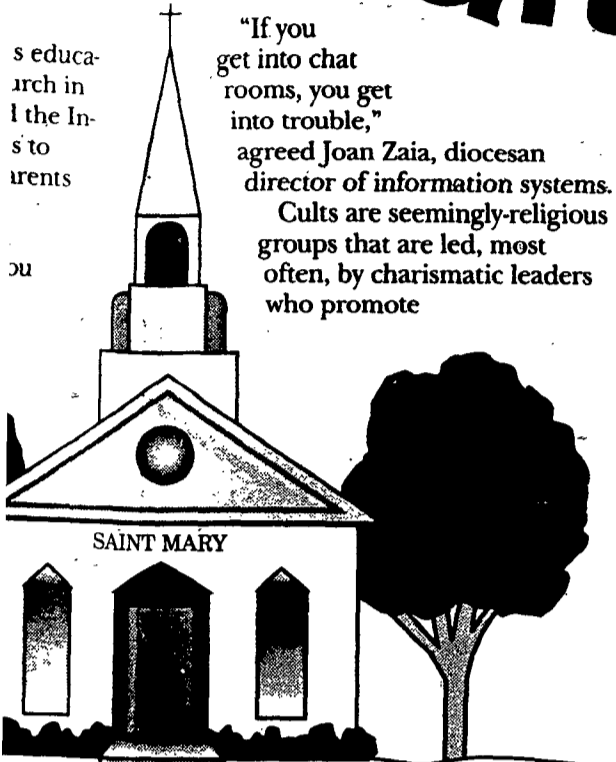


Illustration by Zoe Woodruff

# Our faith on course



"If you get into chat rooms, you get into trouble," agreed Joan Zaia, diocesan director of information systems. Cults are seemingly-religious groups that are led, most often, by charismatic leaders who promote

extreme or unorthodox beliefs. Fox said that a cult may not appear obvious on-line. It may describe itself, for example, as a "lonely hearts" club to lure new members. Gay-LeClerc Qader, executive director of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's New York branch, suggested that parents and children take a careful trip together through the Internet. "There are good, valuable places to go — and places that are kind of funky. Get on-line and search the Net together, and go to those bad places. This helps identify what's not a nice neighborhood," Qader said. Her organization frequently holds workshops on child safety and the Inter-

net. At the same time, Fox said that not all alternative religious groups — on the Internet or otherwise — live in bad neighborhoods, so to speak. He said that most well-known nondenominational groups support young people in their Christianity without blatantly questioning their Catholicism. "Groups like Inter-Varsity and Campus Crusade for Christ are founded by lay people within Christian denominations," Fox said. "I believe they are sincere."

However, he said, local branches of such national groups can sometimes impart their views too forcefully. "There can be a stated philosophy, but the local leaders may not always represent what the national group tries to promote," Fox explained. A good way to gauge whether a local coalition operates legitimately, he said, is to find out if leaders have an open-door attendance policy at their meetings. "If there isn't, then I'd really begin to wonder," Fox remarked. Claire Hamilton said that Catholic youths who are struggling with their faith, along with life in general, are most vulnerable to potentially damaging religious influences.

"When you lose hope in your life, it's easy to fall into these kinds of things," said Claire, 16, a parishioner at St. Cecilia's Church in Irondequoit. Kyle Moran pointed out that parents can play a large part in preventing these occurrences. "I think it's all in your upbringing, and how much your faith is instilled in you," said Kyle, 15, from St. Catherine of Siena Church in Mendon. Kyle noted that he has suspected cult-like activity from time to time among some of his peers, but doesn't feel vulnerable because most of his friends are practicing Catholics. He added that his awareness has also been reinforced through discussions

about cults in his youth group and through a religion class he has taken at McQuaid Jesuit High School, where he is a sophomore. Another way to safeguard against other influences, Claire said, is to practice her own faith more strongly than ever. "There have been times I've questioned things, like, 'If God is good, why does he allow bad things to happen?' But sometimes you just have to keep believing and praying," Claire said. A stronger faith life, Dave noted, helps eliminate the fear that alternative religious or seemingly-religious groups often look for.

"Fear is the base at which people can manipulate your faith. If we can be more confident about our faith, then there's nothing to be afraid of," Dave said. He added that this confidence will — and should — lead you to have discussions with people who challenge your beliefs. "To be a Catholic, universal church, we have to engage in dialogue," he said. Claire added that dedicated Catholics can serve as models for young people who are confused about their faith. She stressed that people who seem to be drawn toward alternative religious groups should be supported by their peers, not rejected. "The most you can do is stand by them and pray that God will help them," Claire said. Fox added that the entire church community is responsible in this effort. "As Catholics, we should put the energy into reaching out to people, saying, 'You are special; you are God's creation and we care deeply and longingly about you,'" Fox said. "If we did that, we would be doing the best thing we could possibly do to prevent people from looking into cults or near-cults."

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