

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

St. Bernard's graduates, friends visit 'The Rock'

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Fathers Joe Catanise and John Gagnier were climbing the stairs to the old St. Bernard's Seminary chapel when they spotted Father Joseph Hart.

"We're looking for 'God Three In One,'" Father Catanise jokingly called up to him.

Father Hart had taught such a course on the Trinity at the seminary. Father Catanise was in its last graduating class, of 1981.

The three priests were among several attending Unity Health System's reception at St. Bernard's Park senior apartments Dec. 6 for friends and graduates of St. Bernard's Seminary. The senior housing complex occupies the former seminary, 2260 Lake Ave., which dates to 1892. A city landmark, it retains its distinctive red stone castle-like exterior and interior with original wood, and cathedral and leaded windows.

Bishop Bernard McQuaid built the seminary, with three-fourths of the initial construction cost raised by diocesan priests to honor his 25 years as bishop. After training some 2,700 priests, the seminary was closed in 1981 amid declining enrollment.

After a decade of use by Eastman Kodak Co., Conifer Development (now Home Properties Inc.) bought the building. The first apartments there were dedicated in 1996 and the final group of apartments may open in January — bringing the total to 170 apartments for low- and moderate-income people ages 55 and over.

Unity runs a social adult day program at the site as well as a physicians office.

"I came after Kodak bought it and my heart was broken, here especially," Father

Catanise recalled in the former chapel. "It was in a shambles."

But as priests toured the building, they were pleased with the restoration of "The Rock." Pneumonia Corridor, a cold walkway from the dorms to classes, was bright, airy and warm. Deacons Corridor, where deacons lived, remained housing. The ground-floor nook where they had hung their required cassocks to go out and play ball was still by a back door.

Father Michael Schramel (class of 1979) said it was a "wonderful" feeling looking out from the central building to the north wing and spotting his former room.

"I spent all four years in that room up there," he said, recalling the quiet of the narrow long dorm. "I enjoyed my time here."

Father Bob O'Neill (class of 1962), however, said he spent six years at the seminary and, "The last 36 years have gone a lot faster."

Touring the site as a potential resident, he said, "It's beautiful. Especially like this, where it's getting good use and people are enjoying it."

He recalled strict rules in his days, including requirements that seminarians quietly remain in their rooms most of the afternoon.

"I'm a very social person, and to lock myself in my little room was not quite my style," Father O'Neill said. "I got caught (outside it, talking) quite a few times."

Today about five of those dorm rooms would fit in one St. Bernard's apartment, according to Sister Bernice Staub, SSND, assistant community manager and St. Bernard's Park resident.



Greg Francia/Staff photographer

St. Bernard's Park resident Arlene Miller, left, leads Father John Philipps on a tour of senior apartments at the former seminary Dec. 6. Father Philipps studied at St. Bernard's Seminary from 1949 to 1955.

"In the '50s and '60s this place was like a cloister," Father Gagnier (class of 1977) noted. "They never got out much."

In contrast, he said, "We had cars. We had to train eight hours a week in pastoral work outside. In my four years here, I went to Sunday Mass here once — and it was because of a blizzard."

Instead, he helped at his home parish of St. Andrew's.

Father Albert Delmonte (class of 1964) recalled, "Everything was in Latin still" — the major classes' lectures, exams and textbooks.

Moving from picture to picture displayed around the community room, he remembered, "There was a tremendous bond among students here."

"Oh, look at this," he told Sister Clare Brown, SSJ, who was accompanying him. "I was in that play; I was Captain Queeg," he said, pointing to a 1959 photo of students in "The Caine Mutiny."

The east wing community room displays old ceiling stenciling, rafters and a rebuilt choir loft in the former chapel, and the wing houses six apartments. Among other changes: a north wing of apartments — where the former dormitory and Theology Hall stood; a central section of apartments — the former administration area; and south wing, where 23 more apartments will replace the former Philosophy Hall.

"It's just as I remember it," quipped Father Thomas Erdle (class of 1955). "They ran a tight ship, but it was a very happy time."

Sister Bernice noted some priests found it too difficult emotionally to revisit their old school. On the other hand, Sherry Schleede, Home Properties community manager, noted many have stopped by for a look.

"Most of the priests were thrilled it was used for something worthwhile," she said. "People here feel like they live in a castle."

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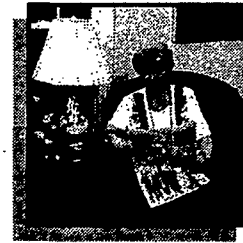
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