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Pagan Pride Day sparks concerns

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

When Martha O'Donnell learned that Finger Lakes Pagan Pride planned to hold a festival in Canandaigua's Baker Park Aug. 28, she was concerned. O'Donnell — a parishioner of St. Patrick's Parish in Victor with relatives who attend St. Mary's in Canandaigua — feared the festival might lure vulnerable children, teens and young adults away from the Catholic faith.

O'Donnell's concerns are understandable and valid, noted Father Joseph A. Hart, a diocesan vicar general and moderator of the Pastoral Center. According to literature he's seen, the largest group of people who "drop out" of church are between the ages of 16 and 22, often in an effort to differentiate themselves from their parents by subconsciously rejecting their parents' values. Becoming a pagan, he said, could be a way for such young people to exercise their inborn religious instincts while rejecting parental values.

The second-largest group of church drop-outs are people between the ages of 18 and 30, he said. Their problems with the church stem from moral teaching — often regarding sexuality — and they often feel so guilty that they leave Catholicism in search of a religion that won't make them feel that guilt.

Parents can combat such rejections of the Catholic Church by helping their children to grow close to God, and encouraging them to have conversations with God, Father Hart said. A person who has a close relationship with God is less likely to turn away from him and his teachings, he added.

"The rejection often comes more from people who have only superficially known Christianity but have not come to know the Lord," Father Hart said.

Father Thomas Mull, pastor of St.

Mary's in Canandaigua, shared Father Hart's sentiments.

"Is (the festival) going to take people away?" he asked rhetorically. "By and large if they're going to be lured away, they wanted to be lured away."

Shelly O'Brien, media director for Finger Lakes Pagan Pride, stressed that the festival, called Finger Lakes Pagan Pride Day, is not intended to recruit people to pagan traditions. It is instead an opportunity for community members to become aware of what local pagans are doing and for pagans to give back to the community, she said.

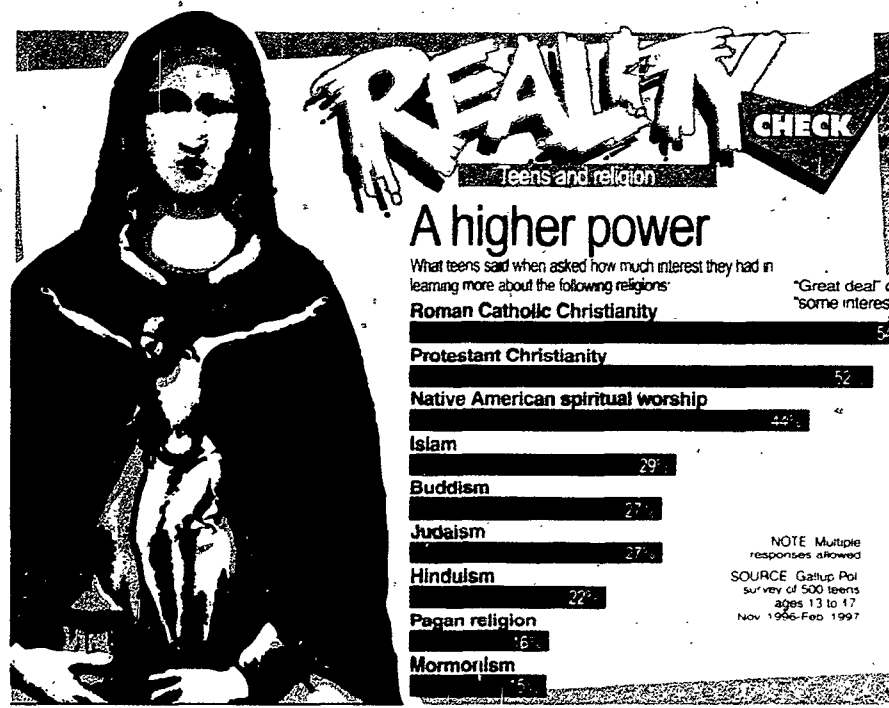
O'Brien said the festival presents an opportunity for pagans to let the community know that "what we do is not scary, that it is earth-based."

The festival is obviously geared toward pagans, O'Brien noted, although anyone may attend. The price of admission is one nonperishable food item, which the group plans to donate to the Social Ministry Food Cupboard at St. Mary's in Canandaigua.

Several Finger Lakes-area Catholics said they felt the food cupboard should not accept the food donation. Father Mull disagreed, noting the cupboard provides food for any of the area's poor, not for just poor Catholics. The food cupboard also receives donations from organizations representing various faiths, so rejection of this new donation would be inconsistent with current practices, he added.

"Anyone that wants to give us food, we'll take it, as long as it's good food and not spoiled," Father Mull said. "It doesn't make much sense to say that Protestant food is OK, Catholic food is OK, but pagan food is not."

Finger Lakes Pagan Pride works under the auspices of the International Pagan Pride Project, whose mission is to foster pride in pagan identity through education, ac-



tivism, charity and community. Although this is the first time Pagan Pride Day will take place in the Finger Lakes, similar celebrations have previously occurred in Elmira, Ithaca and Rochester.

Modern pagan and neo-pagan religions encompass many earth-based spiritual practices, including Wicca — which honors single or multiple deities and whose followers use magic — and druidism, which inte-

grates religion with the healing arts, ecology-awareness, psychic development and artistic expression.

"The best way to treat any religious way of life is to look at its beliefs, worship, ethical imperatives and communal organization," observed Dr. Nathan Kollar, professor of religious studies at Pittsford's St. John Fisher College. "If we put anything or anyone in place of God we endanger ourself and our society."

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