

DIOCESAN NEWS

Diocese, Jews celebrate agreement's fifth year

By Rob Cullivan,
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — At a May 6 event marking the fifth anniversary of an agreement between Catholics and Jews, Bishop Matthew H. Clark apologized for not publicly speaking up sooner about two recent incidents that offended Jewish people.

One was the Easter Sunday publication of the cartoon "B.C." in newspapers, a cartoon titled "The Seven Last Words of Jesus," which depicted the candles on a Jewish menorah extinguishing one by one. In the last two panels, the menorah becomes a cross. The cartoon was criticized by Jewish leaders for showing disrespect toward the menorah as well as allegedly promoting "replacement" theology, the idea that Christianity replaced Judaism. The Catholic Church has condemned such theology, noting that Judaism is a valid religion in and of itself.

The second incident involved the quoting of anti-Semitic remarks by New York Knicks basketball player Charlie Ward in an April 22 *New York Times Magazine* article. Among other things, Ward blamed Jews for killing Christ. The article also stated that Ward's teammate, Allan Houston, pointed out a New Testament passage to buttress Ward's remarks.

"I know that they offended me, and that they offended most members of the Jewish community," Bishop Clark said of both incidents.

Johnny Hart, the cartoonist who draws "B.C.," issued a statement saying he regretted if "some people misunderstood the strip," and he added that, "I abhor so-called 'replacement' theology." Meanwhile, Ward has apologized for his statements and has offered to meet with Jewish leaders to discuss why they found them so offensive.

Bishop Clark made his remarks before more than 100 people assembled at Strong Museum to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Rochester Agreement between the Diocese of Rochester, and the Rochester Board of Rabbis and Jewish Community Federation. Bishop Clark said that he had not been sure of the proper course to take about the Hart and Ward incidents, and he considered whether it was better to let both matters alone than to amplify them



Karin von Voigtlander/Photo intern

Barry Gruber, of Rochester's Temple Beth El, (left) and Pat Fox, of St. Joseph's Parish, Penfield, speak at the May 6 Rochester Agreement celebration.

with statements. However, he said, referring to the community's Jewish leaders, "I'm sorry that I did not pick up the phone and call somebody."

Rabbi Alan Katz, chairman of the community relations department at the Jewish Community Federation, also referred to the "B.C." and Ward incidents in his remarks, and praised Bishop Clark for his apology.

"He makes himself bigger, in my eyes, for saying 'I can learn, and I can do things better,'" the rabbi said in an interview after the formal presentation.

The bishop and Rabbi Katz, along with Roberta Borg, past president of the JCF, all re-signed a copy of The Rochester Agreement, which they had all signed May 8, 1996. At a reception, several attendees also put their names on it after having been invited to do so during the formal presentation.

The agreement was created after extensive dialogue between area Catholic and Jewish leaders in the wake of the 1993 Fundamental Agreement between the Vatican and Israel. The accord established diplomatic relations between Vatican City and the State of Israel.

The Rochester Agreement — believed to be the first of its kind in the United States

and used as a model in other communities — called for cooperation between the diocese and the two Jewish groups on such matters as combating prejudice and promoting education about each faith. One of the writers of the agreement was Deacon Brian J. McNulty, who headed the diocese's ecumenical and interreligious affairs office from 1994-99. The deacon said the agreement had borne much fruit, and that his work with Jewish leaders has enriched his understanding of how the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are related.

"Our stuff comes from someplace," he said of Christian Scriptures. "It doesn't exist in a vacuum."

Speakers at the Strong event noted that Catholics and Jews have worked together on social action projects as well as educational projects since the agreement. One such project is a joint Holocaust study project between Israeli high school students and students at Aquinas Institute who communicate via the Internet.

The teacher overseeing that project, Patrick Connelly, will receive the first Korczak Award for high-school educators May 31 in New York City. It will be presented by the American Friends of The Ghetto Fighters' Museum.

Other efforts include regular meetings

between priests and rabbis, according to Father Joseph P. Brennan, adjunct religious studies professor at the University of Rochester. He said he has regularly met with Jewish rabbis to discuss such areas of mutual concern as upholding marriages in a society that demeans committed relationships.

Deacon McNulty and Suzanne Shady, a Catholic who serves as chaplain at Monroe Community Hospital, are both going to Israel this summer to study at Yad Vashem, a Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. The museum was visited by a group of Catholics, Protestants and Jews from the Rochester area, including the deacon, Rabbi Katz, Father Brennan and Bishop Clark, on an interfaith tour in 1998.

Shady said she wants to study in Israel to learn how Holocaust survivors dealt with suffering. She wants to compare whatever insights she gleans with insights gained through her own experience fighting cancer as well as the experiences of chronically ill patients with whom she's worked.

"(Suffering) completely shakes up your relationship to God," said Shady, who has battled cancer since September. "It changes how you look at the world."

Upon her return from her Holocaust studies in Israel, Shady said she hopes to put all her insights together for a presentation she can give at the hospital.

