



Altar servers Megan Westbrook (left) and Jamie Schemps help Father Walter F. Cushing, pastor of St. Cecilia's Church, receive the gifts during Mass.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Altar girls

Continued from page 1

This issue has touched off controversy as well as confusion, with one recent example occurring this past winter at St. Ann's Church in Hornell. Father Elmer J. Schmidt, pastor, informed the parish — prior to the Vatican's announcement — that St. Ann's was about to open up altar serving to females for the first time.

The pastor's decision prompted outrage among a faction of parishioners. Twenty-two signed a letter of protest and circulated it among the parish community. In addition, five members of the St. Ann's parish council submitted their resignations.

According to Paul Argentieri, a Hornell attorney who was one of the letter's signers, altar girls constituted just one of several areas of concern.

"Is it really about girls being altar servers? I don't think so at all," Argentieri stated. "The limited and minor issue of female altar servers is a smoke-screen for the real issues of major theo-

cratical changes that the social science liberals desire the church to undertake, for example abortion and homosexuality," Argentieri stated.

Argentieri, a member of the national conservative group Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, charged that female altar serving is "a prop upon the larger stage wherein there is an organized and concerted effort to secure women for the priesthood."

Argentieri also expressed concern about Bishop Clark's longstanding policy on altar girls, saying that "bishops like Matthew Clark figure they can do whatever the heck they want."

Michael Colomaio, who serves as president of the St. Ann's parish council, said that since interpretations vary on the subject, he simply chose to trust his pastor's decision.

"In my mind, there was no doubt that Father Schmidt did what he thought was best," Colomaio said. "(The dissenters') concerns are genuine, but you've got to have a little faith."

He also rebutted Argentieri's comment about Bishop Clark by saying that "if the pope had a problem with any

bishop, he had ample authority to remove him."

Colomaio noted that approximately 10 girls from St. Ann's are now performing regular duty as altar servers. "Some people haven't dropped (the issue), but the majority don't have a problem now," said Colomaio.

Up to this point, however, several U.S. bishops and parishes have refrained from using altar girls until receiving the Vatican's green light. With that having now occurred, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops announced June 23 that they "overwhelmingly" support the Vatican's ruling from this past March.

"It is the opinion of the NCCB that the option of having women and girls serve at the altar is a welcome one, subject always to the guidance of the diocesan bishop," stated the motion approved by the bishops.

Bishop Hickey emphasized that this development does not guarantee instant and universal application of altar girls, due to the fact that the Vatican and NCCB have only *approved* the practice rather than *mandated* it.

"It is possible that some bishops may

not use this permission, because the Holy See says it's up to each bishop," Bishop Hickey pointed out. "Some bishops are a bit taken aback by what seems to be a sudden shift."

Overall, Bishop Hickey thinks that the time will soon come where female altar servers will be a non-issue.

"Some few priests may have a problem with girl servers, but the majority will be quite willing as long as the Holy See permits it," Bishop Hickey acknowledged.

For people like 13-year-old Megan Westbrook, it's difficult to comprehend what all the fuss is about. An altar server at St. Cecilia's Church in Irondequoit, Megan is attracted to altar duty in much the same way as her male counterparts.

"I wanted to serve because I like being involved in the service. It gives you a feeling that you're a part of the church; you're an important part of the Mass," she observed.

Megan and her half-sister, 12-year-old Danielle Mauro, are among a large reserve of altar girls at St. Cecilia's, where more than 75 percent of the altar servers are female. Both Megan and Danielle have been altar girls since they were in fourth grade.

This trend has grown since Megan and Danielle's parents, David and Marti Mauro, took over the task of scheduling St. Cecilia's altar servers two years ago.

At that time, David Mauro said, there were only about 12 regular altar servers in the entire parish. Since then, that number has tripled.

"How can turn girls away when they want to be interested in the church?" he wondered.

"If girls can do the job just as well as boys, why shouldn't they do it?" his wife added.

Danielle reports being a central figure in an interesting twist of irony earlier this year at Irondequoit's St. Margaret Mary's parish, where she attends school. Her teacher announced that an altar server was needed for a service at St. Margaret Mary Church that day, and asked if anyone in the class had serving experience.

Danielle was the only person to raise a hand, so the teacher sent her along. Yet neither Danielle nor her teacher was aware that the parish didn't employ female altar servers. Still, Danielle served at the Mass without incident.

David Mauro, who himself was an altar boy while growing up as a parishioner at St. Cecilia's, remarked that all youths, be they male or female, can derive satisfaction from altar serving.

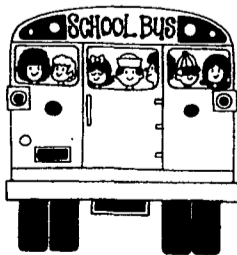
"You stay more focused on the Mass, and I enjoyed the responsibility," he said. "These kids enjoy it — some of them, you can just see the excitement in their faces. And you look at Mom and Dad in the pews, and you can see they're excited about seeing their kids up there."

DON'T GET LEFT BEHIND

Year after year, awards judges and readers alike know the Catholic Courier provides some of the best education coverage of any weekly newspaper in New York state.

That's why your ad in our August 11, Education Section will be especially well-read.

Whether you offer continuing education for the mature student or school togs for tots, don't miss the opportunity to instruct more than 70,000 readers about your services through an ad in this award-winning issue!



Education Issue
Thursday, August 11, 1994

Deadline: Friday, July 29

Advertising Rate: \$18.90/col. inch (5 column format)

To place your advertisement or for more information

Call: (716) 328-4340

Writer

Continued from page 1

My breakfasts with the late Father George S. Wood at the parish rectory ... a not-so-stern Father Eisemann leading us on our annual altar boy bike hikes to Braddocks Bay State Park, where he served as softball pitcher and distributor of his self-proclaimed "bug juice" (actually, it was Kool-Aid) ... and the strong friendship I struck up with Father John T. Reif, which has only continued to grow over a 20-year period.

Of course, not only did my associations with the clergy increase, but the entire experience also brought me closer to my Roman Catholic faith. I can't say it's a coincidence that, two decades after I was an altar server, I happen to be writing for the *Catholic Courier*.

What also impressed me is that so many of my fellow altar boys (there were

not yet altar girls at Mother of Sorrows) honored their commitment so firmly — whether it be midnight Mass at Christmas or 6:30 a.m. Mass in the summer.

Altar-serving is a noble duty for a young boy or girl. It's a chance for a youth to become responsible for duties other than getting good grades and cleaning one's room. For me, altar serving was probably the first duty I ever performed where I felt I was treated as an adult. I learned a lot about adult life during those years as well: the joy experienced by couples getting married; the grief during funeral services.

For youths who don't find attending Mass very stimulating, or for those who'd like to be more a "part of the action," altar serving could be the answer.

And even when you grow older and move on to other things, you may be surprised to look back several years later and see what the experience has done for you and your faith.