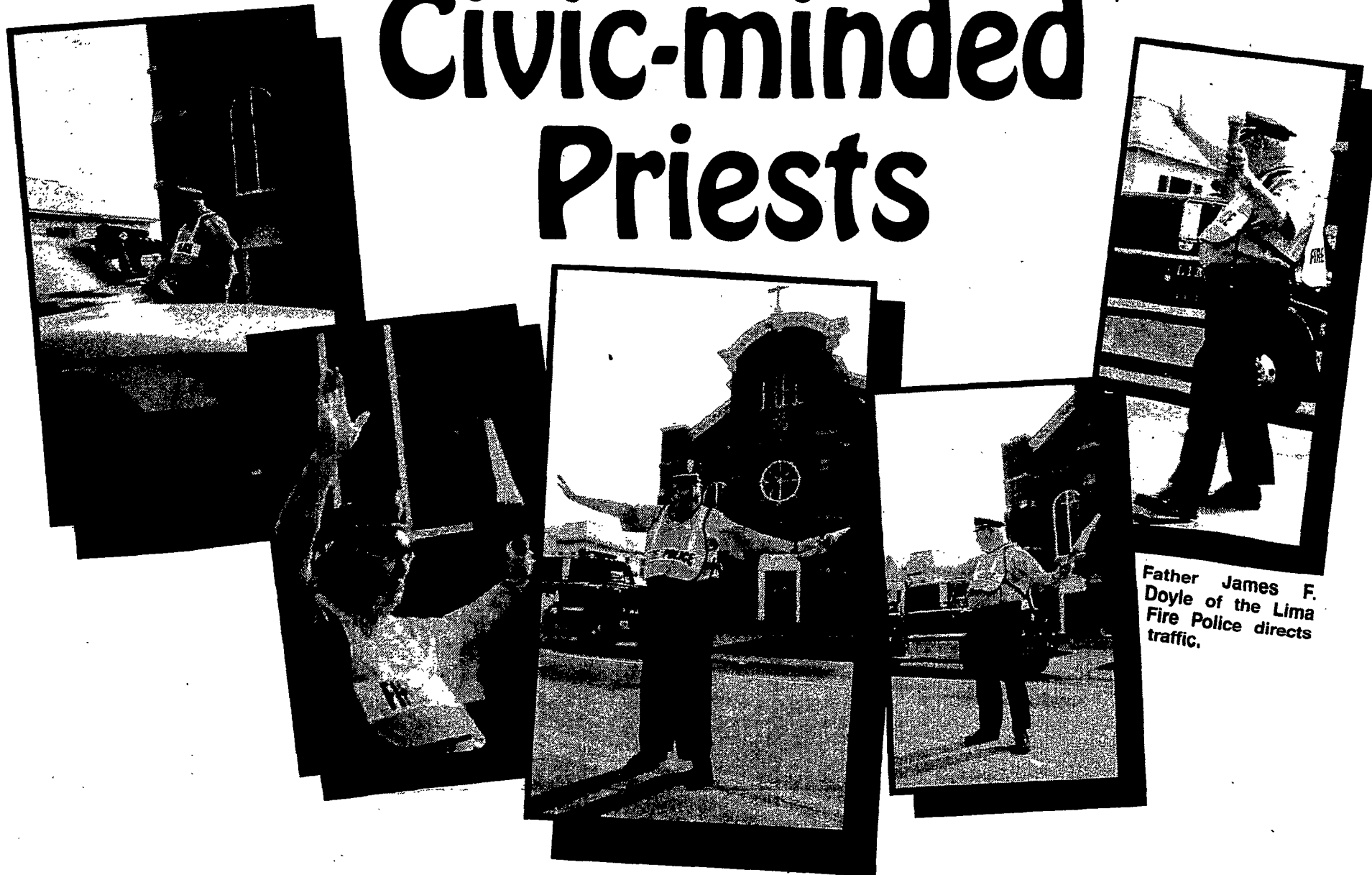




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Civic-minded Priests



Father James F. Doyle of the Lima Fire Police directs traffic.

Community work appeals to many

During his 16 years of volunteer fire-fighting, Father Eugene R. Weis startled a good many parishioners by bursting out from the rectory in response to an alarm.

"I was a driver, so I had to be the first one there," explained Father Weis, who currently serves as pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Owego.

Yet even if he hadn't been under such time pressures, Father Weis' love for his work might have caused his feet still to take wing.

"I liked the excitement," he added. "The adrenaline really starts pumping when the siren goes off and you know you're going to be part of the action to help somebody in need."

When a nearby fire siren would blare during Sunday Masses, he recalled, his excitement was accompanied by a feeling of frustration.

"The people in the pews would smile at me because they knew I wanted to go on the call, but I couldn't," he-remarked.

The allure of volunteerism is shared by several of Father Weis' fellow diocesan priests. They have served in a broad range of positions such as traffic director for fire departments; National Guard chaplain; police department chaplain; community activist; and even public

school-board president.

Father Weis said that priests who fill such roles send a message that priestly ministry can go well beyond parish duties.

"I wanted the people of my area to know that priests could get their hands dirty. They weren't up on a pedestal," he said.

Father Robert G. Kreckel, pastor of St. Mary of the Lake Church in Ontario, remarked that volunteerism can help a priest maintain a balanced perspective.

"I think it helps us understand this whole world we live in, where there's injustice, poverty, institutional racism and discrimination," Father Kreckel said. "I don't think the (Catholic) church is an island. It was meant to build a kingdom in the world that is larger."

"If you don't have a sense of this, I don't think you're able to carry out the mission of the church," added Father Kreckel, a race relations activist in Rochester's inner city during the 1960s.

However, such opportunities were not as plentiful in earlier points in diocesan history, noted Father Robert F. McNamara, diocesan co-archivist. He explained that anti-Catholic sentiment caused many priests to shy away from civic involvement.

"There was a feeling of 'we and they.' In more recent years, the ecumenical movement has brought (the priests) out," Father

McNamara said.

Despite anti-Catholic feelings in earlier decades of diocesan history, Father McNamara noted that some priests still played prominent roles in community affairs.

For instance, Father Peter Colgan, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Corning, took an active role in helping settle labor disputes at Corning Glass Works in the late 1800s. And Father Cornelius Silke, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Rexville from 1918 to 1932, once purchased a farm in an effort to encourage area residents not to abandon their own farms.

Thus priests today are simply carrying on what is in this diocese a tradition of community involvement.

Father Weis began his own fire department involvement in 1963, when he became chaplain of the North Greece Fire Department while serving as assistant pastor at Our Mother of Sorrows Church in Greece. He continued firefighting in subsequent priest assignments at St. Salome's Church in Irondequoit; St. John the Evangelist Church in Greece; and St. John the Evangelist Church in Newark Valley. In all, he said, he has answered more than 800 calls.

Though Father Weis retired from firefighting in 1978 for health reasons, he has

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Story by Mike Latona • Photographs by Matthew Scott