

Saved from closing, Avon school on rebound

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

AVON — Father James C. Burke, pastor of St. Agnes Parish, 108 Prospect St., said he believes that the more schoolparents involve themselves in supporting the school, the more his parish benefits.

"Many parents are not only pro-school, but pro-parish," he said, explaining that many school parents participate in other St. Agnes activities.

The pastor added that several of his parishioners attended St. Agnes School in their youth — a phenomenon he hopes will recur among their offspring. Referring to the parental support of the school, Father Burke concluded: "Really what we're doing is investing in the future of the parish."

The St. Agnes pastor's positive comments about the school point to a dramatic turnaround. Just two years ago — in April, 1990 — St. Agnes' parish council voted to close the school.

The vote was prompted by concerns that the school was a financial drain on the parish. Supporters of the closing maintained that the parish needed its limited income for other ministries.

Such concerns were outlined by the parish's last pastor, Father Charles Bennett, in a December, 1989, letter asking the diocese for financial assistance. Father Bennett died a month later, and Father Burke assumed pastoral duties in June, 1990.

The parish council's vote to close the school met staunch opposition from dozens of school parents, and the closing was eventually tabled by the diocese.

In justifying the diocesan decision, Bishop Matthew H. Clark noted that the school closing notice came late in the school year, and that the parish should wait to see whether the new pastor could reconcile parish groups fighting each other about the school.

Today, Father Burke said, the parish provides 30 percent of the school's annual budget, with the rest coming from tuition, fundraisers and other sources. Apparently, the parish's school subsidy does not drain any of the parish's other ministries, he added.

Once the diocese tabled the move to close the school, both sides took a step back from their positions and worked together on the issue, noted Michael Carroll, school board president.

"A big part of our success over the last few years was in a striving to get away from that bickering," Carroll said, noting that he personally urged parishioners "to approach this in a calm and adult manner" that would "accomplish something."

The parish certainly has accomplished something in the last two years,



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor
Vicki Rose, principal of St. Agnes School in Avon, listens attentively as two kindergartners explain a recent project to her.

increasing the school's enrollment from 65 students in 1989-90 to 83 students for 1991-92, according to Vicki Rose, principal.

In addition to the increased enrollment in grades kindergarten through six, the school has seen a dramatic increase in pre-kindergarten enrollment, from 29 students in 1989-90 to 45 students for 1991-92.

And 95 students have registered for grades K-6 next year, Rose said.

The pre-K enrollment also bodes well for St. Agnes' future student numbers, since approximately 50 percent of the pre-K students will go on into the school's kindergarten program, Rose observed.

Pre-school teacher Cindy Zhe credited her program with attracting new students because it made parents comfortable with Catholic education.

"Once you get people in the door, they feel more welcome and consider a Catholic education," she said.

Rose and Carroll also attributed the increase in enrollment to a vigorous recruitment effort the school undertook in the wake of the closing controversy back in 1990.

The school has used posters, bulletin inserts, and radio and television adver-

tisements to inspire enrollment at St. Agnes.

But none of these efforts works as well as the personal touch embodied in letters to potential school parents, school supporters said.

The school's recruitment committee — chaired by parent Kathy Cook — focuses its letter-writing on Avon-area families with four year olds, in hope of persuading them to enroll their offspring in the school's kindergarten program.

Cook said that her 10-member committee obtains lists of parents' names from area Catholic churches and local nursery schools. The committee then sends each parent a personally signed — not photocopied — letter.

If a nursery school declines to provide parents' names, the committee asks the school to distribute general letters to each of the school's parents, Cook said.

Cook said the letters emphasize St. Agnes' small class size; its teachers' attention to students' individual concerns; its gym, music and art programs; its "family" atmosphere; and that fact that field trips can't be cut out of the school budget because parent volunteers provide transportation.

The letters also invite parents to attend information nights. Four such nights over this school year attracted a total of 18 new school families, Cook said.

Carroll also stressed that recruiters emphasize the school's Christian environment, subtly contrasting it with the fact the public schools are not at liberty to inculcate their students with religious values.

Word of mouth also plays a part in recruiting students to the school, Rose said, pointing to parent Trisha Koomen's experience as an example.

Koomen and her husband, Hans, moved to Avon with their four children two years ago, and were looking for a school that would echo the quality education they found at Public School No. 12 in Rochester.

One of their new neighbors, who happened to be Zhe, gave them information on the school's programs. The Koomens have since enrolled all their children at St. Agnes, and Trisha now teaches an art class.

"Our kids are happy here," Koomen said of the school. "There's a lot of cross-grade interaction. You get to know all the kids, and help out all their squabbles."

Courier wins nine awards in state press competition

The *Catholic Courier* won nine awards at the New York Press Association's 1991 Better Newspaper Contest, held during the NYPA's convention in Albany from March 27-29.

Photo Editor Babette G. Augustin took home four honors from the annual convention, including third place in the Photographer of the Year category. NYPA judges said Augustin's work displayed "good use of wide lens," and was "well-printed."

Augustin also placed third in the Sports Action Photo category for her picture of girls' basketball players from Aquinas Institute and Church-

ville-Chili scrambling for a loose ball during a sectional title game at the Rochester War Memorial in February.

In addition, Augustin received honorable mention for Feature Photo in Division II — papers with circulations of more than 5,000 readers — and honorable mention for Pictorial Photo.

Staff Writer Rob Cullivan received honorable mention for Writer of the Year in Division III, which encompasses weeklies with circulations of more than 8,000. Cullivan's entries included news stories on Catholic reaction to strife in Yugoslavia and Haiti to articles on the abortion debate and

diocesan school closings.

The *Courier* also won two awards in the Typography Class, receiving third-place honors in Best Use of Color for its Christmas, 1991 front page. "Good use of color with excellent registration for reverse type," remarked the NYPA judges. The illustration by freelance artist Matthew Morgaine showed the star of Bethlehem over the stable where Christ was born.

The Christmas illustration also won third place for Best Special Section Cover in Division II — papers with circulations of more than 5,000.

Morgaine also took third place in

Graphic Illustration in Division II for his his Aug. 1 illustration of minorities in the prison system. The judges said the artist's work was marked by "fine detail" that gave "good depth" to the illustration.

The *Catholic Courier* also won first place for a promotional poster — depicting a homeless Jesus in the city — by freelance artist John Kastner. The poster, which was used in a diocesan-wide effort to boost circulation, "effectively promoted the paper's image as a unique and issue-oriented news source for the Catholics of the Diocese of Rochester," the judges said.