

Ecumenical director bridged gaps between faiths

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — As a child, Marjorie S. Nurnberg recalled that some of her fellow Catholics — even some of her Catholic school teachers — believed there was no salvation outside the church.

"My own mother said that was wrong," Nurnberg remembered, noting that her mother based her opinion "on a real sense of God's love for everyone."

The Second Vatican Council vindicated her mother's position on God's universal love in its Decree on Ecumenism, said Nurnberg, director of the diocesan Department of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

Indeed, the document stated that all who had received Christian baptism "have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic church."

"When the documents in Vatican II came out, we really felt justified," the 70-year-old Nurnberg said with a smile. "Once we have recognition of baptism, we realize that we're not the only Christians in the world."

Making that realization come alive for her fellow Catholics has been Nurnberg's task since the early 1970s, when she began working on the diocesan Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. Prior to and during her work for the diocese, Nurnberg was also active in such Elmira-area ecumenical efforts as the Day of Prayer for Christian Unity.

In 1979, she was appointed the first lay director of the diocese's ecumenism



In Providence, R.I., April 12, Marjorie S. Nurnberg received the James Fitzgerald Award for ecumenical work from the National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical Officers.

S. John Willkin/Staff photographer

office, and she has since shuttled back and forth between the Pastoral Center in Gates and her Elmira home giving her all to ecumenical and interreligious work.

In the interim, she has also served as chairwoman of the diocesan Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, and as a representative to and president of the former Genesee Ecumenical Ministries (currently known as the Greater Rochester Community of Churches).

Among the diocesan accomplishments to which her office has contributed over the years: the creation of

an Interfaith Forum which has since seen Christians, Muslims and Jews dialogue on such issues as the war in Bosnia; a covenant between Rochester's Episcopal and Catholic dioceses; and a 1986 pastoral manual on ecumenical guidelines and instructions for sacramental activities.

Nurnberg will retire from her directorship this week and will be honored by the diocese at a luncheon on Friday, April 22, at the Memorial Art Gallery Cafe, 500 University Ave.

She leaves her office on a high note, having been named the first lay person — and the first woman — to receive the James Fitzgerald Award for ecumenical work from the National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical Officers. She received the award at an April 12 luncheon in Providence, R.I.

"I got a standing ovation by all these priests and bishops," she beamed. "It's gets a little heady for a lady."

Her colleagues in the interfaith community also applauded Nurnberg as a fine emissary of the Catholic community to Christians and non-Christians alike.

"She is one of the persons who exhibits an ecumenical spirit," commented the Rev. Lawrence Witmer, currently on sabbatical from his position as executive director of the Greater Rochester Community of Churches.

"It's not just a job with her," he added. "I think those persons who exhibit that kind of spirit are still rare in the religious world."

Rabbi Judea B. Miller, of Temple B'Rith Kodesh of Brighton, noted that Nurnberg was instrumental in opening up relations between Catholics and Jews in Rochester.

"She's one of the most decent people I've met in the Rochester area," he said. "She's always there and she's always on the side of the angels."

Nurnberg pointed out that part of her success was based on a deep respect for other faiths. She said, for example, that when the Interfaith Forum first began participants would hold hands and pray together at events, and all would pray to their respective Gods. Yet, not all were comfortable with this communal prayer, she noted.

A Jewish woman, for example, acknowledged her discomfort in praying to Jesus Christ at one of the forum's events. Nurnberg noted that the forum has since changed its communal prayer in light of such experiences. Currently, forum members stand in respectful silence as each group takes turns to pray in its own fashion, she said.

Although progressive in her thinking on ecumenical and interfaith affairs, Nurnberg stressed that she has never left her Catholic roots — particularly those planted in her days attending Catholic school.

"Without that background, I think I would be floundering," she said.

Most importantly, she acknowledged that she has grown in her own faith as she has learned about others.

"There's always the acknowledgement among religions that there's something greater than all of us and that loves us very much and that we need to react to that," she concluded.



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