

DIOCESAN NEWS

Parish members hope to stall church closing

By Rob Cullivan
Staff Writer

A group of parishioners are attempting to save Rochester's St. Francis of Assisi Church, which — pending diocesan approval — is slated to close June 30.

Concerned members of the parish were attempting this week to recruit 50 to 100 people to attend a parish council meeting slated for Wednesday night, March 15, according to Phyllis Burruto, longtime parishioner and volunteer. She said these parishioners were planning to present their concerns to Father Paul Tomasso, pastor.

"We're trying to do whatever we can to let Father Tomasso know that we're not ready to close St. Francis' doors," she said.

In a Feb. 22 letter to parishioners, Father Tomasso cited a low level of attendance at Masses, small parishioner membership, and various financial challenges as the reasons the parish would close. The pastor's letter also stated that during a Feb. 16 meeting, "it was the general consensus of the Parish Council that our parish should close."

However, Elizabeth A. Cordero, Burruto's daughter and a member of the parish council, wrote March 9 to Bishop Matthew H. Clark, asserting that the parish council never approved of the proposed closing. Cordero provided a copy of her letter to the *Catholic Courier*.

"There was no vote at the meeting," Cordero wrote. "If Father Tomasso understood that to mean consensus then I suggest he review Robert's Rules."

Diocesan officials declined to comment on the matter, referring inquiries to the pastor.

Father Tomasso acknowledged to the *Courier* that no vote had been taken at the Feb. 22 meeting, as Cordero contended. But he said parish council members had accepted the validity of the reasons he outlined for closing the parish, which he took as an informal consensus of the council.

He added that he did not take a formal vote at that time because he wanted to be able to discuss the closing with parishioners first. He also pointed out that the council would have an opportunity to vote formally on the closing March 15.

Burruto acknowledged that the parish is facing problems, but said she and other concerned parishioners want to discuss ways of saving the church with their pastor. For example, she said, the parish could hire a person to evangelize the local neighborhood, going door-to-door to invite people to join the church.

Father Tomasso said that such a move

had been discussed previously, and that an evangelization director needs an active parish on behalf of which to evangelize. He pointed out that of the 90 to 100 English-speaking parishioners, about half are homebound or in senior residences, and most of the other half don't even live in the parish neighborhood anymore. He added that the parish's Hispanic community has a wider range of ages, but is still rather small, numbering only 70 to 90 people. Neither community within the parish can provide the volunteer manpower needed to mount an aggressive evangelization effort, he said.

"Our community is, beyond the vibrancy needed to attract new members," he said. "We're too small, too old and too fragile."



Mike Mergen/Photo Intern

Marks of the season

Michael Connelle and his daughter Alyssa receive ashes from Father Walter Plominski during an Ash Wednesday service March 8 at St. Columba and St. Patrick Church in Caledonia.

Aquinas earns trip to state basketball semis

Winning the school's first-ever sectional title in boys' basketball was a pretty big deal. Now Aquinas Institute, the Section 5 Class BB champ, is two wins from bringing home a state title as well.

The Little Irish steamrolled past Iroquois of Section 6, 64-55, in a state Class B quarterfinal game March 11 at Buffalo State College. The win came on the heels of a 56-50 win over rival Bishop Kearney on March 8 in a Class B qualifier game at Rochester's Blue Cross Arena at the War Memorial.

Now Aquinas, with a 19-6 record, is setting its sights on Amityville of Section 11. The Irish will play that state semifinal contest on March 18 at 11:45 a.m., with the winner advancing to the New York State Public High School Athletic Association Class B title game on March 19 at 1 p.m. The other semifinalists are Utica Notre Dame of Section 3 and JFK Somers of Section 1. The state Final Four will take place at the Glens Falls Civic Center.

The Little Irish earned their victory over Iroquois through the offense of five players. Willie Sanders led Aquinas with 21 points, followed by Kassim Howell (13 points), Shawn Jemison (13), Gemel Williams (9) and Tom Joy (8). The quintet accounted for all the team's scoring. Aquinas led 31-27 at halftime and extended its edge to double digits through much of the fourth quarter.

The state quarterfinal game was made possible by Aquinas' strong outing against Bishop Kearney (17-8), the Section 5 Class B champ. AQ broke away from a 25-23 halftime edge by outscoring the Kings 16-2 in the third quarter. The Irish then held off a BK charge that

saw the Kings rally to within three points in the fourth quarter.

As was the case against Iroquois, all of AQ's offense came from the same five players: Howell (16), Sanders (11), Williams (11), Joy (11) and Jemison (7). Meanwhile, Kearney was led by Brandon Andrews and Marcus Young, who scored 22 and 16 points, respectively.

"We've been pretty balanced throughout the year," said Aquinas Coach Mike Dianetti.

