

Letter reiterates bishop's decision

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

In a Jan. 21 letter Sister Elizabeth Meegan, OP, diocesan superintendent of schools, informed Monroe County Catholic schools and parents that — contrary to a previous announcement from the high school's administration — Bishop Kearney High School would not be opening its own junior-high program next fall.

Last fall, Bishop Kearney had informed parents of its plans to establish its own junior high in 2004-05 to replace Bishop Hogan Catholic Academy, a diocesan-operated junior-high school that has been located in the Bishop Kearney building since 1990. Formerly known as Northeastern Catholic Junior High School, it was renamed Bishop Hogan in 2001.

Kearney's announcement was made shortly after Sister Meegan announced in November 2003 that Hogan would close this spring after the current lease expires this June. Diocesan officials were unable to negotiate a new lease for space in the Kearney building beyond the 2004-2005 school year or to find a suitable alternative location for the junior high school.

However, Sister Meegan's Jan. 21 letter noted that Bishop Kearney

High School had acknowledged Bishop Matthew H. Clark's decision to deny the high school's request to open its own junior high.

Independent Catholic high schools, such as Bishop Kearney must obtain permission of the diocesan bishop for significant configuration changes. Bishop Clark has opposed Kearney's plans for a junior high because of fears that it would dilute the enrollment pool for all Catholic junior highs in the diocese.

Sister Meegan's Jan. 21 letter was sent to all diocesan schools in Monroe County and from there was to be sent home to parents. She noted that officials from Bishop Kearney had met with diocesan officials Dec. 10, 2003. "As a result of that meeting, Bishop Kearney officials understand that, in a letter dated June 30, 2003, Bishop Clark made a decision not to authorize Bishop Kearney's establishment of a junior high-school program. Bishop Kearney officials recognize the bishop's authority in this decision," her letter stated. Diocesan officials noted that this statement in the letter had been jointly agreed on by Bishop Kearney and the diocese.

Michael Tedesco, diocesan spokesman, said Jan. 22 that it was his understanding that Bishop Kear-

ney has moved away from its plans. Yet he said Sister Meegan issued the Jan. 21 letter because "we realized the officials from Bishop Kearney had failed to get back to the parents" about the fact that no junior-high school would be operating in the Kearney building in 2004-05. This communications lapse was causing confusion as the Catholic school registration period for 2004-05 approached, he said.

However, Kearney spokesman Mark Ball refused to say whether the school has abandoned hopes of establishing a junior high next year.

Ball acknowledged that "Bishop Clark has the final word on anything with Catholic schools." But he added, "We're going to be working with him and meeting with him. ... He has been extremely responsive to our concerns. We have opened up a dialogue and are very, very positive about the future."

Tedesco said, however, that the bishop had left no doubt about his decision after the last meeting with Kearney officials.

Ball declined to comment on Sister Meegan's letter, saying "It would be inappropriate (to do so) because it was not a joint communication."

He said Bishop Kearney is cur-

rently accepting registrations for grades 9-12 only, and that the Irondequoit high school wishes to retain its Catholic identity.

Vilma Goetting, principal of Bishop Hogan Academy, said parents of current Bishop Hogan students seem to understand that there will be no junior high in the Bishop Kearney building this fall, and that many are registering their children at other Catholic junior-high schools for 2004-05.

"I have received no questions at all at this point. I think it was fairly clear to our people that we would not be here," Goetting said.

According to Colleen D'Hondt, principal of Irondequoit's Christ the King School, 18 of the school's 20 sixth-grade students are already registered at Catholic schools for 2004-05, with the majority heading either to Siena Catholic Academy in Brighton or All Saints Academy in Gates. Traditionally, she said, approximately half the sixth-graders would enroll at Bishop Hogan Academy, which is located less than a mile from Christ the King.

"We're very pleased," D'Hondt said of the high percentage that will continue in the Catholic-school system.

Leicester church discontinues its Sunday Mass

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

Due to the unexpected departure of the parish's pastor, Sunday Masses at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Leicester ceased with the 10:30 a.m. liturgy Jan. 25.

Father Michael Murimi, pastor of St. Thomas as well as St. Lucy Parish in Retsof since June 2003, was unexpectedly recalled by his bishop in December to his home diocese in Kenya, according Donna Falkner, administrative assistant at the Livingston County parishes. Father Murimi officially resigned the pastorate Jan. 1, and it is uncertain whether the African priest will be able to return to the Diocese of Rochester, Falkner said.

St. Thomas and St. Lucy parishes belong to the Western Livingston Planning Group, which also comprises the Catholic Community of Mount Morris and Nunda (Holy Angels, Nunda, and St. Patrick, Mount Morris); St. Mary, Geneseo; the Newman Community at the State University of New York College at Geneseo; and Groveland and Livingston County correctional facilities, both in Sonyea.

The planning group is moving toward eventually becoming one parish canonically.

Other planning groups throughout the Rochester Diocese similarly have been working over the past several years to consolidate liturgies and ministries in light of the priest shortage.

The loss of Father Murimi leaves two priests to serve the planning group's faith communities: Father Michael Brown, pastor of the Catholic Community of Mount Morris and Nunda, and Father Daniel T. McMullin, pastor of St. Mary's in Geneseo and sacramental minister to the Newman Community.

Father Brown noted that the planning group had expected Father Murimi to stay at least three more years. Suddenly, however, the two remaining pastors now must serve all the communities in the planning group. Hence, the group's faith communities will offer seven weekend Masses until June, when the number of Masses will be reduced to six, he said.

In response to canonical limits, Bishop Matthew H. Clark has directed that no diocesan priest says

no more than three Masses per weekend.

In June, the planning group will decide where to eliminate one more Mass, Father Brown said. He noted that he and Father McMullin decided to continue offering one Mass each weekend at St. Lucy's because it has a larger capacity than does St. Thomas.

Sunday Masses at St. Thomas generally drew 50 to 90 worshipers, Falkner said, adding that 70 to 100 people typically attended Sunday Mass at St. Lucy. Baptisms, weddings and funerals will continue to take place at St. Thomas, she said.

Francis Christiano, a parishioner of St. Thomas for 83 years, said that he understands why Mass was eliminated at his church. However, he called on the Diocese of Rochester to consider sending a new priest to serve the St. Thomas parishioners.

"I look at the Rochester Diocese, and they're the ones that are supposed to recruit and train priests and provide them for this area," Christiano said.

Michael Tedesco, diocesan spokesman, said that it was not possible to find a replacement for the

St. Thomas/St. Lucy's pastorate at the current time.

"As everyone has come to be aware of, we have a declining number of priest personnel, and we don't have an individual at the current time for that position," Tedesco said. "That's a reality that this planning group and all planning groups within the diocese are facing."

Falkner added that many St. Thomas parishioners were upset by the cessation of Masses at St. Thomas.

"It's devastating to them because this church has been here more than 100 years," she said.

In a bulletin insert distributed Jan. 25 throughout communities of the Western Livingston Planning Group, Fathers Brown and McMullin acknowledged the sorrow felt by parishioners over the lost Mass.

"Your pain and grief during this time of transition has touched us deeply," the priests wrote. "Please know that everything we have done has been supported by intense prayer, frank conversation, and faith in the power of God's Holy Spirit."