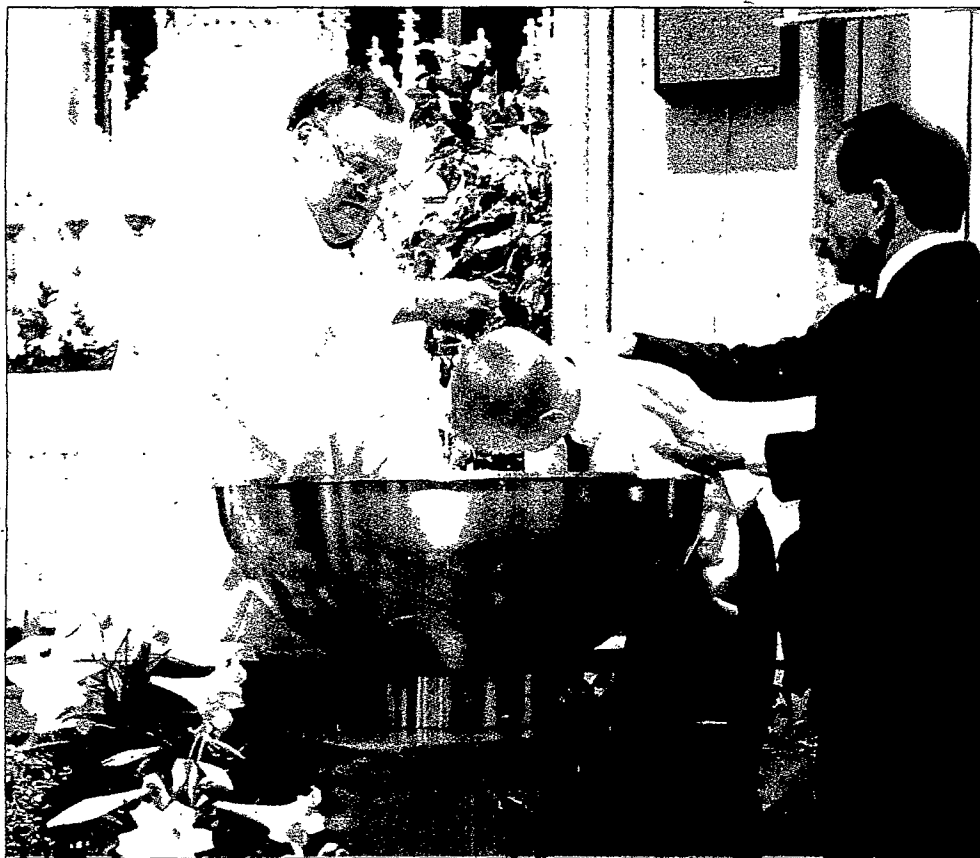


Easter initiation



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

During Easter Vigil Masses around the diocese on Holy Saturday, April 19, 302 people were initiated into the Catholic Church while 396 were received into full communion. Above, Father Patrick Connor, pastor of Elmira's Ss. Peter and Paul Church, baptizes 8-year-old Otto Bresser during the parish's Easter Vigil Mass. At right, lector Paula Welch proclaims the first reading of the Mass.



Franciscans seek sponsor for Mercy in Auburn

Declining number of nuns cited as factor

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

Citing a declining number of sisters as a major reason, the Syracuse-based Sisters of the Third Franciscan Order is seeking a new sponsor for its Mercy Health and Rehabilitation Center in Auburn, according to Sister Marion Kikukawa, the congregation's general minister.

Founded by the sisters in 1919 as an acute-care hospital, Mercy, located at 3 St. Anthony St., shifted its emphasis to caring for the elderly in 1972. Today it provides elder care and rehabilitation services for about 240 residents.

Sister Kikukawa estimated it would take about a year to find a new sponsor. Robert C. Aims, Mercy's administrator, said Mercy is seeking to become part of a Catholic health-care system.

To help the order in its search, the congregation has retained the ser-

vices of Zielinski Companies, a St. Louis firm that specializes in advising religious communities, Sister Kikukawa said.

In a telephone interview with the *Courier*, Deborah Elliot, president of the firm's Zielinski Properties division, said Mercy is open to offers from Catholic systems around the country. In a Franciscan Sisters' press release, Elliot also said that she foresaw no change in the day-to-day operation of Mercy under a future sponsor.

"Our overriding goal is to maintain the tradition and excellence of Mercy Health and Rehabilitation Center," she said. "Mercy will continue to serve the needs of Auburn and the surrounding areas for many years to come."

Sister Kikukawa said her congregation decided to seek a new sponsor for Mercy after conducting a two-year study of its sponsored ministries. Mercy is one of 12 such ministries, she said, noting the sisters work in the areas of health care, education, child care, parish pastoral

work and social services. The order's other sponsored ministries are located in the dioceses of Syracuse and Honolulu, she said. She added that Mercy is the only long-term care facility sponsored by her order, and that the congregation wants to concentrate its limited resources on maintaining its ministries in the Syracuse and Honolulu dioceses.

Although the study concluded that Mercy is part of a valued network of ministries the order sponsors, it also found that the number of sisters working in health care is declining, and called for the congregation to end its sponsorship of Mercy. At their peak in the 1950s and '60s, about 15 nuns worked at Mercy, Sister Kikukawa said, whereas today only two sisters work there. The order would permit the sisters to continue working at Mercy under a new sponsor, she said, but noted that any future sponsor would have the final say on the matter. About 29 percent of the congregation's 293 members still work in health care, she added.

In addition to declining membership, the Sisters of the Third Franciscan Order have many members who are either retired or approaching retirement, Sister Kikukawa said, adding that the median age of sisters is 69. She added that Mercy is currently an independent facility, and its financial health can be better assured if it becomes part of a network of mutually supportive providers, rather than standing alone to face financial challenges in an era of spiraling health costs and declining reimbursements from such programs as Medicare and Medicaid.

"We feel that for the good of Mercy and its future, it would be better if it could be part of a sponsor that has more resources, human resources and financial resources," Sister Kikukawa said.

The Sisters of the Third Franciscan Order was founded in the United States in 1860. Currently, the order has members working throughout the United States, as well as Peru.