"This team has really understood its

roles. To a man, they've put 'team' in front of 'individual,'" added Dianetti, who is enjoying the best season of his 14-year tenure at Aquinas.

One other state contest involving a Catholic high school in the Rochester Diocese was played last week. The Geneva DeSales girls (13-12), Section 5 Class D champions, lost 67-54 to Elba, the Class DD champ, in a state Class D qualifier March 7. The Saints were led by Julia Augustus, with 18 points; and Kathleen Porter, with 11.

Irondequoit pastor taking leave

Father Robert W. Hammond, pastor of Irondequoit's St. Margaret Mary Church since 1998, was placed on administrative leave by Bishop Matthew H. Clark on March 9.

Father Michael Conboy, diocesan director of priest personnel, said Father Hammond's leave of absence arose from "issues and concerns that have been surfacing" in the parish. The purpose of Father Hammond's leave, Father Conboy said, is to enable him to "seek assistance in dealing with the issues raised."

Father Hammond, 60, became pastor of St. Margaret Mary two years ago after having served as 11 years as pastor of St. Mary's Church in Bath.

Father Conboy lauded Father Hammond for aesthetic changes to the church as well as "certain areas of ministry, but other areas needed to be addressed." Because this is a personnel matter, Father Conboy declined to go into further detail.

"We are committed to assisting the

parish, school and their staffs in dealing with the emotions and uncertainties related to such unexpected change," said a statement from Bishop Clark.

Nancy DeRycke, who has been full-time campus minister at the Newman Oratory, SUNY at Brockport, is serving as temporary pastoral administrator at St. Margaret Mary. DeRycke, a former Sister of St. Joseph, is also the former temporary pastoral administrator at St. Helen's Church in Gates.

Richard McCorry, a case instructor for the diocesan Tribunal, has begun as temporary campus minister in Brockport. He will continue to work in the Tribunal as well.

Sacramental coverage at St. Margaret Mary will be provided by two priests living at the parish — Father John Rosse, who is retired, and Father Peter Bayer, chaplain of St. Ann's Home — as well as other priests who minister in the Irondequoit area, Father Conboy said.

—Mike Latona

Obituary

Fr. Nelson Ruppert at 60; served Ovid, Interlaken

Father Nelson T. Ruppert, OFM Cap., who served as pastor of two Seneca County parishes over a 14-year period, died March 11, 2000, at the St. Conrad Friary in White Plains, N.Y. He was 60.

A native of Yonkers, N.Y., Father Ruppert entered the Capuchin Franciscan order in 1958. He was perpetually professed in 1962 and ordained in 1966.

After receiving his master's degree in library science from Catholic University of America, Father Ruppert was librarian of the Capuchin International College in Rome from 1968 to 1981. He then became vicar of the Capuchin community at Sacred Heart Friary and administrator of Sacred Heart High School in Yonkers, serving from 1981 to 1984.

Father Ruppert served as pastor of

Holy Cross Church in Ovid from 1984 to 1990, and of St. Francis Solanus Church in Interlaken from 1989 to 1994. In 1994 he assumed the pastorate of both churches when they were formed into the Central Finger Lakes Roman Catholic Community. He remained in that position until 1998. While ministering in the two Finger Lakes churches, Father Ruppert resided at the St. Fidelis Friary in Interlaken.

"I remember how good he was to the older parishioners, visiting the sick and elderly," said Sandra Huhn, parish secretary/bookkeeper. "If they didn't show up for Mass in the morning, he'd call them."

Parishioner Phyllis Kaiser noted that Father Ruppert baptized all three of her

children, and also supported her through some health problems.

"He came to our house and to the hospital," she said. "He was very personable and dedicated; a very nice man."

Due to his own declining health, Father Ruppert was forced to vacate his pastorate in Ovid and Interlaken in November of 1998. From that point on, he served as assistant archivist at St. Conrad Friary as well as part-time chaplain at St. Rose Home for the terminally ill in New York City.

Father Ruppert's funeral Mass was celebrated March 15 at Sacred Heart Church in Yonkers. He is survived by his cousins, Dolores Hubbard, Betty Sand and Peggy Murphy.

—Mike Latona

What's the beef?

St. Patrick's Day falls on a Friday this year, but if you want to eat corned beef that day, seek a dispensation from your pastor, not Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

Father Kevin McKenna, diocesan chancellor, wrote an explanation of the process for diocesan pastors:

"Although a pastor may not grant a general dispensation for a whole parish, he may however, by one and the same act, dispense several individuals or several families to whom the same reason for dispensation is applicable. He may dispense his own parishioners anywhere as well as others in his parish territory. (T)his faculty for dispensing was extended to all priests in the Diocese in good standing."