

# DIOCESAN NEWS

## 'God Squad' delivers humor, surprise news

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — As the line formed Dec. 11 for a book signing by the "God Squad," Rabbi Marc Gellman was already doing his schtick.

"We'll be giving out signatures along with dispensations to heaven," he said, as his partner Msgr. Thomas Hartman began signing copies of the duo's various books at Village Green Bookstore, 766 Monroe Ave. "The problem is you have to use them this week."

The line of people laughed at the rabbi's words.

"That's an old joke," he said with a smile.

Although the rabbi-priest duo is known for its kidding, Rabbi Gellman and Msgr. Hartman are serious about God and interfaith understanding. Known as the "God Squad" since they first appeared on television 11 years ago, the duo has spent hundreds of hours on the tube and on radio doling out commentary and advice.

"I find them very uplifting and inspirational," said Nancy Fries, a Rochester resident and a Lutheran who brought two of the duo's books for signing. "They balance each other out. They're on totally different ends of the spectrum, but they sit in the middle."

The "God Squad" came to Rochester to speak at two events cosponsored by Catholic Family Center and Jewish Family Service, both Rochester-area agencies. The rabbi and priest spoke to 2,000 people at Temple B'rith Kodesh in Brighton on Dec. 11. They also spoke to 250 people at a conference on families and spirituality at the temple Dec. 12.

Their appearance was designed to draw attention to a document signed in May 1996, by representatives of the Diocese of

Rochester and the local Jewish community. The agreement — reportedly the first of its kind in the country — pledged mutual respect and understanding between the two faith communities.

They also used the visit as an opportunity for a surprise announcement: With the help of President Bill Clinton, they are currently working on a project to reclaim what may be the oldest collection of Torah scrolls in the world.

Stolen from Jews by the Nazis during the Holocaust, the scrolls — some dating to the 15th century — are in Ukraine, Rabbi Gellman said. When recovered, they will be distributed to various Jewish communities throughout the world, he added. Most will go to a Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, the duo said, and at least one of the scrolls may go to the Vatican, which is helping recover them.

Rabbi Alan Katz of Temple Sinai in Penfield deemed the recovery project a significant announcement for Jews.

"The life of the Jewish people is the Torah," he said. "To recover these is a very, very important thing. Next to our own lives, the Torah is most important."

The "God Squad" regularly appears on national TV shows including ABC's "Good Morning America," where they are regular commentators, as well as on such radio shows as "Imus In The Morning," featuring Don Imus. The duo also hosts an interfaith program that appears on the Faith & Values/VISN cable TV network. They have co-authored a number of books for children and adult readers.

Rabbi Gellman hails from Melville, N.Y., where he is spiritual leader of Beth Torah Synagogue. President of the New York Board of Rabbis, he is also editor of the board's journal.

Msgr. Hartman oversees radio and TV



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Msgr. Thomas Hartman, left, listens to Rabbi Marc Gellman prior to a book signing for their books *Where Does God Live?* and *How Do You Spell God?* at Village Green Bookstore, 766 Monroe Ave., Rochester, Dec. 11.

production for the Diocese of Rockville Centre. He has won three Emmy Awards for his TV work, as well as several other awards and citations.

As they signed books at the Village Green, each man took turns speaking about how the other man had changed his religious outlook.

Msgr. Hartman credited Rabbi Gellman for making him aware of the commonalities between Christians and Jews.

"We both have belief in one God," Msgr. Hartman said. "We both have a covenant with a loving God. We have the Ten Commandments. We both believe in the value of community."

Msgr. Hartman added that he has realized, however, that Jews and Christians view the Creator somewhat differently.

"Jews seem to see God as a little bit more remote," he said. "Christians, through the experience of Jesus, seem to personalize God."

Rabbi Gellman said Msgr. Hartman's friendship has sparked his interest in aspects of Judaism he had overlooked.

"Jews don't teach about heaven as much as they should," the rabbi said. He added that he has learned more about Catholicism than just sacraments.

"There's a tremendous piety, a tremendous dedication," he said of Catholicism. "It isn't just ritual — it's values."

Both men credited Pope John Paul II for reaching out to Jews worldwide by regularly meeting Jewish leaders, denouncing anti-Semitism and engineering the Vatican's diplomatic recognition of Israel.

"Over the centuries, (Christians) have killed Jews wrongly, and we all need to heal from that," Msgr. Hartman said.

Rabbi Gellman called the pope the "greatest spiritual leader in the world."

"He is the only person in the world I know of who has a comprehensive view of world peace," the rabbi added.

## Changes in physicians guild indicate break from diocese

By Kathleen Schwar  
Staff writer

In changing its name to the St. Luke's Medical Association and its bylaws to remove mention of the Diocese of Rochester this fall, the Catholic Physicians' Guild has eliminated any relationship with the bishop and diocese, according to the diocese.

Several board members say the October name change was, at least partly, to incorporate the name of the patron saint of physicians. But a Nov. 26 diocesan letter notified pastors and pastoral associates the guild had made the change, "thereby disassociating itself voluntarily from the Diocese of Rochester and its bishop."

