

# DIOCESAN NEWS

## We Are Church drive draws support, criticism

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Approximately 1,000 people at Corpus Christi Church April 5-6 signed the controversial We Are Church petition calling for such changes as priestly ordination of women and married men; greater participation by lay people in church decision-making; and the right of people to follow their consciences on such matters as birth control.

"We believe in a church that ... respects primacy of conscience in all moral decision-making," the petition reads.

But at least one local pro-life activist denounced that statement as a veiled attempt to promote abortion rights in the church.

Petition supporters including Mike Reimringer invited Mass-goers April 5-6 to sign it. He spoke at the end of the 11:30 a.m. Sunday Mass.

"I believe that we as an organization have gotten away a little bit from some of Jesus Christ's teachings of love and forgiveness," he said of the Catholic Church. "And we have to get back to them."

He added that he supported the referendum, in part, because the priest shortage is endangering the availability of the Eucharist.

"I'm very concerned that we're losing the ability, the right to receive Communion," he said.

However, at least one parishioner at Corpus saw the petition drive as a mask hiding the abortion rights movement.

Carol Crossed, a well-known consistent life ethic activist, said the petition's emphasis on "primacy of conscience" disguised its promoters' real intent — softening the church's teachings against abortion.

Crossed said she spoke of her concerns with Father Jim Callan, administrator of Corpus, last week.

As proof of her contention, Crossed noted that Catholics for a Free Choice — a pro-choice group based in Washington, D.C. — is one of the sponsors of the referendum.

According to *Catholic News Service*, Catholics for a Free Choice was denounced in 1993 by the 50-member Administrative Committee of the U.S. bishops. The committee said the group "merits no recognition or consideration" as a Catholic group and is primarily funded by non-Catholic sources.

In a phone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from her office in Fairfax, Va., Sister Maureen Fiedler, SL, national coordinator for We Are Church, confirmed that



Kerry Huller/Intern

Clare Regan, wearing a sandwich board, attracts attention to the We Are Church petition in front of Rochester's Corpus Christi Church April 6. Approximately 1,000 people signed the controversial petition.

CFFC was one of 50 groups sponsoring the petition. Sponsors endorse the petition and contribute at least \$50 to \$100 to We Are Church, she said.

Sister Fiedler said contributions to We Are Church pay her salary and that of two part-time employees, as well as virtually all our contributions have come from individuals, not organizations."

She declined to say how much CFFC contributed.

In addition, Sister Fiedler said that the referendum was also supported by such pro-life groups as Pax Christi/Maine, which is one of 10 organizations listed as part of the referendum's national task force. A letterhead from We Are Church also lists such groups as Catholics Speak Out, Women's Ordination Conference and Dignity/USA, a homosexual-rights organization.

In a phone interview with the *Courier*, Bill Slavick, coordinator for Pax Christi/Maine, said he participated in drafting the We Are Church referendum. Slavick said he supported the referendum because the church is controlled by a "monarchical structure" that represses people who follow their consciences.

"Joan of Arc was canonized for following her conscience despite the bishops telling her to ignore (it)," he said.

He added that although he was at odds with Catholics for a Free Choice, he thought the group had a right to endorse the We Are Church referendum.

"The referendum does not take any position on the abortion issue — it is not for or against abortion," he said. "If it were an endorsement of abortion, I wouldn't support it at all. The referendum is not an effort to segue into approval of abortion."

Father Callan echoed Slavick's statements, adding that Corpus has long been known as a pro-life parish.

"If I thought it was even the slightest bit about abortion, we wouldn't even had had it in the church," he said of the petition.

The priest said he could see why Crossed objected to the petition, but he said that he didn't think her objections were reason enough to ban the petition from his parish.

"We've signed many things over the years ... with people who have different views on different issues," he said, noting that he agreed with the petition's goals.

When asked whether or not she was pro-choice, Sister Fiedler said: "I don't discuss that in relation to the referendum."

In its essence, We Are Church calls for a democratization of the church. Its main points can be summarized as follows:

- Lay Catholics should have a say in selecting their bishops and pastors.
- Women should be allowed to become deacons and priests.
- Priests should be allowed to choose a celibate or non-celibate life.
- People should be allowed to follow their consciences in issues of sexual morality, like birth control, and the church should "affirm the human rights

of all persons regardless of sexual orientation." Sister Fiedler said this meant the church should oppose discrimination in such areas as jobs and housing against homosexuals, as stance many bishops have already taken, she said.

