

Officials' religious affiliation ignites debate

Continued from page 1

Nothings and the Klu Klux Klan, Regan observed, Catholics have not been singled out in any significant way for persecution or discrimination.

Nevertheless, Regan objected to the notion that Thomas' religious affiliation should be a factor in his confirmation.

"I thought that when John F. Kennedy ran and was elected, the issue of Catholicism as a qualifier or disqualifier was laid to rest once and for all," commented Regan, a parishioner at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Brighton.

Objections to Thomas rest solely on the question of abortion, said Regan. According to the criminal-court judge, pro-choice activists are using Thomas' Catholic upbringing to weaken his credibility on the bench.

Not so, said Jackie Ashton, press chair for the Rochester chapter of the National Organization for Women. Ashton said her group's opposition to Thomas runs much deeper than his Catholic roots.

"To say we are opposed because he is Catholic is not the issue," said Ashton. "Basically, we feel he leans far too much to the right."

In addition to Thomas' stand on abortion, Ashton said, NOW objects to him on such other issues as affirmative action. She said that although the judge took advantage of the program for his own advancement, he fails to support it now.

Rochester City Councilwoman Maxine Childress-Brown said she believes another issue is the source of skepticism over Thomas — the fact that he is black. She said Thomas' Catholic upbringing is merely ammunition for those who oppose

him on the basis of his race.

"I almost take umbrage that the staunch Italian Catholic (Antonin Scalia) was elected to the Supreme Court (in 1986) and the question was not raised," commented Childress-Brown. "The question comes up now because he (Thomas) is black — it's just another issue."

Steven Freeman, legal director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, said his organization strongly opposes criticism of the judge on any grounds, whether racial or religious.

"What religion he is should not interfere with his qualifications as a judge," stated Freeman. "We categorically reject the linkage that assumes because of his Catholic background he won't make fair judgments."

Freeman said he hopes people would base their judgments of Thomas on his qualifications as a judge, not on his personal philosophies.

"We have to give them (judges) the benefit of the doubt that they will be partial and fair," explained Freeman.

During his 14 years in political office, Rochester City Councilman John Erb occasionally has seen observers unfairly attribute the attitudes and actions of elected officials to their religious beliefs. But even those who share the same beliefs may differ on political issues, Erb noted.

"Beliefs will shape opinions, but people of good will come to different decisions," explained Erb, a one-time seminarian and current parishioner at Holy Redeemer-St. Francis Xavier Parish in Rochester.

Erb recalled one incident in which the head of the Rochester Teacher's Union charged that Erb would not support public education because of his Catholic background. As a county legislator, Erb said he *did* support it.

"When attacks are made on that level, they are attacking the wrong issues," noted Erb, who served on the Monroe County Legislature for four years. "Catholics can serve in office quite freely and serve the public, too."

Serving the public is the main goal for officials, according to William Polito, a Monroe County legislator (8th District-Webster). Polito compared his responsibilities to those of a lawyer representing a client.

"My political philosophy is that I represent a certain number of people and that I need to take into consideration their position on important issues. I would generally follow that direction unless it was a matter of conscience," he remarked.

A pro-life Republican, Polito said Wilder was trying to promote his own political career by attacking Thomas' Catholic upbringing.

Polito observed that the Thomas-Wilder situation once again brings the separation of church and state back into the political arena.

But Thomas is not the first politician in recent years to be questioned about his religious beliefs. New York Gov. Mario Cuomo, for example, has been scrutinized repeatedly for his position on abortion.

In response to accusations that his politics conflict with his Catholic faith, Cuomo has told several interviewers that he must take into consideration the opinions of *all* his constituents — many of whom are not Catholic.

Joanne VanZandt agreed with Cuomo's philosophy. A Monroe County legislator (10th District-parts of Brighton, Henrietta and Pittsford), she said she must vote in a manner that best represents her constituents.

"The church has definite views, but the constituents' views may differ," explained VanZandt. "I have to reflect the thoughts of the voters."

Nevertheless, VanZandt said moral convictions are an important qualification for public office.

"I could not vote for something I see as immoral," noted VanZandt, a parishioner at Church of the Transfiguration in Pittsford.

