

DIOCESAN NEWS

Train derails, ignites near church in Charlotte

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

CHARLOTTE — While Father Thomas Wheeland was performing his customary blessing of toys during Christmas Day Mass, one child produced a toy train.

"I said 'We almost had a train of our own, right in the church,'" recalled Father Wheeland, pastor of Holy Cross Church.

His remark was met by chuckles from the congregation. But two days earlier, the atmosphere at Holy Cross was much more serious. A train carrying large amounts of chemicals derailed on tracks behind and below the Holy Cross campus in mid-afternoon Dec. 23, touching off a large fire. The accident drew media attention from across the country.

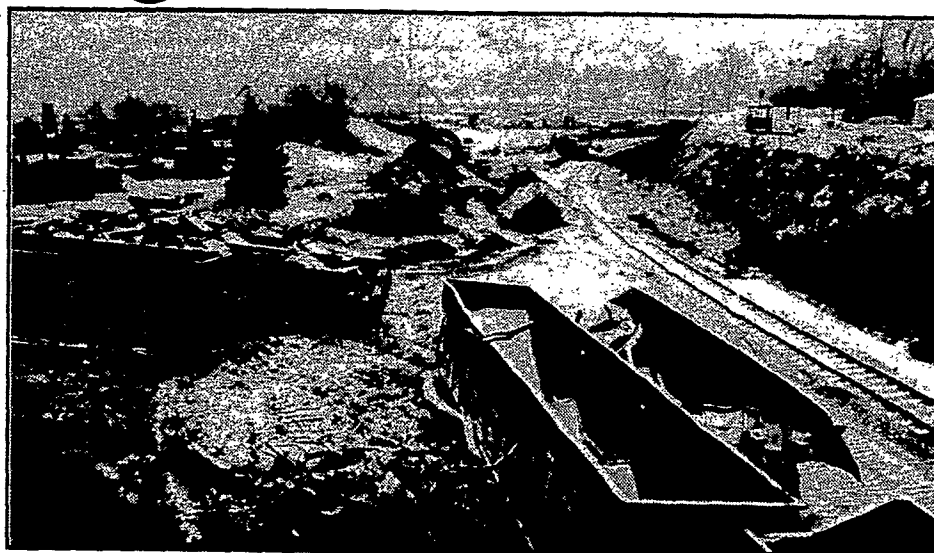
The train was operated by CSX Corp., based in Jacksonville, Fla. Amazingly, the only injury was to the engineer, who leaped off the train when he realized it couldn't be stopped. He suffered a minor injury. According to Bob Sullivan, CSX spokesperson, the engineer was the only person aboard at the time.

The accident forced a one-night evacuation of the two priests and five nuns who live at Holy Cross, and also threatened to disrupt the parish's Christmas liturgy schedule.

Father Wheeland said he heard the derailment while sitting in his office at approximately 3:30 p.m. Dec. 23. Soon thereafter, he said, "I was looking down on this huge fire."

According to Capt. Dan McBride of the Rochester Fire Department, 27 of the train's 43 cars jumped the tracks, with five cars catching fire and several more damaged or destroyed by the impact.

Bob Sullivan, spokesperson for CSX, acknowledged that the train had been parked near Kodak Park, four miles to the north, but began moving unexpectedly and gained speed at it traveled slightly downhill. It derailed after failing to negotiate a sharp curve in the northern section of Rochester known as Charlotte. The tracks



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Train cars litter the area around the empty railroad track Dec. 27 after a train carrying flammable chemicals derailed in Charlotte four days earlier. Crews were still working to clean up the wreckage more than two weeks later.

run between River Street and the Genesee River, just shy of Lake Ontario. Holy Cross's campus rests atop a hill above the tracks, adjacent to the Charlotte Lighthouse.

Two houses and numerous boats were destroyed by the combination of derailed cars and ignited chemicals. Three tankers, containing the chemicals acetone and dichloromethane, caught fire. McBride said that tens of thousands of gallons spilled.

John Schmitt, a Holy Cross parishioner and commander of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Reserve, was one of five Coast Guard members who responded to the accident.

"There were three different fires, with wreckage in the middle," said Schmitt, who helped fight the fires for almost six hours before they were deemed under control. Schmitt noted that the dangerous situation was handled efficiently due to the teamwork of area police and fire departments, as well as the Coast Guard, Eastman Kodak Co. and the Greater Rochester Inter-



Some of the damaged cars are seen near the tracks at the Genesee River, with Holy Cross Church visible in the background.

national Airport's emergency crews.

Schmitt said eyewitnesses gauged the train's speed at up to 55 miles per hour. Sullivan said Jan. 4 that a speed had not yet been confirmed, but the train "was obviously going faster than it should have."

Sullivan added that the cause of the mishap remains under investigation. He noted that CSX plans to cooperate fully with people who incurred property losses. He also said that the company has brought in consultants to assess the quality of the air, soil and water in the area to ensure that no dangerous chemicals remain.

"We want to make sure the public is protected," he said, noting that the clean-up and testing will likely take several weeks. Most of the wreckage had been removed within two weeks.

Sullivan said CSX officials have spoken with the engineer and conductor, but he declined to give details.

Schmitt, a Charlotte resident, noted that the River Street area is fairly desolate during the winter months but is a haven for boaters and beach-goers in the summer. Had the derailment occurred then, he said, there would likely have been several deaths and injuries.

Meanwhile, Father Wheeland spent the night of Dec. 23 at St. Lawrence Church in Greece, trying to figure out alternative sites in case Holy Cross remained inaccessible. Then he received a call from the Rochester Police Department at 6 a.m. Dec. 24, saying that it was safe to return to Holy Cross. So the regularly scheduled 7:30 a.m. Mass went on as planned, as did all the Christmas liturgies.

