspring to a new school.

Highlights of the survey included the following conclusions:

- Although 75 percent said "schools are doing an excellent job of communicating with parents," most respondents want more information on quadrant governance. Parents particularly wanted to know more about such areas as tuition costs and "where the money goes."



Second-grader Danny Deiore cleans out his desk for the last time.

- A majority of respondents said that reorganization had either no impact or a positive impact on students and parents. But 30 percent of the parents, particularly those whose children had moved, viewed reorganization in a bad light. Generally, the survey noted, they criticized the idea of reorganization itself, not its implementation.

- More than 80 percent agreed that their children, if moved from a closed school, had "merged into the student body and life of the (new) school." Nonetheless, some "stated they still have concerns."

- Almost 75 percent of parents whose children changed schools said they had good relationships with staff and other parents at the new school.

- Fifteen percent listed "more opportunities/classes available" as benefits of reorganization, while "a number" listed no benefits or said benefits remain "to be seen."

- Given an opportunity for additional comments, 25 people wrote that they wanted more information about the quadrant, and 21 people expressed resentment toward the reorganization.

Anger toward the quadrant governing board and the diocese can still be found at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish, where a 140-student school shut down last June. At the time of the closing, many of the school's parents — half of whom were non-Catholic, and the majority of whom were either black or Hispanic — saw the closing as an abandonment of the diocese's commitment to the inner city.

"The Hispanics felt they had lost another service to them," commented Father Neil R. Miller, OLPH's pastor. "They have a history of losing Hispanic parishes, and the Hispanics felt they lost again."

To buttress his assertions, Father Miller pointed out that — following the closing — only 12 or 13 OLPH students enrolled in another northeast quadrant school. The pastor acknowledged that some might criticize his parish for not encouraging

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Syracuse reorganization followed similar scenario

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

"Parish groups say 'no' to plan."

"Bishop braces for meetings with parents — School closings on the agenda."

"Parents say plan unveiled too soon."

Headlines from recent editions of the *Catholic Courier* or the Gannett Rochester Newspapers?

No, these headlines came from the pages of Syracuse's *The Herald-Journal* and *The Post-Standard*, circa 1984-85.

In those years, Catholic school reorganization — much like current efforts within the Diocese of Rochester — was proposed in the Diocese of Syracuse.

As in Rochester, declining enrollments, rising per-pupil costs and under-utilized buildings compelled diocesan officials to commission a study of Onondaga County's schools in 1981. A task force was commissioned in the Rochester diocese with a similar mission in 1985.

By 1984, Syracuse's 20-member task force had concluded — after three years of study — that closing at least four elementary schools and creating three centralized junior highs offered answers to the school district's woes.

And as happened here, Syracuse parents reacted vehemently against the proposals.

"I think the main concern of Catholic parents is the possibility of losing the opportunity of sending our children to neighborhood Catholic schools," *The Herald-Journal* quoted one home-school association president as

saying during a March, 1985, forum on the proposed closings.

The Syracuse proposals also proposed "that the county's Catholic schools be divided into 'four clusters' on a geographic basis," the article said, noting that the task force believed "The clusters will enable decision-makers to more systematically address the need for fewer buildings."

Sound a lot like Monroe County's quadrant system? It should. Syracuse was one of several dioceses that Rochester looked at when considering models for school reorganization, according to Brother Brian Walsh, diocesan superintendent of schools. The superintendent said local officials also looked at the dioceses of Albany, Baltimore, Dallas, and Washington, D.C., to garner ideas on how best to restructure its Catholic schools.

Like the Rochester diocese, each of the above dioceses has created a regional model for administering schools, or has in some way transferred parish control of schools to a separate governing board answerable to the diocese.

Four Catholic K-8 schools eventually did close in Syracuse, and today, that diocese boasts four centralized junior highs in the northeastern, northwestern, southeastern and southwestern sections of Onondaga County. Two of the junior highs are located at high schools, and two junior highs are housed at elementary schools.

Parents are allowed to choose whether or not they want to send their children to an elementary-based junior high

or one housed at a high school, said Brother Robert Bimonte, director of curriculum for the Syracuse diocese.

"Some kids might benefit from a smaller setting... much more than from a high-school type of environment," he said, explaining the rationale for giving parents the option.

The school closings and establishment of centralized junior highs allowed the diocese to better use its financial resources, said Sister Mary Ellen Shirtz, CSJ, an area superintendent for the Syracuse diocese and a former member of the task force that studied reorganization.

"We were trying to get all the parishes to efficiently and economically use the buildings," she said. "There was opposition because the parishes... didn't see Catholic schools as a system."

An interesting footnote: Just as heavy opposition last winter caused the Rochester diocese's Commission of Reorganization of Catholic Schools to delay making reconfiguration and consolidation recommendations in the southwest and southeast quadrants earlier this year, Syracuseans saw their diocese change its reconfiguration recommendation date from September, 1985, to September, 1986.

"Parents who charged the plans had been unveiled too quickly for them to assess their possible impact... appeared to have won a partial victory," one reporter wrote in a *Post-Standard* article on the matter.

It's enough to give you a case of *deja vu*.