

DIOCESAN NEWS

Group keeps vigil at homicide victims' homes

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

ROCHESTER — A light rain fell at noon July 9 as nine people gathered in a circle in front of 353 Central Park.

They held hands and clutched umbrellas and flowers as Deacon Bill Coffey of St. Mary's Church softly began, "Lord, we pray for our city, for this neighborhood, for this house ..."

His voice was drowned out as cars whooshed by on the rain-dampened street.

No sound came from 353 Central Park. Its front door and first-floor windows were sealed with plywood. The triangular police markers that had traced a path from the house to a nearby store just two days earlier were gone.

After Deacon Coffey stopped speaking, several other people in the circle prayed, their voices, too, often lost in the noise. Then they began to sing.

"Peace is flowing like a river ..."

Song over, they placed the flowers on the concrete walkway leading up to the boarded-up house.

About five minutes after it began, the prayer vigil was over.

The vigil was one of an ongoing series led by Deacon Coffey in front of the Rochester homes of homicide victims.

At this particular site, Felix Privorotsky, 44, a landlord, allegedly shot and killed Eugene Akins Jr., 41, July 7. He had been in the process of evicting Akins.

Paul and Rita Stack, St. Mary's parishioners, attended the vigil.

"It's to give an outward sign to the neighbors, to let them know somebody cares," Paul observed. "It's the right idea at the right time."

"Perhaps this is a step toward healing in the neighborhood, to give the neighbors an opportunity to start the



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Deacon Bill Coffey, left, with wife, MaryLu Coffey, prays July 9 outside 353 Central Park, Rochester, where a homicide occurred July 7.

healing they need to do," noted Kathy Cobbett of Webster, attending the vigil with her husband, Bob.

The idea to hold such vigils came to Deacon Coffey last year while he was praying.

"There's an evil that happened there," Deacon Coffey explained. "Through prayer, we're asking God to bring peace to the neighborhood, to re-hallow the ground."

Deacon Coffey had surveyed a number of people about the idea last December.

"A lot of people told me they thought about this, but didn't know how to start it," Deacon Coffey said.

He also checked with Rochester Police Chief Robert Duffy, who approved the idea.

Finding support, Deacon Coffey invited people to join him. They held the first vigil Feb. 2. Three people attended.

Since then, he has organized 15-20 such vigils, generally within a day or two after the identity of a homicide victim becomes known. A member of the police department contacts him to let him know the murder victim's address, and then Deacon Coffey notifies a network of supporters by e-mail and telephone. Some of the individuals he contacts do not live in the Rochester area, so they pray in support from wherever they are.

Many recent vigils have averaged 25 participants, Deacon Coffey said. Some of those participants are neighbors or relatives of the slain person.

"What I'll generally do is go to the neighbors and tell them what we are about — that we're praying — and invite them to join us," he said. "I think it's a real privilege to pray with people in their time of trial. It's a real privilege to stand with people and let them know they are not alone."

EDITORS' NOTE: Deacon Coffey requested that anyone wishing to be added to his list of vigil supporters call St. Mary's Church at 716/232-7140.

Leary

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the past year. In addition to Father Joseph A. Hart, diocesan vicar general and Pastoral Center moderator, the commission comprised three theologians and a psychiatrist.

"The first (error) is called by the Church 'millenarianism,'" the preface reads. "This erroneous teaching, contained in the first 6 volumes of *Prepare for the Great Tribulation and the Coming Era of Peace*, holds that Christ will return to reign on the earth for a thousand years at the end of time." The preface goes on to quote the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which rejects a literal interpretation of the thousand-year reign of Christ referred to in the Book of Revelation.

"The Church has rejected even modified forms of this falsification of the kingdom to come under the name millenarianism ...," the catechism states.

Interestingly, Volume VI of Leary's locutions, published in 1997, actually contains a passage in which he claims Jesus told him on March 27, 1997, "The leaders of My Church have made binding interpretations of 'millenarianism' which I wish you to acknowledge under obedience to My Magisterium. They have not interpreted one thousand years to be taken literally. I will not reign then in My Body. Only spiritual will I be present."

The preface also points out that Leary's books counter church doctrine on the office of the pope.

"The second error is 'anti-papalism' ...," the preface continues. "Mr. Leary's locu-

tions select Pope John Paul II to be obeyed but his successor to be ignored as an 'imposter (sic) pope.' This erroneous teaching is found in all the volumes."

The bishop's June 25 letter stated: "The Commission is convinced that you are sincere in your affirmation that these are supernatural (locutions), that you are psychologically healthy and that you have not perpetrated a fraud on the community," the bishop wrote. "Nevertheless, they are persuaded that you have mistaken the normal workings of the mind in the processes of mental prayer for supernatural locutions."

The *Catholic Courier* attempted to contact Leary both at his Greece home and in Ireland where he is reportedly speaking, but was unable to reach him. However, Father Hart said that Leary had told the diocese he would cooperate with the bishop's request. Father Hart also said Leary has agreed to use a theological adviser to work with him on future volumes.

Father Hart said the diocese decided to examine Leary's volumes after a number of people asked diocesan officials about them. Commission members met with Leary and found him to be "sincere, open, straightforward, honest, spiritual, but mistaken," Father Hart said.

Father Hart said the commission unanimously found that Leary's writings were riddled with doctrinal errors and that they were of human origin. He said the messages themselves were the basis for this finding.

In addition, Father Hart said he believes Leary does not fit the pattern of a true visionary. He noted that Leary's own beliefs correspond too closely to those reported

from the locutions, whereas genuine visionaries often learn something that either contradicts or goes beyond what they believed before the vision.

For example, he cited St. Bernadette, to whom the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared in 1858, at the French grotto of Massabielle, saying "I am the Immaculate Conception." That was a term with which the saint — then a 14-year-old girl — was completely unfamiliar.

Another difference Father Hart noted

between Leary and genuine visionaries is the fact that he did not express any reluctance about having such visions. Genuine prophets and visionaries often resist God's call, Father Hart said, pointing to Jeremiah and other biblical figures as examples. Yet Leary seemed to have a great desire to be such a prophet, Father Hart said, a quality that predisposed him to have locutions of the kind he has had.

"There is no prophet who really wants to be a prophet," Father Hart concluded.

TGA donors pledge \$5.01 million

The 1998-99 Thanks Giving Appeal has garnered \$5.01 million in pledges, according to Jennifer K. Myszka, diocesan director of annual giving.

The goal was \$5.15 million. The TGA is the Diocese of Rochester's major source of income for diocesan programs and initiatives.

Myszka reported that as of July 7, 53,500 pledges had been made to this year's TGA. The diocese has already collected \$4.86 million of the amount pledged — exceeding the 1997-98 total collection of \$4.82 million. She added that the TGA generally collects 97 percent of the money donors pledge.

About 1,000 fewer pledges were made during the 1998-99 appeal than were made during the previous year's appeal, Myszka said. However, the average size of individual TGA pledges increased from \$89 during the 1997-98 appeal to \$93 this year.

"Everyone's been incredibly generous in sharing with the diocese and contributing to the TGA," she said.

Myszka said that the diocese will probably have a higher TGA goal for 1999-2000.

"I'm not prepared to say what our goal is going to be, but it's not going to decline at all," she said.

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