St. Francis of Assisi discusses possible closing

By Rob Cullivan
Staff Writer

Due to a low level of attendance at Masses and continual financial challenges, St. Francis of Assisi Church, 77 Whitney St., Rochester, may close on June 30, according to Father Paul Tomasso, pastor.

Father Tomasso informed parishioners of the possibility in a letter dated Feb. 22. He also wrote that he had contacted the diocese for assistance in the matter. The diocese must give final approval to any parish closing, according to Father Kevin McKenna, diocesan chancellor.

In the letter, Father Tomasso wrote that the 9 a.m. Sunday Mass attendance "struggles to reach 50 people," and noon Mass only draws about 70. The parish, he wrote, "is no longer capable of providing opportunities for parish life."

Father Tomasso added that the parish's buildings need repair, but to invest in repair would be to take away money that could be used for ministry. Finally, he wrote, the parish could not balance its budget without dipping into its savings and without the financial support it receives from the diocese and St. Pius the Tenth Church in Chili, which tithes on behalf of St. Francis.

Father Tomasso, who had presented his concerns to the parish council on Feb. 16, wrote that it "was the general consensus of the Parish Council that our parish should close." The parish has held meetings on the matter since that meeting, and the parish council will address the issue again March 15.

The last two parishes to close in Rochester were St. Theresa's Church in 1997, and Holy Redeemer Church in 1985. St. Theresa's parishioners merged with those of St. Stanislaus Parish, and Holy Redeemer's members joined St. Francis Xavier Parish to form Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier Parish.

File photo

St. Francis of Assisi Church, Rochester

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Is anti-Catholicism still a factor in U.S. politics?

In September 1960, Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy addressed a group of Protestant ministers in Houston, Texas, on his being a Catholic politician in a predominantly non-Catholic – and sometimes anti-Catholic – nation.

The Massachusetts senator repeatedly emphasized that his membership in the church did not mean the church would tell him how to be president. He also appealed to the ministers' sense of fair play, pointing out that Catholics like himself had fought and died alongside non-Catholics in war for the United States.

"(I)f this election is decided on the basis that 40 million Americans lost their chance of being president on the day they were baptized," he said, referring to his fellow Catholics, "then it is the whole nation that will be the loser, in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics around the world, in the eyes of history, and in the eyes of our own people."

With his subsequent election that November, Kennedy became the nation's first Catholic president, apparently having disproved forever the notion that anti-Catholicism could bar a Catholic from the nation's highest office. But anti-Catholicism still exists in the United States, and 40 years later, what the late historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. called "the deepest bias in the history of the American people" has once again become an issue in a presidential election.

However, this time, candidates are not afraid that being Catholic or sympathetic to Catholics will hurt their election chances. This time, even non-Catholic candidates are gushing publicly over how much they respect and admire the church.

Meet Jones

It all began when Texas Gov. George W. Bush, seeking support in the February South Carolina Republican primary, gave an address Feb. 2 at Bob Jones University. The university is a fundamentalist Christian institution in Greenville, S.C., that banned interracial dating until this month. The school's Web site also contains articles labeling Catholicism a "pagan counterfeit

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