

Brockport school set to close doors

Enrollment on decline; building needs repairs

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

The Monroe County Catholic Schools Board and Sister Elizabeth Meegan, OP, diocesan superintendent of schools, have recommended to Bishop Matthew H. Clark the closing of Brockport's Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary School. The recommendation was motivated by decreasing enrollment and related financial concerns.

If the bishop approves, the school will close at the end of the current school year, according to Sister Meegan. The diocese announced the recommendation in an April 2 statement, which was released after parents and teachers had been informed during meetings that same day. Sister Meegan said the bishop is expected to approve the closing soon.

The recommendation came after a decade-long decline in enrollment at the school, which only drew 60 students at the beginning of the 2002-03 school year. Enrollment in pre-kindergarten to fifth grade has dropped more than 50 percent over the past 10 years, according to the

diocese, which noted that fewer than 50 students are enrolled for 2003-04, with just five students each in first and fourth grades.

"A class size of five children is not conducive to the academic and social development we strive to offer our students," Sister Meegan said in the diocesan statement.

Low enrollment also makes the cost of educating students at Nativity much higher than that of educating students at other Monroe County Catholic schools, the diocese said, adding that the school is also in need of various repairs costing more than \$100,000. The school conducted a marketing campaign in hopes of increasing enrollment, Sister Meegan told the *Catholic Courier*, but the effort failed to yield a substantial increase.

Bill Hayles, who heads the school's advisory committee, said Nativity had more than 90 students enrolled for the 2002-2003 school year. But for various reasons — including the lure of lower tuition at Holy Family School in Le Roy in the Diocese of Buffalo — several parents withdrew their children from Nativity, resulting in a loss of 30 students over the summer, he said.

Tuition at Le Roy's Holy Family is \$950 for one student from a family



File photo

Melissa Perez, 7, reads a book she wrote for an Author's Tea at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary school in Brockport June 1, 2001. It has been recommended that the school close.

registered at one of the six parishes that support the school, and \$1,475 for one student from a Catholic parish elsewhere. Tuition at Nativity is the same as it is for all Catholic schools in Monroe County — \$2,660 for one child from a family registered with a Monroe County Catholic parish. This common rate is established by the Diocese of Rochester. As a school of the Buffalo Diocese, the Le Roy school, by contrast, is free to establish its own tuition rates, according to Kathy Callahan, school secretary at Holy Family.

"It was like a run on the bank," Hayles said of the exodus of stu-

dents from Nativity. He added that his committee has found it difficult to find enough parent volunteers for events because of the low number of families with children at the school.

Hayles, whose wife, Patricia, chairs the county school board, said he and his spouse were "devastated" by the closing. The couple has a daughter in the second grade at Nativity, and their other three children all attended the school as well.

"We've been part of the school and given our time freely because we think the teachers and faculty are dedicated," he said.

Sister Meegan said every effort will be made to find jobs for Nativity faculty and staff members elsewhere in the county's Catholic school system. Meanwhile, the diocese is encouraging families at Nativity to consider enrolling their children at other Monroe County Catholic schools, including the one closest to Nativity, St. John the Evangelist School in Spencerport.

Hayles said it is likely he will enroll his daughter at St. Lawrence School in Greece. He noted that while some parents opted to enroll their children at the Le Roy school, he had questions about the future of schools in the Buffalo diocese. An official with the Buffalo diocesan schools said two schools were closed last year, and that three more are slated to be closed this year.

Sister Meegan said she did not foresee anything happening that could keep Nativity open at this point. She added that she understood whatever anger or sorrow parents felt about the school's demise.

"You never want to close a Catholic school if you're a Catholic schools superintendent," she said.

War protesters ponder next steps

Court dates lie ahead for trespass arrestees

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

Thirteen anti-war protesters — mostly Catholics — arrested during an Ash Wednesday sit-in at the Federal Building in downtown Rochester are slated to appear in Rochester City Court over the course of the next two weeks.

The demonstrators, who refused to leave the entranceway to the Federal Building, are charged with third-degree criminal trespass, and face up to 90 days in jail if convicted.

Among those committing civil disobedience were representatives of St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, a Catholic Worker shelter in the city; the House of Mercy, a Catholic outreach ministry; Pax Christi Rochester, a Catholic peace group;

and Lake Avenue Baptist Church.

One of the protesters, Dr. Harry Murray, a Nazareth College professor and Catholic Worker, said most of the protesters are expected to respond to plea offers on Friday, April 11. According to Clark Zimmermann, an attorney advising Murray, the protesters expect offers that would involve pleading guilty to a violation that carries a sentence of a \$100 fine and \$60 surcharge, or pleading guilty to criminal trespass in the third degree, a class B misdemeanor, and receiving conditional discharges.

Some of the protesters may decline to plead guilty and go to trial, Murray added, noting that other protesters are slated to appear in court April 21 and 25. The professor, who is representing himself, is slated to go back to court April 25 and said he would plead not guilty. He added that he will argue to have his case dismissed based on his assertion

that the U.S. government is guilty of the same offense.

He said his argument is "based on the fact that the U.S. government has committed the most egregious act of trespass since Hitler invaded the Rhineland" in invading Iraq. "If the United States government is unwilling to obey the law of trespass, then the criminal justice system can't legally enforce that law."

Asked whether he thought his argument would persuade the court, Murray chuckled and said: "I'm sure it will go far." Even so, he added, "I think it's worth pointing out." The government, he said, claims a "monopoly on force," but has never claimed "a monopoly on the right to commit trespass."

"I guess I would argue that (President George W. Bush) is undermining the whole rule of law — as well as undermining God's law," Murray said.

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