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Retirement population challenges church

By Lisa Strong
Staff writer

Sister Florian Reichert, SSJ, began a short career as a poet at the age of 24, and has since published two collections.

Monaghers Joseph and Gerard Gelfi, 75-year-old twin brothers, spent the first few weeks of May clearing debris from a May 1 storm that swept off Lake Ontario over their 150-acre farm in Cape Vincent, N.Y.

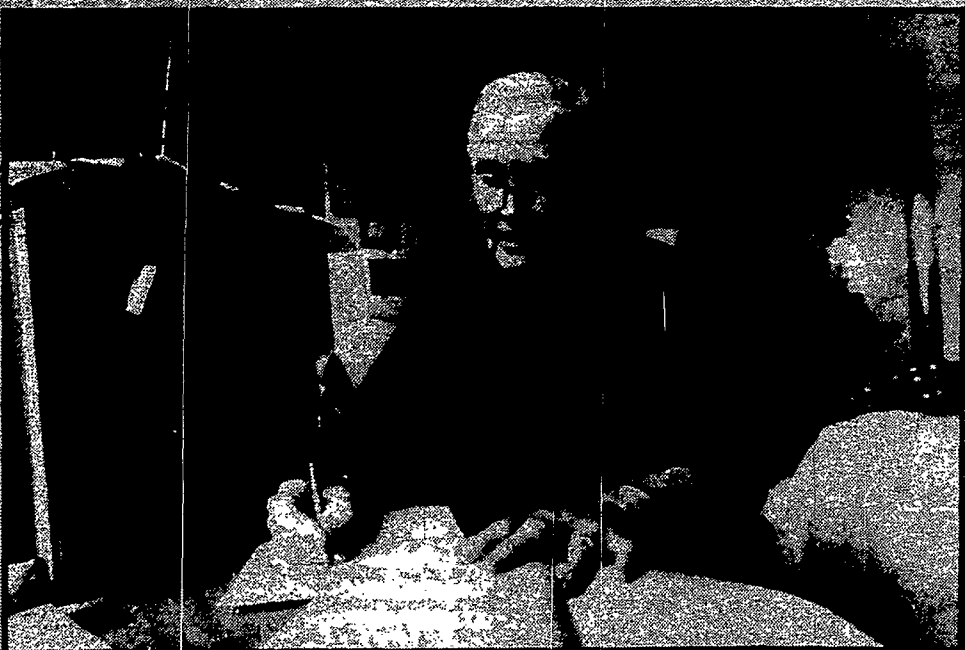
At 78, Sister Agnes Mary Linehan, SSJ, still does occasional parish visiting at Immaculate Conception Parish in Elmira, and has time at night to watch sports on television.

Father Joseph Gaynor, 72, is part of the regular Sunday Mass and homily rotation at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Auburn while living in community with other retired priests in the rectory of St. Alphonsus Parish.

These four are among the many retired priests and religious who served in the Diocese of Rochester. In their retirement years they have found not only ways keep active and to pursue interests, but also to continue serving the diocese and the church.



Most retired religious continue working for their congregations in a variety of unpaid ministries. Here Sister Josephine Stowell, SSJ, 64, performs one of several ministries the Sisters of St. Joseph call "contributive services" — ironing clothing at the order's St. Joseph Convent Infirmary.



Father Joseph Donovan, 76, who retired in 1985 as pastor of St. Mark's Church in Greece, works on a homily in his room at the SSJs' infirmary.

Unlike lay people in secular occupations, however, priests and religious never really retire from their vocations.

"Retirement is an ambiguous word to use for priests," noted Father John S. Hayes, 76, former pastor of St. Patrick's, Aurora. "We retire from being pastors, but we never retire from being priests."

"You are always a woman religious, so what we say is they retire from a particular ministry, and they find volunteer work to do," observed Sister Ann Miller, superior general of the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester.

But the growing numbers of retirees pose a serious challenge — not only for the Diocese of Rochester but also for religious orders throughout the nation.

Until the 1960s, few dioceses or congregations set aside funding for the retirement of priests and religious.

Diocesan priests simply worked until they were no longer able to do so. And religious congregations relied on the income generated by a steady stream of new members to support their retired members.

But after the Second Vatican Council, the Vatican mandated that diocesan priests retire at later than age 75 — and

the Diocese of Rochester implemented a policy that priests retire from administrative duties at age 70. That policy has since been amended to allow priests to continue in administrative posts until 75 if they so choose, or before 70 under special circumstances.

Meanwhile the stream of recruits for congregations has dwindled to a trickle, forcing orders to stretch the incomes of fewer and fewer working members to support growing numbers of retirees.

The Diocese of Rochester instituted a pension plan for priests in 1967. That — coupled with personal savings and the Social Security payments clergymen make as self-employed workers — have helped meet the financial needs of diocesan priests.

As the local ranks of retired priests have grown to the current figure of 79, however, diocesan priests have begun debating the possibility of establishing a retirement home for well priests — a project that raises questions about possible sites and costs, and about who would operate such a facility.

The situation for religious orders, on

the other hand, appears far more drastic — both locally and nationally. Orders have faced mounting fiscal problems produced by the cost of supporting retired members — and in some cases have been forced to curtail ministries to continue supporting these retirees.

In fact, the Tri-Conference Retirement Office — which was created by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men's Institutes in response to the retirement-funding problem — estimated in 1990 that \$5.6 billion dollars would be needed to meet the retirement needs of U.S. men and women religious.

At the time that estimate was made, religious orders across the country had approximately \$2.6 billion in funds available to meet the need — leaving a shortfall of approximately \$3 billion.

The office determined that this enormous shortfall would last only approximately until the late 1990s — by which time many of the religious who have inadequate pension coverage would have died.

To help religious orders meet their retirement needs until the late 1990s, the office in 1988 launched an annual, nationwide collection with a 10-year life span. The first three collections have netted more than \$73 million, reported Sister Mary Oliver Hudon, SSND, director of the Tri-Conference Retirement Office, during a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

In addition, some dioceses across the country — including Syracuse and Albany — have conducted their own drives, reporting collections of \$16.5 million to the retirement office during the same span.

Funds from the national collections are distributed to congregations across the country, including ones serving in the Rochester diocese. As of July 1, 1991, for example, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester will have received more than \$400,000, Sister Hudon reported.

Yet the Diocese of Rochester is the only diocese in the country that thus far

has run neither the national nor a local drive, Sister Hudon said.

Mark Seeberg, diocesan director of development, explained that the decision not to participate in the national drive was based on a recommendation contained in the report of the Five Year Financial Planning Process Task Force, released in April, 1987.

The task force determined that approximately \$70 million would be required to meet the retirement needs of local religious. Of that sum, \$30 million was available, leaving a shortfall of approximately \$40 million.

Since most of the religious serving in the diocese are members of two Rochester-based women's congregations — the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of St. Joseph — the task force recommended that a local fundraising effort be mounted, with the diocesan portion of the effort being \$20 million.

That recommendation was coupled with a task force recommendation that the diocese establish a development office, Seeberg explained, noting that Bishop Matthew H. Clark accepted both recommendations.

But before a capital campaign to raise monies for retirement could begin,

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Sister Marie Claire Koele, SSJ, 80, sews quilted pillows, which are sold at the Corner Stone Craft store at the SSJ motherhouse.