

Jesuit charism includes martyrdom

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Throughout the 450-year history of their order, members of the Society of Jesus have been called many names by their detractors:

- Elitist.
- Crafty.
- Deceitful.
- Radical.

But in recent years, the Jesuits have come to be called another name — martyrs.

More than 70 Jesuit priests and brothers have been killed during the last 20 years,



File photo
Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas of San Salvador, El Salvador, prays over the bodies of six Jesuit priests assassinated Nov. 16, 1989.

noted Father Patrick Sullivan, SJ, rector of the Jesuit community at McQuaid Jesuit High School in Rochester.

Among the most recent — and perhaps most graphic — of those killings was the Nov. 16, 1989, assassination of six Jesuits, their housekeeper and the housekeeper's daughter in El Salvador.

"In a way, we're still in an age of martyrs," Father Sullivan commented.

But the label of martyr is actually an old one for the order. Father Sullivan pointed out. He noted, for example, that the Catholic faith was introduced to western New York by such Jesuits as Fathers Isaac Jogues and St. John John de Brebeuf, who were both killed by Native Americans in the 17th century.

The order itself repeatedly has been ejected from countries, and from 1773-1814 was even suppressed by the Catholic Church.

Jesuits throughout the world are now looking back at this history of controversy,

persecution and service to the church as the order celebrates the "Ignatian Year," marking the 500th anniversary of the birth of its founder, St. Ignatius Loyola, and the 450th anniversary of the order's creation.

The Ignatian Year, which began Sept. 27, 1990, and will end July 31, 1991, is being highlighted by a number of events, including an April 22, 1991, papal Mass at St. Peter's Basilica that will mark the date in 1541 when St. Ignatius and six companions pledged obedience to Pope Paul III.

Within the Diocese of Rochester, celebrations will include an April 21 liturgy at Our Lady of Lourdes Church with Bishop Matthew H. Clark as chief celebrant. Following the 3 p.m. Mass, a reception will take place at McQuaid High School.

Long associated with education, the Jesuits in the United States alone administer 28 colleges or universities, and 46 high schools — including McQuaid, which opened in 1954.

Their concern for quality education — partially responsible for the order's "elitist" reputation — dates back to the Jesuits' earliest days.

St. Ignatius was a Spanish soldier who, after being seriously injured in combat, underwent a conversion in 1521. In 1522 and 1523, he lived in a Dominican priory near Montserrat in France, where he developed the popular Ignatian Spiritual Exercises.

Prevented from traveling to the Holy Land by the Ottoman Turks who controlled the Middle East, St. Ignatius returned to Spain and then went to France to continue his education. He and a group of followers tried to go to the Holy Land, where they had vowed to live and work, but were repeatedly barred from doing so. Finally, in 1538, they placed themselves at the disposal of Paul III, and received papal approval for their order on Paul Sept. 27, 1540.

At the time, Catholic Europe was reeling from the effects of the Reformation, as well as contact with other world cultures through exploration and colonizations, Father Sullivan noted.

The Jesuits, therefore, set out to educate priests and leaders in society. Their intent was to bring about social change by educating the elite, so that education could then trickle down throughout the rest of society.

"What St. Ignatius wanted to do was to choose ministry by the way it would have the greatest effect on people," noted Father William J. O'Malley, SJ, currently a member of the faculty of Fordham Preparatory School in New York City, and for 22 years a McQuaid faculty member.

Father O'Malley said order's the elitist label is deserved, but added that the elite with which the order works is not

necessarily an economic elite.

"I'm talking about people who could effect change," Father O'Malley explained, noting that this group includes intelligent, ambitious men from all classes of society.

Jesuit missionaries soon spread throughout the world. The Jesuit model in other lands was the same as in Europe: to work with and educate the elite.

Often, however, Jesuits came into conflict with the leaders of other nations as the order proposed changes that would promote social justice. The result was increasing hostility and mistrust toward the order, and in many cases, death for its members.

Because the Jesuits were responsible directly to the pope, some government and even church leaders suspected that members of the order were spying on them for Rome, or were secretly advancing papal goals. The perception became so widespread that "jesuitical" eventually entered the language as a word meaning "crafty" and "deceitful."

Father Sullivan pointed out that recent conflicts in which the order has been involved are simply a continuation of the pattern established many years ago. This what happened to the six Jesuits in El Salvador, he noted.

"There's no doubt they were identified with the poor, they were identified with the disadvantaged," Father Sullivan observed. "But they were working out of a university that was talking about governmental changes."

Mistrust of the Jesuits has even been present within the Vatican. Clement XIV suppressed the order in 1773 and, more recently, John Paul II likewise showed some uncertainty about the order.

Ascending to the papacy in 1978, John



File photo
Father Pedro Arrupe, SJ, who died Feb. 5, 1991, headed the Jesuits from 1965 to 1983, a period in which the Society of Jesus was re-evaluating itself in light of the changes brought about by Vatican II.



Leonard von Matt
This wax mask, taken immediately after St. Ignatius' death on July 31, 1556, is preserved in the Curia of the Society of Rome.

Paul II had little prior contact with the Society of Jesus, which was not active in Poland, Father Sullivan said, suggesting that some of the anti-Jesuit feeling may have been repeated to the new pope. Thus when the order's worldwide superior, Father Pedro Arrupe, SJ, suffered a stroke in 1981, the pope appointed personal delegates to oversee it.

"That was really kind of a blow to Jesuits," Father Sullivan acknowledged.

Yet the order's response apparently took the pope off guard, the priest noted. "The Jesuits just shut up and did their work," Father Sullivan noted.

As a result, Vatican restrictions on the order eased in 1983, and Father Arrupe's successor as superior, Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, has simply continued many of the policies the order launched in the 1960s.

Father Arrupe, who died Feb. 5, 1991, headed the Jesuits from 1965 to 1983, a time when the Society of Jesus — like other orders in the church — was re-evaluating itself in light of the changes brought about by Vatican II.

"(Father Arrupe) brought us through Vatican II into the post-Vatican church, and reinvigorated the spirit of the Jesuits in light of Vatican II," Father Sullivan said. "He was a man, like St. Ignatius, who read the needs of the times and responded to them."

Among the needs of current times, Father Sullivan said, is continuing work in the Third World, where Jesuits are helping refugees in such places as Indonesia and El Salvador, and where the order is attracting large numbers of potential recruits.

The Jesuits' help apparently is being called for as well in Eastern Europe, where the church is re-emerging after decades of suppression by communist regimes, Father Sullivan noted.

"In a sense, (the order) is rediscovering our charism by responding to what the pope called for — spreading the word of God to the people," he concluded.

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