"My goal is that I'm hoping to explore finding hope in the midst of suffering."

Lay ministry expert will speak on change

John Reid, former chairman and current board member of the National Association for Lay Ministry, will be the presenter at "Spring 2001 Ministry Day," May 16, at the Holidome, 1111 Jefferson Road, Henrietta. The association is a Chicago-based national group that supports Catholic lay ministry.

Reid will speak in three sessions on "Surviving and Thriving as Leaders in Times of Change" at the event, which will run from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Ministry Day, designed for pastoral leaders throughout the Diocese of Rochester, is sponsored by the Office of Continuing Education at St. Bernard's Institute at Rochester.

Crys Cassano, continuing education secretary, said 300 people are expected to attend Ministry Day.

Reid's presentation is intended to help pastoral leaders who fear impending decisions to close parishes; reduced opportunities to celebrate the Eucharist; and the absence of priests for sacramental celebrations. Ministry Day is also designed for pastoral leaders who have concerns about the emergence of lay ministers as pastoral caregivers as well as strategic planning initiatives and implementation.

Reid has conducted workshops on leadership, collaboration and transition around the country and is a former coordinator of transition services for the Office of the Archbishop of Seattle, Wash.

According to information from the continuing education office, the goal of Ministry Day is to equip pastoral leaders to understand their role in change; develop strategies for helping faith communities facing transition; and understand diocesan expectations with respect to changing circumstances.

The fee for the day is \$30, and includes lunch. For information, call St. Bernard's at 716/271-3657, ext. 290.

—Rob Cullivan

Gates priest to extend pastorate past age 75

By Mike Latona,
Staff writer

For the first time in more than 30 years, a Rochester diocesan priest will carry his pastorate beyond his 75th birthday.

Father John Steger has received permission from Bishop Matthew H. Clark to continue as pastor of St. Jude's Parish. He will begin his 34th year at the Gates parish in late June, after turning 75 on May 26.

Church law requires that a pastor submit a formal letter of resignation at age 75. Then, the diocesan bishop "is to decide whether to accept or defer the resignation," says Canon 538 in the Code of Canon Law.

Beginning in the late 1960s under Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, such resignation letters had all been accepted, said Father Michael Conboy, diocesan director of priest personnel.

Yet Father Steger has been permitted to continue full-time active duty, Father Conboy said, because of his deep desire to remain associated with St. Jude's.

Father Steger, the only pastor in St. Jude's 33-year-history, stated that he was never once tempted to retire from the 1,500-family parish.

"Quite frankly, two of my younger brothers have died in the last three years. So my family is my parish," Father Steger explained. "If I left the parish, I'd fold up, probably. This is my family, this is my life."

Another diocesan priest, Father Frederick Bush, will celebrate his 75th birthday on June 7. Both he and Father Steger submitted their required letters to Bishop Clark in January.

Yet Father Bush's resignation letter was accepted, even though he was willing to continue as pastor of Holy Spirit Parish in Penfield. Father Bush has led that parish since 1971.

Father Conboy noted that the resignation letters had different tones, saying Father Bush was willing to accept retirement if that was the bishop's desire — whereas Father Steger was vehement about wanting to put off his retirement.

Father Steger said that continuing his pastorate will help address the ongoing priest shortage, and that he's not concerned about the workload.

"I consider the priesthood a vocation, not a professional job that you retire from," Father Steger said.

He added that moving elsewhere was not an option, saying, "I wouldn't even consider it. I think the bishop knows that, and he respects my feelings."

Meanwhile, Father Bush will be succeeded at Holy Spirit Parish by Father P. Frederick Helfrich, currently the parochial vicar at St. Theodore's Parish in Gates.

Father Bush said he would have enjoyed remaining at Holy Spirit, but does not feel badly about moving on while Father Steger will stay put at St. Jude's.

"(Father Steger) founded the parish so it's a little different. I hope the best for him," Father Bush said.

Holy Spirit's departing pastor said he plans to stay busy in priestly ministry after moving next month to his new parish home, St. Mark's in Greece.

"I don't want to sit around," he said.

In some parts of the diocese, priests older than 75 are still leading parishes. But they are officially retired and operate under the title of "administrator" in these small parish communities. Such priests include Fathers Dominic and Charles Mockevicius, brothers who are co-administrators of St. George Church in Rochester; and Father Albert J. Shamon, administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel in Fleming.

Father Conboy noted that the customary retirement age for Rochester diocesan priests is 70, and they are eligible to retire with full benefits as early as 67. Only a small percentage of priests ever serve full-time until age 75, he added.

Fathers Steger and Bush have been at their respective parishes for unusually long tenures, based on current diocesan policy.

Beginning in 1986 the diocese invoked term limits, meaning that a pastor can serve no more than two consecutive six-year terms at a single parish. Some priests had begun pastorates prior to 1986 and were grandfathered, receiving the option of staying at their parishes indefinitely.