

Parish series draws large audience

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

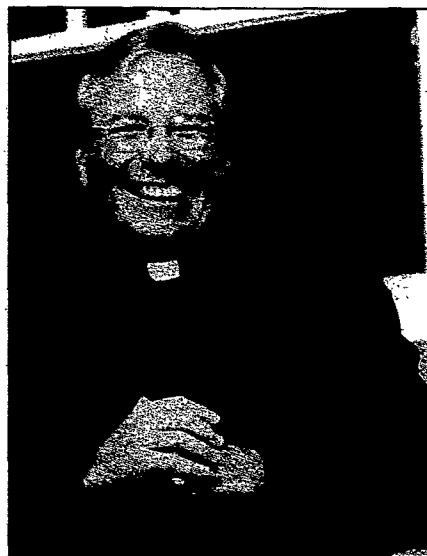
Walt Votra loves sports, and like many fans, considers Sunday a holy day of TV-watching obligation. However, in recent months, Votra occasionally has passed on televised games to do something different — learn about his faith.

Votra is one of scores of Catholics who have attended a monthly adult/family education program at St. John the Evangelist School of Religion in Clyde. The program's sessions are free and open to the public, and take place once a month on Sundays from 6-7:30 p.m. in the school, located at 43 W. DeZeng St.

"Have you ever been someplace, and you heard somebody talk, and they bored you to death?" Votra asked rhetorically. "These guys are not like this."

"These guys" are a series of academics and other professionals St. John's Parish has brought or will bring to Clyde from such places as St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry in Rochester and Nazareth College in Pittsford. They include a marriage and family therapist, a retreat leader, a Dante scholar and several Scripture scholars. Benefiting from the parish's aggressive promotion of the sessions, these lecturers have enjoyed large attendance figures. St. John's and its mission parish in Savannah, St. Patrick's, average a cumulative attendance figure of 400 people at weekend Masses, according to Father Jim Hewes, pastor of both parishes. Yet, the adult-education programs are drawing almost one-fourth that number at every session, he and Votra said.

"I have given presentations at fairly large parishes that have only 20 or 25 people present," Father



Jason Fearick/Catholic Courier

Father Robert Kennedy, pastor of Rochester's Blessed Sacrament Church, laughs during his Nov. 10 lecture at St. John the Evangelist School in Clyde.

Hewes said. "To get our percentage at an adult-education program at a 2,000-member parish, you would have to have about 150 to 200 people!"

Votra estimated that one-third of those attending the adult-education sessions are there, in part, because their children are attending catechetical classes held simultaneously. However, Votra said, he's not one of those parents, just an interested Catholic.

"I just feel compelled to go down because the previous speaker was enlightening, and I think 'Maybe it'll happen again'" he said. "I can honestly say I've never been disappointed."

The monthly sessions began two years ago as a new twist on a concept that St. John's had promoted during its children's catechetical sessions — simultaneous, but sepa-

rate, discussions among parents of the same topics their children were learning. When Father Hewes arrived as pastor two years ago, he decided to survey the parish's adults to see what they wanted to learn. He also decided to open up the sessions to the general public.

Father Hewes said studying Scripture was high on the list of requested topics; of the 2002-03 sessions, four of eight are on scriptural themes. This year's sessions featured or will feature presentations on the Gospel of Mark, the Book of Revelation, St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and the Song of Songs. The next session, scheduled for Sunday, Dec. 8, will be presented by Jim Krisher, adjunct professor of religious studies at LeMoyne College in Syracuse. Krisher will speak on Revelation. The remaining sessions are slated for Jan. 12, Feb. 9, March 9 and April 13.

In its first year, Father Hewes presented half the session topics, and guest speakers presented the other half. Starting this fall, the sessions all feature such guest speakers as Father Robert Kennedy, pastor of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Rochester and adjunct professor of liturgical studies at St. Bernard's. Father Kennedy gave a presentation on "Whatever Happened to the Church of My Youth" on Nov. 10, and said he was overwhelmed both by the wide range of ages of those present, and the sheer numbers, almost 100.

"This is the dream of every parish that wants to do adult education," Father Kennedy said.

He added that his topic dealt with the changes wrought in the Catholic Church by Vatican II, and that the audience was equally divided by thirds into those who became adults

before the council; those who were formed around the time of the council years in the 1960s; and those formed in the church that came out of it. The session was useful to those who may not understand members of their families who were formed in different church eras, he said, noting that Catholics today range from those who regularly recite the rosary to those who regularly read the Bible.

"We all find different ways to God," he said.

Andrea Drahms, a married mother of six children, has found a different way of looking at the Bible since she started attending the adult-education sessions. Drahms, a parish lector, goes to the monthly sessions when they're slated at the same times as her 10-year-old son's catechetical class. In particular, she said, she's enjoyed sessions on family issues as well as scriptural topics.

"I really love to study history and the Bible," she said. "I like finding out what the authors are really getting at, and how that relates to the message as the Word of God. I think it makes me respect the (Sunday readings) more."

She added that she and her husband, Richard, who has attended some sessions with her, see the adult-education sessions as important as the religious education their son receives.

"This is taking place at the same time, and this is an excellent opportunity to increase our knowledge of our faith and our own spirituality," she said.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For information on the St. John's/St. Patrick's adult-education program, call St. John's at 315/923-3941.

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