

# Christmas FEATURE

## Out with the wrath, and in with the warmth

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

To chastise or to encourage, that is the question. This coming weekend, church parking lots will be jammed and seating will be scarce unless you show up well before Mass begins. Meanwhile, many of the people taking up these spaces won't resurface in your parish until Easter, or possibly even next Christmas.

The church's attitude toward these "twice-a-year" Catholics can go in one of two directions: Is Christmas the time to issue stern reminders that weekly obligations are not being fulfilled? Or can the holiday season be viewed as an opportunity to cheerfully invite further participation in parish life?

Of the diocesan pastors interviewed for this story, all strongly agreed that the latter approach is more effective in today's Catholic Church.

Father Philip J. Billotte, borrowing from rock star Rod Stewart's recent hit ballad, sums up his approach as "Have I told you lately that I love you?" He added that this disposition must be evident in the words and actions of all parishioners.

"The welcoming part gives the person a warm feeling. It's not the fantastic liturgy or all the great music. It's, 'Can I form a relationship with these people,'" said Father Billotte, who serves as pastor of the Naples/Prattsburg Catholic Community.

Father Billotte noted that "Jesus welcomed anyone who came to him," so neither he nor any parishioner owns the privilege to pass judgment on infrequent churchgoers.

The fact that these people decide to attend church at all should be viewed as an important step, noted Father Thomas H. Watts.

"You always hope there is some spark of faith that will bring them further," said Father Watts, pastor of St. James Church in Waverly and St. Pius X Church in Van Etten. "On those occasions I take a very friendly stance and say that we welcome you to come every weekend and become more involved in parish life."

"I feel it's wonderful that they're there. They may reevaluate what it means to be a Christian and then ask themselves, 'Is this enough,'" remarked Father Alexander H. Bradshaw, pastor of Holy Ghost Church in Gates.

Yet Father Bradshaw, who became a priest in 1985 after several years of practicing law, noted that a fully



Photo illustration by S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

benevolent approach from the pulpit hasn't always been the case.

"I remember the days when I used to be in the congregation and at some of the (Christmas) homilies, I felt that people were being put on a guilt trip," Father Bradshaw said.

Father Billotte acknowledged that earlier in his life, he was "part of a tradition" that adhered to a more judgmental attitude.

"I must say I've been guilty of that — it was something put into me," he remarked. "One of the things I've had to learn to do is be welcoming."

The example of Father Billotte's attitude shift is a common one, Father Watts pointed out.

"I think in today's church, the fire and brimstone is probably almost gone," said Father Watts. "With the changes in society, people are very, very sensitive. If you say something wrong, that gives them the excuse to leave the parish entirely."

Father Bradshaw agreed that "a good number will be self-conscious" if they're not used to attending Mass regularly, and the use of strong criticism may further alienate them.

Father Paul J. Ryan, pastor of the Cayuga Team Ministry Cluster, acknowledged that a small percentage of diocesan priests still find it difficult to take an open-arms approach. Despite their feelings, he said, "I hope there aren't any that would go up there and lambaste people."

Father Ryan estimated that approximately 25 percent of his registered parishioners only attend Mass at the holidays, and that the vast majority of his regular churchgoers are senior citizens.

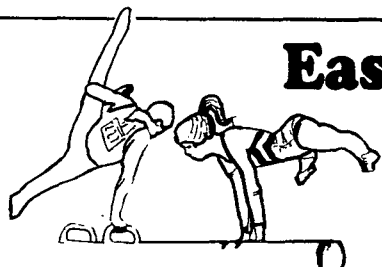
"Maybe if we spoke more to our culture and where we're at, we might be drawing people," he suggested.

The trick, he said, is to find a way to make parish life appealing to marginal Catholics while still reminding them that there are certain commitments they should observe.

"I just think we're going to win more people by kindness, although I'm certainly not going to be a doormat," Father Ryan commented.

"People still have to be reminded of their obligation," said Father Watts.

"My sense is that it's good to challenge people. You can make people feel welcome, and still challenge them, by being upbeat," Father Bradshaw added.



### Eastside Gymnastics

Classes for ages 5 through teens at all ability levels—Age group classes for Girls & Boys High School & USGF competition program

SPECIAL FOR CATHOLIC COURIER READERS

New Students can save \$5.00 on their registration with this ad.

★ New Classes begin January 2nd; No waiting lists yet! ★

**GIRLS PROGRAMS**  
age 5-7; Tues., 4:5-10pm, Sat., 11:45-12:55  
age 7-10; Wed., 5:30-6:40pm, Sat., 1-2:10pm  
age 10-teens; Fri., 4:15-5:25pm

**CO-ED Mini-Gymnasts**  
age 4½-6  
Fri. 5:20-6:20

1776 East Ave. (near Winton Rd.) 271-3517

Mercy

EDUCATING TODAY'S YOUNG WOMEN  
FOR TOMORROW'S WORLD

Wishing you a blessed Christmas  
and the happiest of New Years!



Registration for 1995-96: Wednesday, February 15, 1995

4:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.  
Grades 7-12

Our Lady of Mercy High School  
1437 Blossom Road, Rochester, NY 14610 • 288-7120

Make 1995 The Year For Your  
Dream Vacation To Come True!

Call us for all your travel needs in the New Year.

Best Wishes for a Holiday Season  
filled with the spirit of love and goodwill.

from:  
Judy Graper, Philomena Haskins,  
Sandy Sanzotta, Jenny Courtenay, and Sharon McGraw

Judy  
Graper  
Travel

(716) 385-3820

The Barn Bazaar  
Clover Street at Jefferson Road  
Pittsford, New York 14534

Peace

May the holiday season  
bring to all the fulfillment of its  
promise of joy and peace.

Nazareth  
College

4245 East Avenue  
Rochester, NY 14618  
586-2525