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Religious leaders decry hospital closing

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Tears welled up in the eyes of Sister Beth LeValley, SSJ, president of Greater Rochester Community of Churches (GRCC), as she spoke about why she's fighting the closing of the 114-year-old Genesee Hospital.

"Are we about something or aren't we as a religious community?" she asked rhetorically.

Sister LeValley's ecumenical organization — to which the Diocese of Rochester belongs — is leading a petition drive to save the hospital, located southeast of downtown. GRCC has been conducting the drive since March, and planned to wrap it up May 14.

GRCC had gathered more than 3,500

signatures on its petition, copies of which have already been delivered to state, city and Monroe County political leaders, as well as leaders of the medical, business and labor communities.

"We call upon them, individually or collectively, to take what action is feasible, including legal steps, to postpone the closing of the hospital until every alternative has been explored," the GRCC petition reads, in part.

On March 28, the board of ViaHealth, the corporation that owns Genesee and Rochester General hospitals, voted to close Genesee within 90 days. In a press statement, Thomas H. Litz, ViaHealth's president and chief executive officer, noted that the hospital had operational losses in 2000 of \$21.7 million, and wrote off \$50.2 million for restructuring and prior year ad-

justments. Additionally, he said, the hospital would not be able to meet its goal to cut expenses by \$83 million by the end of 2002, although it had cut expenses by more than \$50 million.

Genesee has served such populations as the poor and the uninsured, said Sister LeValley, who is also facilitator of the Interfaith Health Care Coalition, which has been examining the area health-care system since last year. As people who believe in the value of hope, religious leaders can't abandon such patient populations simply because market pressures are adversely affecting health institutions, she said.

"This is the moment to stand for something," she said.

However, the situation at Genesee looked anything but hopeful as of May 15.

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The Genesee Hospital, Rochester, is slated to close.



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Sacred Heart Cathedral's tabernacle depicts the four Gospel writers.

The tabernacle

Father George J. Weinmann and Sister Lilian Marie McLaughlin, SSND, gave their lives trying to rescue the Blessed Sacrament as fire engulfed Rochester's St. Philip Neri Church on Feb. 20, 1967.

Fulton J. Sheen, then bishop of Rochester, called them martyrs. Their action "demonstrated great devotion to the Blessed Sacrament," observed Father Robert F. McNamara, diocesan historian. "It is a very Catholic idea that Jesus is in the Blessed Sacrament. If he is in danger, you want to rescue him. ... (B)ut theologically speaking if the host is destroyed the Real Presence would be no longer there."

Today, Father McNamara noted, some parishioners at St. Philip Neri, which was rebuilt in 1969, would like to see Father Weinmann (who died two days after the fire) and Sister McLaughlin canonized. The heroic pair — and the parishioners pressing their cause for can-

onization — illustrate the intensity with which many Catholics cherish the Blessed Sacrament and the tabernacle in which it is reserved.

Today the tabernacle has become a "lightning rod" for the anger and frustration experienced by U.S. Catholics who do not accept the liturgical reforms that have taken place since the Second Vatican Council, acknowledged St. Philip Neri's current pastor, Father Timothy E. Horan.

Accustomed throughout their lifetimes to seeing the tabernacle straight ahead on the high altar — and more recently on a back altar behind the altar of celebration — when they walked into church, they reject efforts to relocate it. But since Vatican II, the church has stressed as the center of Christian life Jesus' presence in the celebration of the Eucharist, the Word proclaimed and the person of the

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Story by Kathleen Schwar Photo by Andrea Dixon