"We got a lot of calls, asking whether or not we were in business," he said.

Father Wheeland noted that Christmas Masses were well-attended. In fact, the parking lot was filled not only with parishioners, but also with cars driven by curiosity-seekers hoping to view the wreckage. Father Wheeland said, with a smile, that most people initially ignored his pleas to move their cars — until he pointed out they were about to be blocked in by Mass-goers.

Obituaries

Father Joseph D. Donovan, founder of St. Mark's, Greece

Father Joseph D. Donovan was known as "The Fisherman." He also loved to hunt, to hike and to travel, and even got to stoke a train's boiler on a trip to Buffalo.

Father Donovan died at the age of 87 on Dec. 29, 2001, at St. Joseph Convent Infirmary. He was founder and pastor emeritus of St. Mark's Church in Greece.

"Bishop Casey said it would be the happiest thing I'd ever undertake, and it was," he told the *Catholic Courier* in 1990 upon his 50th jubilee. "We felt that we were really extending the Kingdom of God."

He founded St. Mark's in 1964 and remained pastor there until retiring in 1985.

The Rochester native attended Immaculate Conception and St. Monica's schools, and St. Andrew's and St. Bernard's seminaries. He earned a doctorate in education from the University of Buffalo.

Ordained May 18, 1940, in the former St. Patrick's Cathedral by Bishop James E. Kearney, Father Donovan served the Diocese of Paterson, N.J., from 1940-41. Later he served as assistant pastor at St. Ann's Parish, Hornell, 1941-46; at St. Margaret Mary Parish, Rochester, 1946-51; at St. Patrick's, Corning, 1951-55; at St. Peter and Paul Parish, Rochester, 1955-59; and at Holy Rosary Parish, Rochester, 1959-64.

Father Donovan was in residence at St. Ambrose Church from 1985-90, and became assistant chaplain at the St. Joseph Convent Infirmary in 1990.

He served on the Diocesan Board of Education, and taught at St. James Mercy Hospital School of Nursing and Catherine McAuley College.

Father Bruce Ammering, chaplain at St. Joseph Convent Infirmary, who gave his funeral Mass homily, noted that the church of Rochester had lost a great priest.

"He was a parish priest principally," he said. "He was a wonderful preacher, a good confessor, good to the sick, very comforting and pastoral."

One day when Father Ammering took holy Communion to Father Donovan's room, he recalled, "I just stopped and said, 'Joe, you're one of the finest.' He looked up at me and said, 'You can say that again.'"

Father Donovan had a "pretty healthy

view of who he was" and a good sense of humor, Father Ammering said.

He was close to his family, especially his late brother, Dr. Bernard, whom he once described as a saint, according to Father Albert Shamon, who gave Father Donovan's vigil service homily. A woman religious who was nursing him responded, "In my book, Father, you're the saint."

To which Father Donovan laughed and said, "But, Sister, your book doesn't have an imprimatur."

The priest also was predeceased by his brother Dr. Mortimer J. and a nephew,

Joseph Donovan. He is survived by his sister-in-law, Helen Donovan of Indiana; cousins, Ruth (Paul) Luke, Irene (Nelson) Loomis, Father Gerard McMahon and Sister Mary Denis Hurley, SSJ; nieces, nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark presided at his funeral Mass Jan. 2 at St. Mark's Church. Interment was in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

Donations may be made Father Donovan's memory to St. Mark's Church or the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent Infirmary.

— Kathleen Schwarz

Deacon Joseph E. Dwyer, lived the words he spoke

Deacon Joseph E. Dwyer, 63, died Dec. 22, 2001, after several illnesses.

"He always had a word of wisdom for the situation, whatever the situation was," said Deacon Dave Palma, director of the Office of Deacon Personnel. "He was very perceptive, profoundly perceptive in human nature and very spiritual, too."

Deacon Dwyer, a U.S. Navy veteran, was ordained to the permanent diaconate in 1995. He served St. Charles Borromeo Parish, Greece, and Immaculate Conception Parish, Rochester, before going as pastoral counselor to St. Helen's Parish in Gates, two years ago. He had been a professional chemical dependency counselor.

Father John Firpo, St. Helen's pastor, recalled three themes of Deacon Dwyer's at his Dec. 28 funeral at St. Helen's, attended by many priests and 40-plus deacons.

One theme was to "stay in today," Father Firpo said. "He was a real advocate for us to see each day given to us as a gift from God" and that "today we could encounter God in encounters with other people."

The second was "let it go," he said, adding, "If we're to truly follow the Lord, our call is to let go at times of our agendas, our timelines, our will and keep surrendering to God's will, knowing God's will eventually will bring us to a place greater than any we could possibly imagine."

And third was to love and accept others as they are and to forgive. The deacon lived these words, Father Firpo stressed.

"Joe was very, very compassionate," Deacon Richard Schuler, St. Helen's pastoral associate, said. "He was the kind of guy who when people spent time with him, felt better about themselves and their circum-

stances."

As former president of St. Stephen's Diocesan Community Association, he had helped bring that community together.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark celebrated his funeral Mass. Interment was in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

Predeceased by his son Timothy, Deacon Dwyer is survived by his wife, Iris (Kaiser) Dwyer; son, Ryan; daughters, Heather (Dr. Mark) Tallman, Albany, and Erin M. (Scott) McCarroll, South Carolina; brother, Dennis (Ann), New Jersey; four grandchildren and nieces and nephews.

Contributions may be made to the St. Lawrence Fund (Permanent Deaconate Benevolent Fund) c/o the Diocese of Rochester, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, NY 14624.

— Kathleen Schwarz