



Nancy Erickson/CNS

Seventh-grade students at St. Francis School in Cleveland give a report on the African-American Kwanzaa celebration earlier this year. Of the school's 258 students, 148 used the voucher program to help pay 2001-2002 tuition.

## Voucher ruling seen as victory

By Patricia Zapor  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court's June 27 ruling upholding Cleveland's school-voucher program was hailed as a victory for low-income parents by Catholic educators and other church leaders, but decried by public school educators for validating a system that does not address the problem of inferior public schools.

The Supreme Court upheld the Cleveland voucher program in a 5-4 ruling in the case of *Zelman vs. Harris*, saying the program is "entirely neutral with respect to religion." A majority of the students who receive the vouchers use them to attend Catholic schools, which led opponents of the program to charge that it constitutes state support of religion.

The majority of the court disagreed, however, siding with Chief Justice William Rehnquist, who said the system is "a program of true private choice" and does not vio-

late the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Sister Elizabeth Meegan, OP, superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Rochester, hailed the decision as a victory for parents' rights.

"I was delighted to see the Supreme Court make the right decision in supporting the basic right of parents to choose a school for their child," she said. "I think that this will strengthen both public and private education in this country, and that that has to benefit children."

Sister Meegan said the decision removes a constitutional block that may have prevented some politicians who supported vouchers from proposing legislation for fear it wouldn't pass constitutional muster. She added, however, that it will take the efforts of parents of all denominations — and of no denomination at all — to successfully lobby state and community leaders to pass voucher legislation, not just the efforts of Catholic school parents.

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# Catholic Courier

DIocese of ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

VOL. 113 NO. 38

THURSDAY, JULY 4, 2002

75¢

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## Priest shortage escalates

During the last several years, the number of active diocesan priests who have retired, died or otherwise left ministry has been significantly larger than those being ordained. This year, for instance, five priests retired and one died (Father David Bonin, on March 13), while Father James Fennessy was the only priest ordained.

Add to these the removal of three pastors due to allegations of sexual abuse, along with another pastor being placed on administrative leave for similar reasons, and the shortage becomes even more pronounced.

"These are pretty much uncharted times here. We haven't had to face this before," said Father Michael Conboy, diocesan director of priest personnel.

The most recent pastorate to open up suddenly was St. Patrick's in Seneca Falls, when on June 25 Bishop Matthew H. Clark placed Father David Gramke on a one-year administrative leave for allegations that he sexually abused a minor in the 1970s.

This news came nearly two months after Bishop Clark removed three pastors from ministry and placed further restrictions on three others. The three removed from ministry were Father Foster Rogers, St. Pius Tenth in Chili; Father David Simon, St. Paul in Webster; and Father Thomas Burr, St. Mary Our Mother in Horseheads. In addition, Father Joseph Brodnick, a priest of the Diocese of Cleveland, left his chaplaincy at St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira on April 9 at the request of his bishop, due to an allegation that, as a young priest in the mid-1970s, he had an inappropriate relationship with a girl in her late teens.

And, investigations continue in the cases of three additional diocesan priests against whom charges of child sexual abuse have been filed.

Despite these developments, none of the affected parishes has suffered a loss of sacramental coverage except for the cancellation of some weekday Masses, said Sandy Grocki, diocesan coordinator of clergy services. In order to accomplish this, the diocese has sought the services of temporary administrators, as well as retired and extern priests.

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Bill and Grace Gilmartin look on as their 6-year-old daughter, Brittany, shakes hands with Father Christopher Linsler during a reception for him after the June 30 Mass at St. Mary Our Mother Parish in Horseheads. Father Linsler recently replaced the church's former pastor, Father Thomas Burr, who was removed from ministry due to allegations that he committed sexual abuse in the mid-1970s.

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