

CONTINUED...

St. Francis

Continued from page 1

"We believe that there can be a dawn after the darkness," Father Tomasso said during his homily to the assembled worshippers, some who wept during the Mass. "But we are not meant to be a people who live in the past."

Bishop Clark presided at the Mass, assisted by Father Tomasso as well as Father Peter A. Deckman, a former pastor who is currently parochial vicar at St. Michael's Parish, Penn Yan, and Father Jesus Florés, former interim director of the Diocese of Rochester's Office of the Spanish Apostolate.

St. Francis' parish council voted 5-4 in March to close the parish, citing declining Mass attendance, an aging membership and various financial challenges. The closing was vigorously opposed by a couple dozen parishioners, some of whom have appealed to the Vatican. The appeal to Rome has forestalled efforts by the parish to disposing of property until the matter is settled.

Betty Ann Cordero, parish council president who voted against the closing, joined other protesters in reciting the rosary outside the church building during Mass.

"I cannot celebrate the closing of our church," she said, explaining her refusal to attend the Mass. "There's no celebrating that."

A resident of Gates, which borders the westside Rochester neighborhood in which St. Francis is located, Cordero added that she hasn't joined another parish.

"I haven't found a place that feels like home yet," she said, noting that she had attended St. Francis for 42 years.

Before Mass started, Father Tomasso went outside and invited the protesters to attend the service, but most declined to come into the church. At least one of the protesters did enter the church to receive the Eucharist.

Some of those who opposed closing the church disagreed with the protesters' tactics. Among them was Myrdna Vargas, 19, who was an altar server for the final Mass.

"We didn't get what we want, and I agree with the (Vatican) appeal," said Myrdna, the daughter of Deacon Carlos Vargas, who headed St. Francis' Spanish ministry and youth program. "But I'm not going to sit outside and picket while the last Mass is going on... These are the cards God has dealt us, and you've just got to go with it."

Following the Mass, Bishop Clark said he was pleased with the service, though he understood the sadness many felt both inside and outside the church.

"I leave here confident that these folks will make it happen (at Holy Apostles)."

He added that he hoped the protesters might come to terms with the closing.



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Myrdna Vargas, 19, watches protesters from a van following the last Mass at St. Francis Assisi in Rochester on Aug. 15. Statues of Mary and St. Francis were removed at the end of Mass to transport to Holy Apostles Church, which is welcoming St. Francis parishioners.

"I wish they were in here praying with us," he said. "I just hope someday soon they may be with us."

Following the Mass, parishioners took down the church's statues of St. Francis of Assisi and Our Lady of Providence, Puerto Rico's patroness, and placed them in vehicles to transport in a procession to Holy Apostles Church. But for several minutes protesters blocked the procession of cars from going down Whitney Street.

Finally, police announced that anyone continuing to block the road would be arrested, and the protesters complied with police orders. One picket tossed a protest sign onto the road as the vehicles began moving.

A little while later, when Bishop Clark was being driven from the parish grounds by his secretary, Father Timothy Brown, about a dozen protesters, along with a few neighborhood children, stood in a semi-circle on the sidewalk blocking the bishop's vehicle. Among them was St. Francis parishioner Joe Benvenuto.

"The bishop won't talk to us," he said, explaining why he blocked the bishop's car. "He won't take our phone calls. He wouldn't come down to see us. This is the first time he's been down, and it's not fair."

Police eventually ordered the protesters to get out of the way, and as the bishop's car drove down Whitney Street, some of the protesters chanted, "You buried us, you



Bishop Matthew H. Clark consecrates the bread and wine during the last Mass at St. Francis of Assisi. At left is Deacon Carlos Vargas, and at right is Father Paul Tomasso.

buried us!"

Down at Holy Apostles, things were a bit calmer as parishioners from both communities shared prayer along with cookies and

refreshments following the procession's arrival from St. Francis.

Deacon John Antenucci of Holy Apostles welcomed the St. Francis parishioners with brief opening remarks upon which he elaborated during an interview afterward.

"When two communities come together... life is generated," he said. "I was praying through this whole process that new life would come."

Carmen Vega, a parishioner at St. Francis for 23 years, said she had accepted the reasons given by church leaders for the closing of her parish, and said she was optimistic about combining with the Holy Apostles community.

"I felt welcome here, and a lot of people I talked to felt the same way," she said.

At Holy Apostles, Father Tomasso expressed dismay that protesters had refused to attend the final Mass and blocked the bishop's car. Yet he added that he, too, was optimistic about the future of St. Francis parishioners at Holy Apostles, noting that the two churches had already held a joint picnic Aug. 5.

