

DIOCESAN NEWS

Bishop asks parishes to donate to Jubilee fund

By Kathleen Schwar
Assistant Editor

Bishop Matthew H. Clark is asking each parish to consider giving 3-5 percent of its savings and investments to the diocesan Jubilee Forgiveness Fund to help struggling parishes. He sent letters March 15 to the diocese's pastors and pastoral leaders.

"Current estimates indicate burdensome unpaid bills and old loans amount to over \$2 million which equates to nearly 5% of the combined savings and investments of our parishes at the end of the last fiscal year," Bishop Clark stated in his letter.

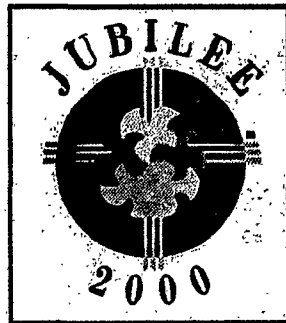
"Some parishes can meet their current bills but are unable to pay off debts originally levied years ago," the bishop wrote. "Other parishes struggle to cope with significant economic and demographic changes that have crippled their income. For others still, today's pastoral leaders are faced with debts that resulted during the term of a previous pastor."

The impact remains the same, he noted: "(P)astoral leaders must focus efforts on money instead of ministry, important parish programs are curtailed or abandoned, facility maintenance is deferred until buildings crumble, and the fabric of our diocesan church is weakened."

The bishop's request was made in the spirit of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 proclaimed by Pope John Paul II. Jubilee years — every 50th year — traditionally emphasized freedom and forgiveness.

In his apostolic letter, "As the Third Millennium Draws Near," Pope John Paul II stated, "Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations."

"The roots of what the bishop called for and the pope called for are the same — the



jubilee theme of restoring right relationships," Father Joseph A. Hart, vicar general, commented.

The Priests' Council endorsed the diocesan plan, which calls for a response not only from the parishes, but also the Pastoral Center, schools and individuals.

• The diocese will forgive about one-third of burdensome debt through absorption of losses in the Pastoral Center's operating fund and selected other diocesan funds.

• Parishes and individuals will be asked for contributions toward the other two-thirds of the debt. This portion represents unpaid bills for such employee benefits programs as pensions and health insurance and unpaid parish subsidies to schools.

• The Catholic School Board of Monroe County will review unpaid parish subsidies (separate from diocesan debt) and anticipates the schools will absorb one-third, the diocese one-third, and that the parishes will retain one-third of the unpaid subsidies.

The bishop plans to announce on Pentecost his decisions regarding debt forgiveness. All money received for the fund will be distributed this year by an ad hoc committee of priests and laypeople yet to be named.

The fund got its start with \$7,709 presented as a surprise during the bishop's Jan. 19 jubilee visit to the Seneca-Cayuga region, and collected during Advent from the region's parishes.

Parishes will continue to share their wealth after the Jubilee Year. The bishop stated in his letter that he will annually ask parishes with savings and investments of more than \$50,000 to voluntarily donate

at least 1 percent to a permanent fund to assist poorer, but clearly financially viable, parishes that face unusual structural repairs and renovations.

Bishop Clark stated that the diocesan priests "understand well that they not only oversee individual communities but also bear collegial responsibility with me for all the churches."

"Absolutely, we will contribute and it will be our desire to," commented Father James Schwartz, pastor of St. Louis Church, Pitts-

ford. The parish already tithes 10 percent of its weekly collections to various causes.

Father Timothy Horan, a Priests' Council member and pastor of St. Andrew and St. Philip Neri parishes in Rochester, said, that although the parishes' viability is such that "we'd be a candidate" to receive assistance from the Jubilee Forgiveness Fund, they, too, will gladly contribute.

"The church needs to be a model for the rest of society, of how material goods are to be distributed amongst the people."



John Powell
Aquinas Institute's Jemel Williams goes up for a layup as Amityville's Jason Fraser attempts to block his shot.

Semi-final ends hopes of Li'l Irish

Aquinas Institute's Little Irish were beaten 72-55 by the Amityville Warriors in the semi-finals of New York state's high school basketball tournament. The Warriors went on to win the state Class B title March 19, beating Utica Notre Dame-III 66-52.

Jemel Williams, the Little Irish forward, and Shawn Jemison, a guard, led Aquinas in scoring with 24 points and 13 points, respectively.

Aquinas coach Mike Dianetti was philosophical about his team's loss at Glens Falls Civic Arena before 3,000 people March 18.

"We're disappointed we lost, but we tip our hats to Amityville," he said. "If we're going to lose, it might as well be in the Final Four."

Council votes to close St. Francis

By Rob Cullivan
Staff Writer

The parish council at St. Francis of Assisi Church, Rochester, voted 5-4 March 15 to close the church June 30. The council turned down an alternative motion to keep the church open until Easter 2001 so that the parish might have a chance to revive it.

In February, Father Paul Tomasso, pastor of St. Francis, cited a low level of attendance at Masses, small membership and various financial challenges as reasons the parish should consider closing.

But opponents of the closing still aren't giving up their fight.

On March 19, several St. Francis parishioners protested the vote by placing notes instead of money in their weekly collection envelopes, according to Elizabeth A. Cordero, a parish council member who orchestrated the protest. At the 9 a.m. English Mass and the noon Spanish Mass, she said, parishioners' notes contained such messages as "Please don't close our parish."

Cordero added that the parishioners plan to continue the envelope protest for three more weeks at Sunday Masses, and also plan to write letters and postcards to diocesan officials. The diocese must give final approval to any parish closing.

Father Tomasso said he understood why parishioners were withholding their money from the parish.

"I'm sad that they're doing that, but it's an effort to protest something that has hurt them," he said.

About 40 people attended the March 15 parish council meeting at St. Francis, according to Marta Vargas-Perez, daughter of the parish's Deacon Carlos Vargas. Vargas-Perez said the people who attended the meeting were unanimous in their desire to keep the church open, and were disappointed that the council voted against the

wishes of the parishioners.

"I don't feel they voted with the community in mind," she said, adding that she now fears for the future of the parish's Hispanic community. Many of the church's Spanish-speaking people walk to St. Francis for Mass, she said, and live between a 1/2 mile to 1-1/2 miles from the nearest Catholic church. She pointed out that some Spanish-speaking Catholics may opt to attend Protestant services that are closer to their homes.

Father Tomasso said that the parish must survey its members and ask them where they want to go after the parish closes. He added that four neighboring parishes have let St. Francis know that its parishioners are welcome to join their communities. St. Francis has fewer than 200 members.

Although the council vote was via secret ballot, Cordero said that she had a good idea who voted for the resolution to keep the church open, and that those who supported the closing appeared to include four parish staff members. When contacted for comment, Bruni Martinez, the parish's religious education coordinator and a council member, declined to say how she voted. She did say, however, that she had experienced a parish closing before and wasn't enjoying the experience this time either.

"It's not an easy task," she said. "For me, it's twice the pain."

Pat Gatti, who was not among the list of parish council members Cordero said voted to keep the parish open, also declined to say how he voted. Gatti — who is not employed at the church — did say there is a dearth of youth available to volunteer at the church, and that makes the parish less viable. For example, he noted that at the age of 68 he is the sole altar server at the church for the Sunday 9 a.m. Mass.

"If there was a young one, I would step down," he said.

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