Further, the letter stated, "Any programs, speakers, or literature distributed

by the 'St. Luke's Medical Association' is not authorized by the bishop or sponsored in any way by the Diocese of Rochester." The letter was from Father Kevin McKenna, chancellor.

The guild's relationship with the diocese had been under study since late spring. Its president, Dr. Michael Aiello, a radiologist now at the Adirondack Medical Center in Lake Placid, had sent a letter to 400 physicians, clergy and other diocesan residents that criticized attempts to teach an overly "compassionate treatment of homosexuality."

Bishop Matthew H. Clark then issued directives in a May 6 letter that the bishop pre-approve moral or theological teachings by the guild. However, he suspended the directives pending diocesan-guild talks in-

tended to clarify the guild's role.

For the next few months, each side said talks were continuing.

After the name change, board members the *Catholic Courier* contacted deferred comment to Aiello and Dr. Fernando Ona, who founded the guild. The *Courier's* phone calls to both doctors, however, were not returned.

Dropped from the new set of by-laws are the phrases: "To assist the ecclesiastic authorities in the diffusion of the knowledge of Catholic medical ethics" and "The spiritual advisor shall be appointed by the ordinary of the diocese." The lack of those articles, combined with no other mention of the diocese, eliminates any relationship, according to Father McKenna.

The Nov. 26 letter from the diocese also states that the bishop will be meeting with

representatives of the local Catholic medical community.

"It is his hope to explore new means and ways by which the Diocese of Rochester can work effectively to promote a mutually beneficial dialogue between the Diocese and Catholic physicians in the area of medical ethics as well as other areas of mutual concern," it states.

If another group were to form, Father John Firpo, pastor of St. Helen's Church in Gates, would likely serve as a spiritual advisor, according to Father McKenna. Father Firpo had been appointed spiritual advisor of the guild in mid-October after Father Alexander Bradshaw, who briefly replaced Father Frederick Helfrich, resigned.

However, ever since his appointment by the bishop, Father Firpo reported, "I have been trying to contact them," but members of the guild had not responded.

A Nov. 19 communication about the recent changes, signed by Aiello, caught him by surprise, he said.

St. Luke Medical Association stationery does not list anyone as spiritual advisor, traditionally an executive committee position.

The guild was created in the mid-1980s to help assist church leadership in the field of Catholic medical ethics, according to Father Firpo. Its board members readily acknowledge the organization is loosely run and that some of them rarely attend meetings.

"I haven't gone to many meetings," Father John Healy, O.Carm, said. "I'm hesitant talking about the board when I am not a physician." A counselor and teacher at McQuaid High School, he is a relative newcomer to the board.

Guild membership has dropped from more than 100 to about 50 paid members, according to its treasurer, Dr. W. Stewart Beecher. Attempts to discern why so many have left have failed, he said.

## Obituary

### Deacon Thomas S. Phillips; was ordained in June

Deacon Thomas S. Phillips, who was ordained a diocesan permanent deacon June 7, died Dec. 10, 1997, at Rochester's Highland Hospital after a bout with lung cancer. He was 64.

Deacon Phillips, a parishioner at St. Christopher Church in North Chili, had entered the diaconate program after retiring from Eastman Kodak Company in 1991. He was also a Korean War veteran who had been awarded a Bronze Star. He had converted to the Catholic faith in 1972.

Following his ordination, Deacon Phillips served as a deacon intern at two parishes on the city of Rochester's west side: St. Francis of Assisi and Ss. Peter and Paul.

"He had a real fondness in his heart for the poor and disadvantaged people," said



Deacon Thomas Cass, diocesan director of deacon personnel.

Deacon Cass described Deacon Phillips as a quiet, generous man who conducted much of his ministry "behind the scenes." For example, Deacon Cass said, Deacon Phillips apparently once used money from his income-tax return to purchase Bibles for members of a study group he was leading.

In a message on the back cover of Deacon Phillips' funeral program, family members characterized him as "an inspiration to us and a model of kindness and generosity we will never forget."

Deacon Phillips is survived by his wife,

H. Barbara; children, Thomas Jr., Douglas, Mark, Donna Mathes and her husband Perry, and Terri Aloï and her husband Robert; grandchildren, Amanda, Heather, Elizabeth, Rachel, Adam and Krista; sisters and brothers, Shirley, Barry, Dianne, Marilyn and David; brothers and sisters-in-law; nieces and nephews; and several friends.

The funeral Mass for Deacon Phillips was held Dec. 15 at Sacred Heart Cathedral. Bishop Matthew H. Clark presided, with Fathers Paul Tomasso and Thomas Muff concelebrating and Deacon William Coffey serving as homilist. Interment was at White Haven Memorial Park.

Donations in Deacon Phillips' memory may be made to St. Peter's Kitchen, 681 Brown St., Rochester, N.Y. 14611.

— Mike Latona