"I'm hopeful that the blending of these two communities is off to a very good start," he said. "The cooperation and the spirit and the desire to become friends is very tangible."

As an example of cooperation, he pointed out, Holy Apostles' parish council has designated three of its seats for the next three years exclusively for representatives of the St. Francis community.

He added that St. Francis parishioners also will have three seats on a team working to implement the Diocese of Rochester's Pastoral Planning for the New Millennium, a diocesanwide process of interparish collaboration seeking solutions to staffing and program challenges stemming from the priest shortage.

In addition to St. Francis, the team will be made up of representatives from Holy Apostles, Holy Family and St. Anthony of Padua parishes.

Deacon Vargas — who will serve the Spanish-speaking community at Holy Apostles — said that members of both Holy Apostles and St. Francis will discuss the possibility of providing transportation for some of St. Francis' Hispanic parishioners who do not own cars and walked to St. Francis for services. Obtaining a van or arranging a car-pooling system are some of the solutions being discussed, he said.

He also said that the day of the final Mass — the feast of the Assumption and the 71st anniversary of St. Francis' founding as a parish — was a fitting day for St. Francis parishioners to join with Holy Apostles.

"Our mother being raised to heaven is like us being raised to another level of faith," he observed.

Politics

Continued from page 1

"Good people can disagree on this issue, but surely we can agree on ways to value life by promoting adoption and parental notification," Bush said.

After previous elections where the GOP emphasized its anti-abortion platform, Wilcox thinks Bush's reference was remarkable for its mild tone.

"That's pretty soft for a Republican," he observed.

Neither Bush nor Gore has abortion positions that are at the optimum point for most voters, he said. For instance, polls show most voters would disagree with Gore's opposition to laws banning partial-birth abortion, but support his position that the ultimate decision about whether to have an abortion should be between a woman and her doctor.

Andrew Walsh, associate director of the Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., said most Catholics voters, like voters in general, are not motivated to choose candidates primarily on the

issue of abortion.

"The center of the electorate doesn't seem willing to be led to extremist positions on abortion on either side," Walsh said. "It's unlikely that lots of people outside the 'highly committed' camp are going to hold either one's position against him."

Even those who strongly oppose abortion often are reluctant to support efforts to ban it altogether, he noted. And they also don't tend to make election choices based on abortion.

But Gail Quinn, executive director of the bishops' pro-life secretariat, said she thinks abortion will be a factor in the November elections.

Surveys may show a relatively small percentage of voters point to abortion "as the single most important issue" for them in deciding how to vote, Quinn said. But she argued that among those voters are pro-lifers who "may choose a broader category in a particular poll, such as concern about 'moral/ethical values,' which in their minds includes abortion."

"Abortion as a political issue is being discussed regularly in print and on talk shows," she said.

Organizations such as the National

Right to Life Committee, which endorsed Bush in February, are trying to draw voters' attention not only to Gore's support for legal abortion, but the fact that he used to have a more pro-life voting record.

Last September, more than a year before the general election, the NRLC published a thick binder, "Al Gore on Abortion."

The loose-leaf booklet includes hundreds of pages of newspaper articles, press releases, letters, speeches, interview transcripts and congressional voting data — records of how Gore voted on abortion-related legislation in his House and Senate career and what he has said about abortion as vice president.

The compilation makes much of what it calls Gore's "flip-flop" on abortion — from an 80 percent "pro-life voting record" as a congressman in the late 1970s and early 1980s, to what the NRLC refers to as an increasingly strident pro-abortion stance since 1987.

Gore voted against federal funding of abortions in the 1980s but changed his position, he said in an interview on "Meet the Press" in July, "because I came to understand more from women."

In the Senate, Gore co-sponsored the

Freedom of Choice act, which would have prohibited states from restricting access to abortion under most circumstances. The bill failed to make it out of Congress. He also supported a bill, which became law, making it a federal crime to block entrances to medical offices, aimed at ending anti-abortion blockades of clinics.

But when it comes to this election, Wilcox said he doesn't expect either candidate to focus much attention on abortion.

"Abortion could come into play if the Supreme Court becomes a big issue," Wilcox said. The next president is likely to fill more than one vacancy on the Supreme Court.

"If that happens, it will be good for Gore," Wilcox thinks, because it could motivate Gore supporters who otherwise might be complacent about this election. Otherwise, he said, "that's just not where the heat is on social issues."

But Quinn, noting that "recent debate about partial-birth abortion was pretty intense," said the Supreme Court's decision to overturn the Nebraska ban on partial-birth abortion and rule that "virtual infanticide is constitutionally protected will likely keep a focus on the issue."