

Soccer sectionals
Five diocesan high school soccer teams advanced to the semifinal rounds as boys' and girls' sectional tournaments began last week. Page 15.

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Saints survive through era of neglect

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

A slumping real estate market is proving a boon for sales of St. Joseph statues.

According to rumors, burying a statue of the saint upside down in the front yard will help a homeowner sell his house.

"We do sell a lot of statues (of St. Joseph) for that," acknowledged Carla Coloney, a buyer for Logos Books, a religious supplies store in Rochester. But she added that the store's owners do not endorse the practice.

Likewise, Trants, another religious-supplies store, has experienced steady sales of St. Joseph's statues — along with statues of St. Dymphna (patron saint of those with mental illnesses), St. Peregrine (patron saint of cancer patients) and other members of the community of saints who have been linked to serious illnesses.

"I think (sales volume) has been as strong as ever," noted Anne Marie Madison, Trants' manager. But, she cautioned, "This is the kind of place where people who still believe in saints still come."

Beyond the current interest in the real-estate prowess of St. Joseph, one need only look at the classified advertising pages of most newspapers to find that devotion to saints is still alive — as is evidenced by the numerous ads offering thanks to St. Jude, St. Mary, St. Joseph and others the advertisers believe have granted them favors.

Such practices of popular religion may be subjects for mockery in some circles, but those who ridicule are missing the point, according to Robert Orsi.

"Even something as apparently silly as burying a statue of St. Joseph is still a human expression of some kind of human desire," declared Orsi, a professor of religious studies at Indiana University in Bloomington, Ind. In a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*, Orsi said such devotions help people to articulate fears. Moreover, "saints give us unmediated access to the sacred, to the holy," he observed.

Devotion to saints remains an identifying feature of Catholicism, noted Gregory Dues, a religious educator from the Diocese of Saginaw, Mich., and author of the book *Catholic Customs & Traditions*.

Churches are still named after saints, Dues observed, as are many Catholic children. Some saints are still remembered through festivals, and the community of saints are still included among the prayers at Mass.

What has changed is the emphasis placed on devotion to the saints, Dues told the *Catholic Courier*. That change in emphasis came about after Vatican II.

Vatican II reforms made "a successful attempt to do away with the bad aspects of what we were doing ... the superstitious aspects," Dues said. But unfortunately, he added, "In the process of finding our correct priorities in liturgy and the Scriptures, other things kind of lost their place. One is the whole area of popular religion."

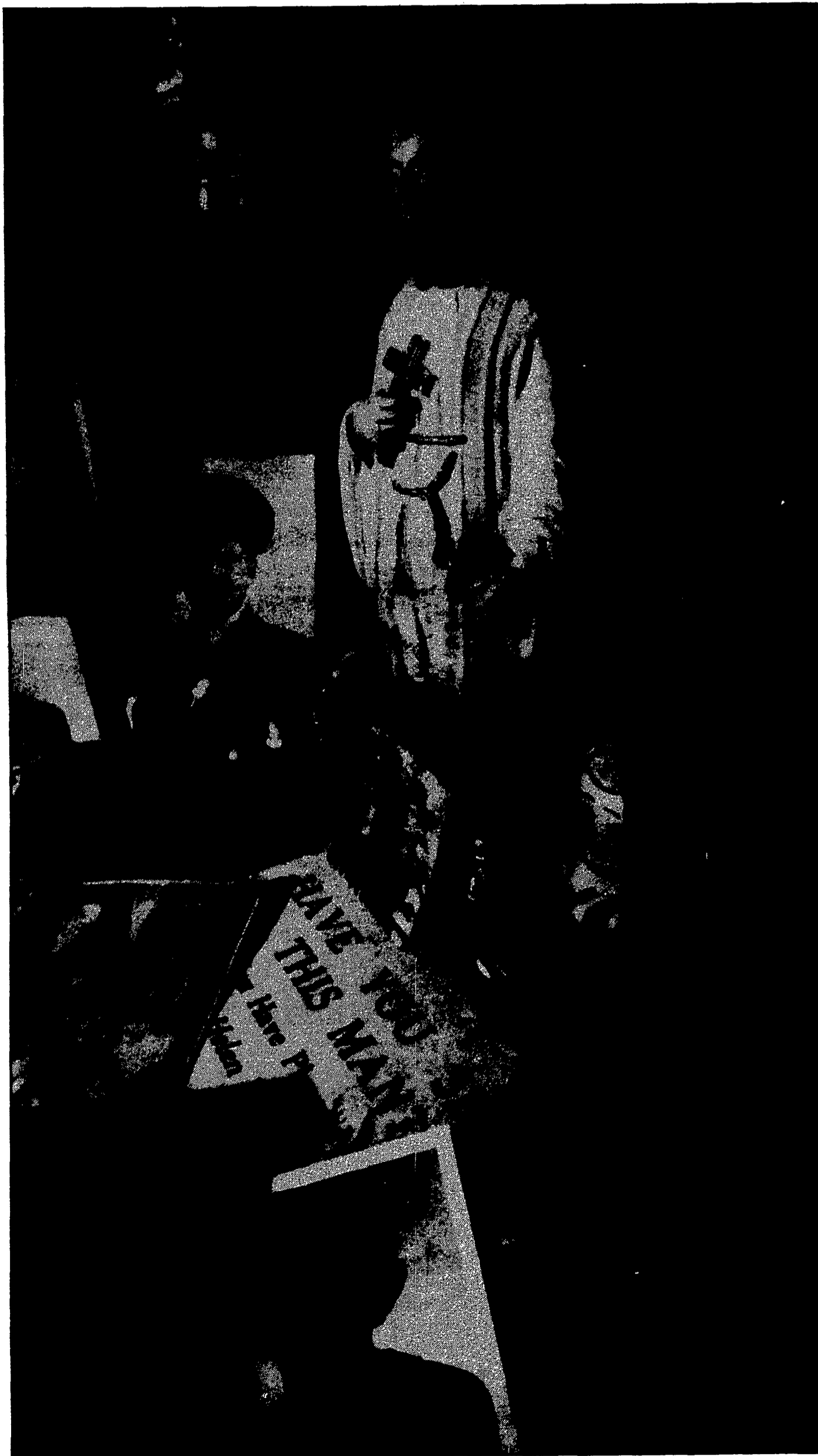
"There has frequently been an uneasiness among members of those who govern the church that there was need for popular devotions," Orsi observed. "There were excesses, but I think the whole cult of the saints question was mishandled by professional liturgists in the late '60s because they had no sympathy for popular religion, for the devotions of their grandmothers."

Devotion to the saints extends far beyond the "devotions of their grandmothers" to the early days of the church. Those who died for the faith — martyrs — were honored for their sacrifice. This veneration eventually spread to include those who suffered for the faith, but didn't necessarily die. Finally the circle grew to encompass individuals who made such sacrifices in the name of their faith as dedicating themselves to lives of virginity, or going off into the desert as monks to lead lives of total prayer.

At first, saints were very often honored only in specific regions. In some cases, these "saints" were simply pagan deities who were transformed into/Christian heroes, noted Tom Tripiciano, a counselor for the Livingston County Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse.

"I work on the premise that saints took the place of the pagan pantheon," observed Tripiciano, who will be speaking about saints Nov. 4 at Blessed Sacrament Parish. He

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Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer