

Education

Parish libraries strive to fulfill families' needs

By Rob Cullinan
Staff writer

Almost two years after delegates to the 1993 diocesan Synod named lifelong religious education the diocese's most important priority, a growing number of parishes are responding to that call, in part, by updating and expanding their libraries.

Many parishes have long featured small libraries, book shelves, or reading rooms filled with Catholic literature. But today's Catholics want a much wider variety of resource material, including audio- and videotapes, to augment at home what they have learned at church, parish librarians observed.

These librarians agreed that Catholic families, in particular, desire to borrow everything from entertaining religious videos geared to their preschool children to such popular magazines as *St. Anthony's Messenger* and *Catholic Digest*.

Particularly in the turbulent post-Vatican II era, when a variety of cultural factors are combining to challenge the faithful's belief in Catholicism, Catholics seek reliable and easily accessible sources of information on their church's teachings, one expert noted.

"I think they're looking for the church to provide them some guidance," remarked Alice Leistman, associate director of religious education for St. Anne's Church in Rochester.

"They hunger for spirituality," she said of her fellow parishioners. "They're trying to get some clarification."

Leistman and a number of other observers added that many modern Catholics prefer video- or audiotapes to books because their viewing or listening can fit more easily into a busy person's schedule than can reading a book.

St. Anne's plans to create an audio-visual library which will provide parishioners with videos and tapes on such topics as Catholic morality; raising children in the faith; dealing with stress; and the importance of Scripture, she noted. The parish plans to hold a "Mardi Gras" celebration next year to raise funds for the A-V library, Leistman added.

In the past year, St. Theodore's Parish in Gates has established a video and screen-



David Higbee, coordinator of adult and children's religious education at Irondequoit's St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, sitting in the Irenaeus Center.

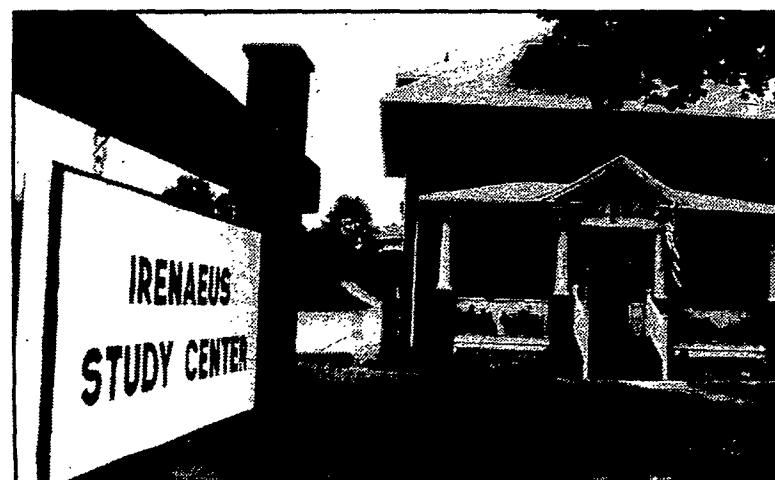
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Alice Leistman,
associate director
of religious education,
St. Anne's Church, Rochester

ing room, along with a book library, in its parish life center, located in the same building that houses All Saints Catholic Junior High, according to Sister Barbara Bartkowiak, OSF, pastoral associate.

She added that the library also boasts a collection of Italian literature geared to the large number of St. Theodore's parishioners who are of Italian origin or descent.

Mona Mattuzzi, religious education coordinator at St. Mary's of the Lake Church in Ontario, credited the parish's inter-generational sacramental program for exciting interest in creating a parish video library to supplement the parish's already existing book library.



The Irenaeus Center, 4536 St. Paul Boulevard, is housed in a renovated caretaker's house next to the church.

Started about five years ago, the inter-generational sacramental program uses videos to educate parents and their children about such topics as the Eucharist, she said. Such programming inspired many parents to ask if they could borrow the instructional videos, leading the parish to develop a formal video library, she recalled.

Eventually, magazines, books, audio cassettes and videos will all be available in a resource room, Mattuzzi explained, noting that, like other parishes, St. Mary's contains a large number of people who want resource materials they can use at home.

She said the parish is stressing, "Religion is everyday life, ... and it can go into (families') en-

tertainment as well."

St. Mary's Church in Bath also features a variety of videos for use by parishioners — videos that explore such topics as the sacraments and the church's beliefs, said Barbara Ayer, religious education coordinator.

The parish, which owns a satellite dish, also regularly recorded programs sponsored by the Catholic Telecommunications Network of America, the now-disbanded satellite television service provided by the U.S. bishops, she said.

Each parish supports its libraries through a variety of means, some incorporating their budgets in their overall religious education outlays, while others hold specific fundraisers

to benefit their lending rooms.

Additionally, some parish libraries welcome donations of books and other materials from parishioners to build their collections. Other parishes reject such donations, fearing that they will be saddled with outdated theological textbooks or unorthodox reading materials.

St. Thomas the Apostle Parish in Irondequoit, however, has combined both parishioner donations and its own purchases to create an extensive and respectable collection of Catholic literature, according to David Higbee, the parish's coordinator of adult and children's religious education.

The parish actually possesses three libraries, Higbee said — a general library located in the former school building; a more academic library located in the Irenaeus Center, a study center which also houses the third library created by parents who home-school their children.

Like many other parishes, St. Thomas the Apostle is currently upgrading its collection of books, weeding out old titles and replacing them with up-to-date books that appeal to everybody from pre-schoolers who like religious picture stories to scholarly theological and historical works geared to academically inclined Catholics, Higbee said.

The parish also uses its computer system to download such documents as Pope John Paul II's latest encyclical on ecumenism, "Ut Unum Sint" ("That They May Be One,") Higbee added. In this manner, parishioners can read the document several weeks before it is available to the public in print, he said.

As at other parishes, St. Thomas' most popular library titles tend to focus on the saints or are written by such popular figures as the late Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, Higbee said.

He added that the parish plans to expand its collection of audiotapes which are even more popular than Catholic videotapes.

"We are dealing increasingly with a post-literate society which explains why the audiotapes are so popular," Higbee said. "You can just pop them in and listen to them in your car."

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