

DIOCESAN NEWS

Bishop's Mass for gays, lesbians fills cathedral

By Kathleen Schwar and Mike Latona
Staff writers

ROCHESTER — Gays, lesbians, and their families and friends poured into Sacred Heart Cathedral March 1 for the diocese's first official Mass for them.

Meanwhile, approximately 80 demonstrators picketed in front of the cathedral during the controversial Mass, which was cosponsored by the diocese and the Catholic Gay and Lesbian Family Ministry. The picketers emphasized that the church does not approve of sexual activity between homosexual people.

For the 1,300 people from across the diocese who crammed the cathedral, the Mass was primarily a celebration.

They stood to applaud Bishop Matthew H. Clark, who made it clear that the church accepts gays and lesbians with respect and compassion.

The bishop said he'd never felt more "intense" climbing the pulpit, "not in the sense of being anything but deeply joyful about this gathering, because I think it's absolutely right to do."

Yet only two other bishops in the country have been known to preside over such a public Mass, according to several sources.

And several Catholics clearly disagreed with the bishop's assessment.

"It's good to be loving, but you've got to give the truth," commented Kathleen Neilon of St. Jude's Parish, Gates. It would be more courageous, she said, for the bishop to have stood before such a group "and say if you're not in a state of grace you can't receive the body and blood of Christ."

Uniformed police officers and plainclothesmen stood watch on the street and in the church. Despite some verbal outbursts, there were no prolonged altercations.

In his homily, Bishop Clark cited the Oscar-nominated movie "Shine." In the movie, a father embraced his son, a pianist prodigy, in a way that was confining rather than compassionate, he noted.

The bishop said that the embrace in the day's Gospel reading of the Prodigal Son, however, "expresses a real love, and a respect for freedom and a reverence that I think God has for every person made in God's image."

"May I ask you please to forgive us for all the ways witting and unwitting that we have failed to honor and respect you," Bishop Clark said to the gay and lesbian worshippers. "I hope I can say with confidence that this gathering this afternoon symbolizes a widespread sentiment among the people of our diocese that we'd like to do a better job on that."

The bishop said the Bible is often used contrary to its life-giving message, and added that people also have much to learn from scientific research, "which has yielded a lot of new information that I believe we have not as yet integrated into our knowledge and value systems."

Kevin Elphick of the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward, for one, welcomed the Mass.

"It really concretized for me the church. I've always believed in but not always seen," said Elphick, who is gay and a part of the Catholic Gay & Lesbian Family Ministry. "The church is welcoming to everybody."

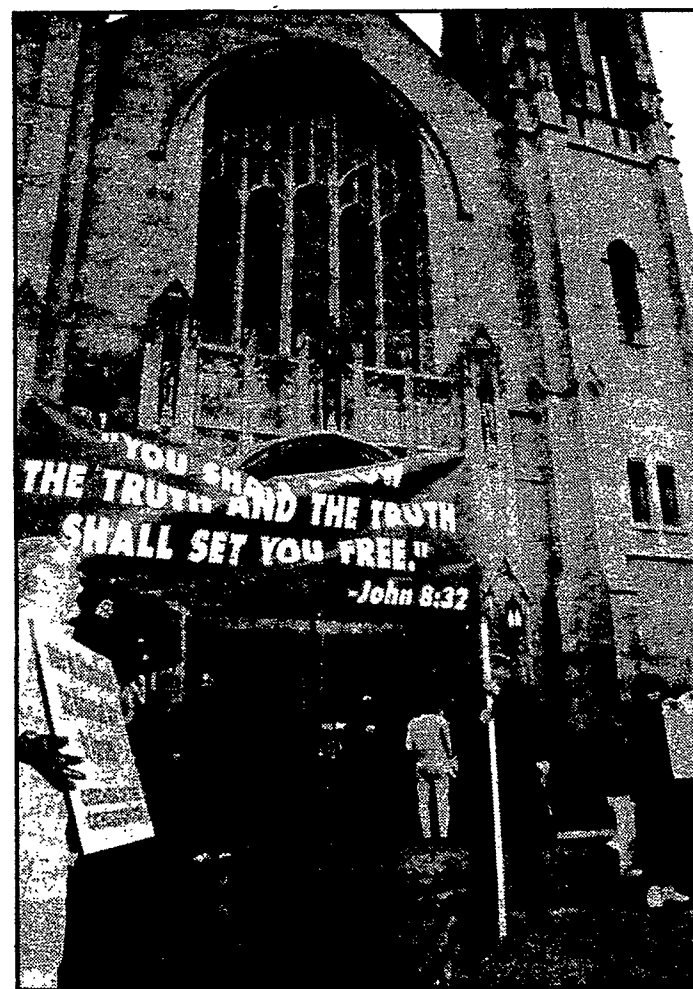
He noted that the congregation included people of various ages, races, ethnicity, religious affiliations and sexual orientations.