• The church should welcome those who are divorced and remarried, and married priests, and allow theologians and others "freedom of speech." Sister Fiedler said this passage was included because the church has censored and — in some cases — excommunicated dissenting theologians and activists in recent years.

Petitions that are similarly worded have been circulated in Europe and Australia. Petitions in Austria and Germany have garnered 2.3 million signatures since 1995, according to We Are Church.

Sister Fiedler said supporters of the referendum will convene in Rome in October — the 35th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council — to present the collected petitions to the Vatican.

Sister Fiedler declined to say how many signatures the petition has gathered so far in the United States, but she has said in previous statements that the goal was 1 million.

## A Church in Search of Justice

An Evening of Reflection with Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton Auxiliary Bishop of Detroit

Bishop Gumbleton will explore a number of controversial issues confronting Catholics today: end-of-life choices,



poverty, genetics, welfare reform, homosexuality, and cloning. In order to reflect on a consistent ethic of life, he

will present the Catholic tradition on these issues and paint his vision for how Catholics can work toward a more just world order.

Tuesday, May 6th  
7:30 p.m.  
St. Catherine of Siena Church, Mendon, NY  
Tickets \$5 at the Door

Sponsored by St. Bernard's On The Road SE Monroe County



## Obituary

### Father Eugene Sweeney, Ithaca priest, at 62

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

According to those who knew him well, Father Eugene Sweeney's most memorable quality was a human touch that extended far and wide.

"He had a way of not just listening with his ears, but also listening with his heart — which is the gift of a 'people person,'" said Father Bernard Carges, pastor of Rochester's Most Precious Blood Church and a member of Father Sweeney's ordination class.

"He just had a loving relationship with so many people. He was a very loving person," added Father Bernard Carges, pastor of Ithaca's Immaculate Conception Church.

Father Sweeney, parochial vicar at Immaculate Conception, died April 4, 1997, at the Hospicare in Ithaca after a long battle with lung cancer. He was 62.

Born in Rochester, Father Sweeney grew up in Rochester's Immaculate Conception Parish. He attended Immaculate Conception School, St. Andrew's Seminary and St.

Bernard's Seminary. He was ordained in 1960 by Bishop James E. Kearney.

Father Sweeney's first priest assignment was at St. Mary of the Lake Church in Watkins Glen and St. Benedict's Church in Odessa, where he served as assistant pastor from 1960 to 1966. He was then assistant pastor from 1966 to 1967 at Rochester's Our Lady of Good Counsel Church and from 1967 to 1969 at Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Father Sweeney then served as chaplain at Geneva DeSales High School (1969-71); assistant pastor at St. Patrick's Church in Corning (1971-75); co-pastor at St. Michael's Church in Newark (1975-80); and pastor at St. Pius V Church in Cohocton and Sacred Heart Church in Perkinsville (1980-84).

His longest parish assignment was at St. Patrick's Church in Seneca Falls, where he was pastor from 1984 to 1992. He moved to St. Patrick's Church in Elmira as pastor in 1992 before going to Immaculate Conception as parochial vicar two years later.

Father Paul McCabe, pastor of Our Lady

of Lourdes Sweeney in Elmira, remarked that Father Sweeney, a longtime friend, did not consider administrative work to be his first love.

"He saw it as preventing him from being with the people," Father McCabe said. "All he ever wanted was to be a people's priest."

A Mass of the High Priest was celebrated for Father Sweeney on April 6, at Immaculate Conception Church in Ithaca. A funeral Mass was held at Immaculate Conception the following morning, with Bishop Matthew H. Clark serving as celebrant. Interment was at St. Mary's Cemetery in Watkins Glen.

Father Sweeney is survived by his sister and brother-in-law, Nancy and William Dyer; nieces, Theresa Tews, Mary Williams and Nora Shellenberger; nephew, William Dyer Jr.; two great-nieces and four great-nephews.

Memorial donations can be made to the Clergy Relief Fund, c/o Father Thomas Wheeland, Holy Cross Church, 4492 Lake Ave., Rochester, N.Y., 14612.