

Group aims to educate, activate

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

If, as the old saying goes, "Knowledge is strength," parishioners at St. Rita's in Webster and St. Mary's in Canandaigua may have found a spiritual equivalent to the Charles Atlas program.

The two parishes offer Witnessing With the Poor, a program designed to educate people about social problems — and of ways of responding to these problems.

Begun in 1987 at St. Rita's, the program consists of parishioners delivering five- to six-minute talks during Masses about such topics as unemployment, welfare, homelessness and

of things that come out, for example, in the bulletin."

"It's a conscience-raising effort to let people know we cannot be comfortable and let these ills continue in our society," noted Father John Reif, St. Rita's pastor.

The program has had a noticeable effect on parishioners, Father Reif said.

"I see a much greater awareness in people's minds about the deep-rooted problems that are in the lives of the poor," Father Reif continued. "Their lives are so complicated, and there are no quick, easy solutions."

According to Kwiatkowski, one of the keys to the program's success is that the talks are presented by parishioners, not "experts."

with the issue in some way, and even visiting these agencies.

Part of Sue Markowski's preparations for a January, 1991, talk about rural poverty involved a visit to the Rushville Health Center. There, the St. Rita's parishioner learned of a need for warm clothing. Following her talk, Markowski collected two carloads of winter clothing from St. Rita's parishioners.

"It made you feel so good because you knew that people were more aware of (the rural poor) and you were doing something," Markowski recalled.

As part of the talks, witnesses also present opportunities for parishioners to respond to the issue. Sometimes that response might involve collecting items or money — as in Markowski's case. Other suggested responses might be prayer, volunteering, or writing cards or letters to public officials.

In the spring of 1989, for example,



The group's logo emphasizes community.

ple," Father Donnelly continued. "If all we're doing is taking the Body of Christ to ourselves and we're not being the Body of Christ outside the church, then we're missing something."

In both parishes, the groups coordinating Witnessing With the Poor are subcommittees of the parish social ministry committees. Although WWP



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor

St. Rita's parishioners Peg DeFranco (left), Mary Ann Kwiatkowski (center) and Felice Armignacco have been members of Witnessing with the Poor's steering committee for nearly five years.

rural poverty. The program was introduced to St. Mary's in 1991, and organizers at St. Rita's see it as something that could be of value at other parishes.

"The idea is just to raise the awareness of the people in the community about the issues," said Mary Ann Kwiatkowski, one of the three core members of the St. Rita's group. "We figure that after people hear things several times, then something is going to hit home, and they're going to do something about it."

One advantage of WWP's approach, Kwiatkowski added, is that the issues are "constantly being put before the people verbally, rather than the loads

"The fact that you have people who are also parishioners saying, 'I looked this up and I think this is important that you know this,' I think that just adds credibility," Kwiatkowski said.

The program's format calls for a group of people to serve as "witnesses," who select topics and — working individually or in pairs — begin to prepare short talks to be delivered at the end of Masses, usually one week-end each month. The speakers also remain in church after Masses to provide more information for interested parishioners.

Preparation for each talk consists of reading about the particular topic, calling individuals or agencies that work

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Father William Donnelly

Thelma Bechtold and Norma Murphy spoke at St. Rita's about homelessness. They brought with them response postcards parishioners could mail to state legislators. Bechtold said that 600 cards were taken by parishioners following the talks.

The success of the program at St. Rita's has begun to attract attention. Father William Donnelly, parochial vicar at St. Mary's Parish, read about the program in a magazine and brought it to the attention of his parish's social ministry committee. He liked the Witnessing With the Poor approach to addressing social issues.

"It gives people a chance to make a response," Father Donnelly said. "Ideally, it invites people to take some kind of concrete action, not just give money."

Father Donnelly also liked the fact that the talks were "presented in the context of the liturgy."

"It certainly is well within the scope of what we are called to be as a peo-

addresses some of the same issues as her parish's social ministry committee, Bechtold said the approaches are different.

Bechtold said the social ministry committee coordinates such activities as collections. "But they don't really get before the parish and talk about particular topics," she said.

Thus WWP helps people to understand issues, not just respond to them through means provided by the social ministry committee, Bechtold observed. The two committees, she suggested, "work hand-in-hand."

And even if the Witnessing With the Poor talks do not lead a sudden, obvious influx of people to direct action, the program still serves a purpose, Markowski observed.

"I think that even if you can reach a handful of people and inform them that they can help more than just by putting a dollar in the basket, then you've done something," Markowski concluded.

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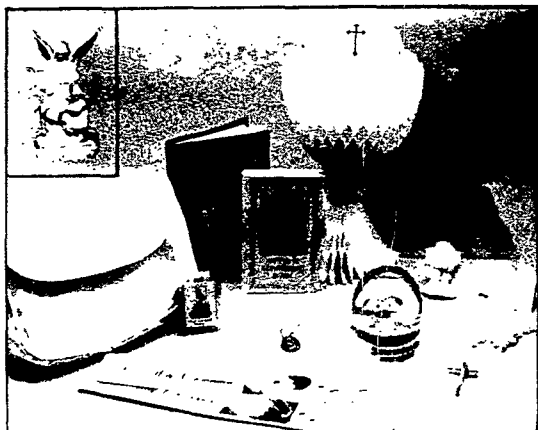
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