When it comes to the question of mixing religion with politics, Chemung County Executive G. Thomas Tranter Jr. believes politicians should strive to do their jobs well.

"I do my job here the best I know how," commented Tranter, a parishioner at St. Patrick's in Elmira. "Of course a person is influenced by their upbringing and religion, but my fundamental philosophy is to try to keep them separate from politics."

In the same vein, Tranter remarked that Judge Thomas should be judged on his legal qualifications, not his religious beliefs.

"I prefer to judge someone on how they respond to questions, instead of making conclusions because they are a member of a particular organization," he said.

Polito, on the other hand, said too many Catholics misinterpret the meaning of separation of church and state, and are afraid to stand up for their rights.

"I think that generally Catholics — and especially some bishops and laity — have been intimidated into believing that the separation of church and state means that Catholics and Catholic politicians have to be second-class citizens," remarked Polito, who has held political office for nine years.

"The constitutional mandate of separation of church and state is being interpreted as separation of God and moral principles from government," he lamented.

In an era of moral decline, Polito said he feels that the Catholic Church is one of the few institutions that can keep our society from falling apart.

"The Catholic Church is the only institution strong enough to stand between a lack of moral values and utter chaos," he said. "It's a question of having a standard out there. If the Catholic Church does not hold to a standard, then there is absolutely nothing else out there to hold the line."

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Corrections

Last week's story on efforts to return the Tridentine Mass contained two errors.

A quotation attributed to Father Benedict Ehmann indicated that Pope Pius IV quashed a move during the Council of Trent to approve use of the vernacular for Mass. Father Ehmann actually said it was Pope Pius V.

The story also referred to a movement that began in the 1840s as "the Theological Movement." The correct name was the Liturgical Movement.

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Sister 'Peggy' Whalen, RSM, 74; longtime teacher and principal

Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated Tuesday, Aug. 20, for Sister Marguerite (Peggy) Whalen, RSM, at the Mercy Motherhouse Chapel, 1437 Blossom Road.



Sister Peggy died of cancer Aug. 18, 1991, at the age of 74.

A Rochester native, Sister Peggy was born July 7, 1917. She graduated from Our Lady of Mercy High School in 1935, Nazareth Normal School in 1937 and St. Bonaventure University in 1944 with a bachelor's degree in education.

She entered the Mercy congregation in 1935, professing her final vows in 1941. For many years, she was known as Sister Mary Richard.

Between 1938 and 1980, Sister Peggy was involved in education at both the elementary and secondary level. She taught at Holy Cross, St. James, St. John the Evangelist (Humboldt Street) and St. Charles Borromeo, all in Rochester; St. Louis in Pittsford; and St. Michael in Newark.

In 1950, Sister Peggy became the founding principal of St. Louis School in Pittsford, which she served until 1954. From 1955-58 she was the principal of St. John the Evangelist. She also served stints as the principal of St. Cecilia (1972-75) and of St. Thomas the Apostle (1978-80).

Sister Peggy twice was assigned to teach at Our Lady of Mercy High School, from

1944-50 and from 1958-68, teaching algebra, introduction to business and general science.

Sister Joyce McGinn, a student of Sister Peggy's at Mercy and later principal at St. Michael in Newark, remembered her as fair teacher and a mild person — but always firmly in control of her classes.

"She loved teaching," Sister McGinn recalled. "It was just very much a part of herself. Even when she was just talking with people, she was sharing her knowledge."

After her formal teaching career ended in 1980, Sister Peggy served as the motherhouse coordinator (1980-82), as executive secretary in the congregation's administration office (1981-87), and as financial assistant in the congregation's gift shop and coordinator of the Mercy High School bookstore (1989-91).

In addition, from 1987-89, Sister Peggy assisted with religious education and secretarial work at St. Gregory's Parish in Marion.

"She was a strong-willed, determined yet kind, generous, very hardworking, prayerful and a humble woman," noted Sister McGinn, who lived with Sister Peggy for the past five years.

Sister Peggy is survived by her brother James Whalen and his wife, Eileen, of Glenarm, Northern Ireland.

Interment was in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

— Lee Strong