

Sense of community grows at four-parish cluster in Tier

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

CORNING — Two years after four Southern Tier parishes formed a cluster, Father Philip Billotte has seen a growing sense of community.

"For our RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) on the Easter Vigil, the church has been packed. Those are probably the two biggest gatherings I've seen in a long time," said Father Billotte, parochial vicar for the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community.

Father Billotte also expects about 300 people to attend the cluster's first-ever picnic on Sept. 13 at Craig Park in Painted Post.

"I feel the enthusiasm; this is a good sign," remarked Father Billotte, who added that organizers hope to make the picnic an annual affair. "There's still a lot to do, but these things stick out in my mind."

RCIA and the picnic are among numerous ways the cluster's parishes now operate as a single community.

The cluster comprises three parishes in Corning and one in Painted Post, all within two miles of each other: St. Mary's, 155 State St., Corning; St. Patrick's, 274 Denison Parkway E., Corning; St. Vincent DePaul, 222 Dodge Ave., Corning; and Immaculate Heart of Mary, 115 E. High St., Painted

Post.

This Southern Tier community is the most recent of six such clusters now existing within the Rochester diocese.

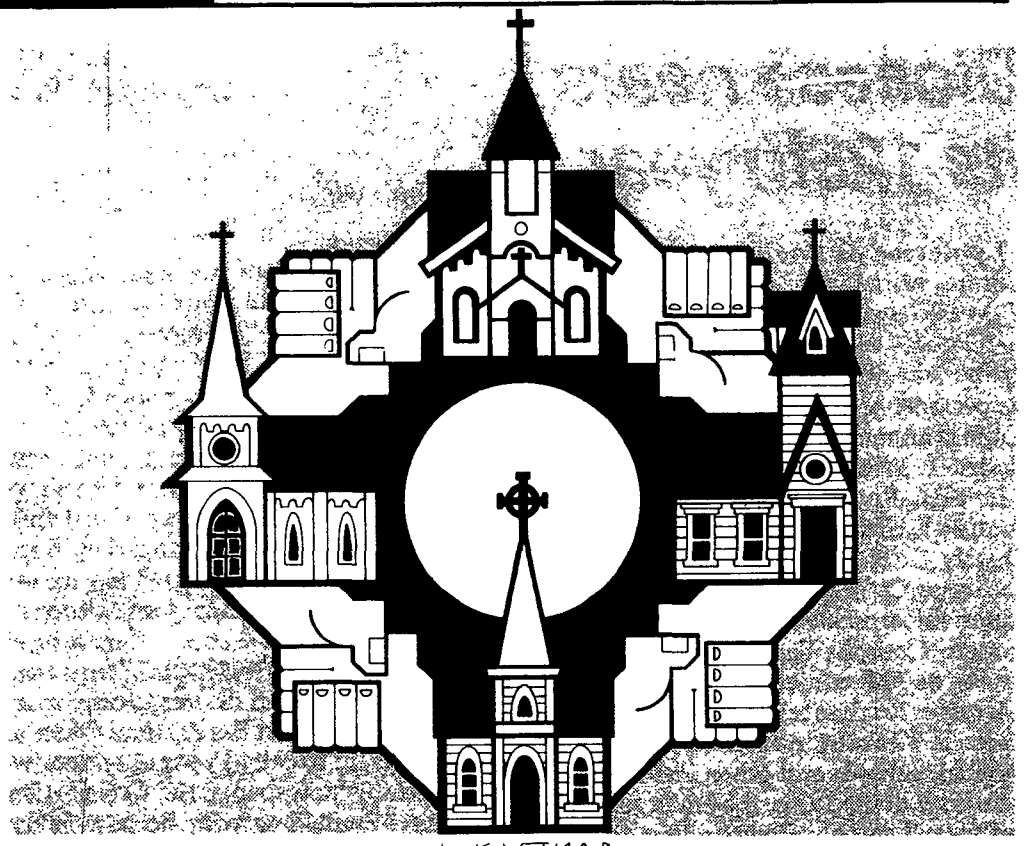
Plans for the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community's formation were originally announced by Bishop Matthew H. Clark in October of 1989, when he notified the parishes that they would be served by three priests on a full-time basis, rather than four, following the retirement of Father Francis Davis, former pastor of St. Patrick's, in June of 1990.

The original three priests who took over the cluster after Father Davis' retirement are still serving the community today: the pastor, Father William V. Spilly, who is currently on sabbatical; Father Billotte; and Father John H. Hayes, parochial vicar.

All three priests reside in St. Mary's rectory. The cluster also includes three retired priests living at St. Vincent's; one deacon; and a pastoral assistant/associate — along with a religious-education coordinator — at each parish.

Together with the reduced number of full-time priests, several other changes came about due to the clustering plan:

- Four weekend Masses were eliminated, dropping the total number from 16 to 12 (one on Saturday and two on Sunday at each parish.)



- In addition to the pre-existing parish councils, a common council was formed with representatives from each parish council.

- St. Vincent's has become the venue for a central office where the four parishes' finances are now consolidated and handled by one business manager.

- The liturgy, social ministry and Christian formation committees have become joint efforts as well.

Father Walter Wainwright, the current pastor at St. Mary's Church in Canandaigua, served as pastor at Immaculate Heart of Mary from 1981-90. He recalled that, in the months leading up to the cluster implementation, his Immaculate Heart parishioners openly acknowledged the reality that there were no longer enough priests to go around.

"They were accepting a fact of life," said Father Wainwright. "They would have preferred that things could have stayed the way they had been, but they were open to change."

Father Billotte noted that a major concern was "people who wanted to make sure they wouldn't be forgotten. You really can't blame them."

Making sure that the parishioners' needs are continually met can often be a difficult task, Father Billotte admitted. "This is the busiest I've ever been," he said.

Mike Sorge, parish council chairman at St. Mary's in Corning, believes that the concept of four parishes operating as one community — yet still preserving separate identities — has worked.


"The churches have retained their individuality, but within that framework have worked toward the common concerns that we now have to deal with," said Sorge, a former member of the cluster's common council. "You still feel the identity (of individual parishes). On the plus side, I also think that people are now more comfortable about going to other churches (within the cluster)."

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