"And here we are gathered together. It speaks to the leadership of Bishop Clark," Elphick said.

Mary Ellen Lopata, a co-founder of the ministry, said after the Mass, "I am feeling so blessed and so proud of the people who showed up. I know the bishop knows they are just a small representation of the people he touched today."

Previously worried the publicity would scare people away, Father Gary Tyman of the ministry and Newman Community chaplain at the University of Rochester, said the attendance was beyond expectations.

One person attending, Frank Hall of Sa-



Kurt Brownell
(Above) Bishop Clark embraces Kris Mich, one of an estimated 1,300 people (immediate left) who attended the diocese's first Mass for gays, lesbians, and their families and friends, March 1 at Sacred Heart Cathedral. Before and during the Mass, approximately 80 protesters (far left) prayed and processed in front of the cathedral.

cred Heart, said he was there "because I'm gay and Catholic."

"I have a husband and he and I attend Mass here every week," he said, adding their son was baptized there as well. Noting that he's endured years of feeling unwelcome, he said, "I finally said I have every right to be in this church."

Among clergy attending was Father James B. Callan, administrator of Rochester's Corpus Christi Church, who has so enthusiastically embraced the cause of gay and lesbian Catholics that he has blessed their unions.

Recently acknowledging that he had asked the priest to stop doing so, Bishop Clark told the *Catholic Courier*, "I wanted him to clearly understand to stop that practice," not as a punitive measure but out of concern his efforts might be misunderstood. The blessings might be seen as compromising church teaching on marriage, he said. He also said that such an initiative calls for reflection by the wider church.

Prior to and during the Mass, protesters chanted rosaries in front of the cathedral. As Father Tyman stood on the cathedral steps and greeted people entering, a rosary-clutching protester shouted to the priest, "Tell them the truth — you know right from

wrong."

"Are you going to give them Communion?" another protester asked Father Tyman. He did not reply.

As people entered the church — including gay couples holding hands — protesters urged them to repent and reminded them that homosexual activity violates church teaching.

Michael Macaluso, chairman of the Rochester-based Citizens for a Decent Community that organized the demonstration, said he was protesting out of concern, not dislike, for homosexuals.

"We're concerned about the spiritual life of these people, especially for the hereafter," Macaluso said. "They could have a ticket to hell."

Although church teaching states that ho-

mosexual acts are sinful but homosexual orientation is not, Macaluso said that he believes all gays and lesbians who attended the Mass engage in sexual activity.

"It's so obvious. Why would a person want to call themselves a homosexual unless they want to live a homosexual lifestyle?" Macaluso remarked.

One protester, David Morrison of Arlington, Va., said he is homosexual and a member of Courage, a Vatican-endorsed organization that encourages homosexuals to live chastely. He said he hopes homosexuals will at least try for abstinence.

Morrison said he abandoned his homosexual lifestyle in the early 1990s through the "witness of orthodox Catholics."

Upon learning that Bishop Clark had not pointed out official church teaching on homosexual activity during his homily, Morrison was frustrated.

"The bishop squashed an opportunity," he said. "I was hoping for the bishop to give the fullness of the Catholic teaching."

Teachings from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: "(Homosexuality) has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.' They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circum-

stances can they be approved." (2357)

"The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. They do not choose their homosexual condition; for most of them it is a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition." (2358)