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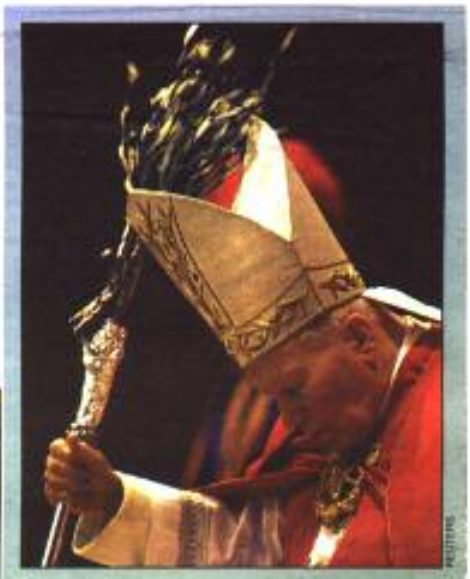

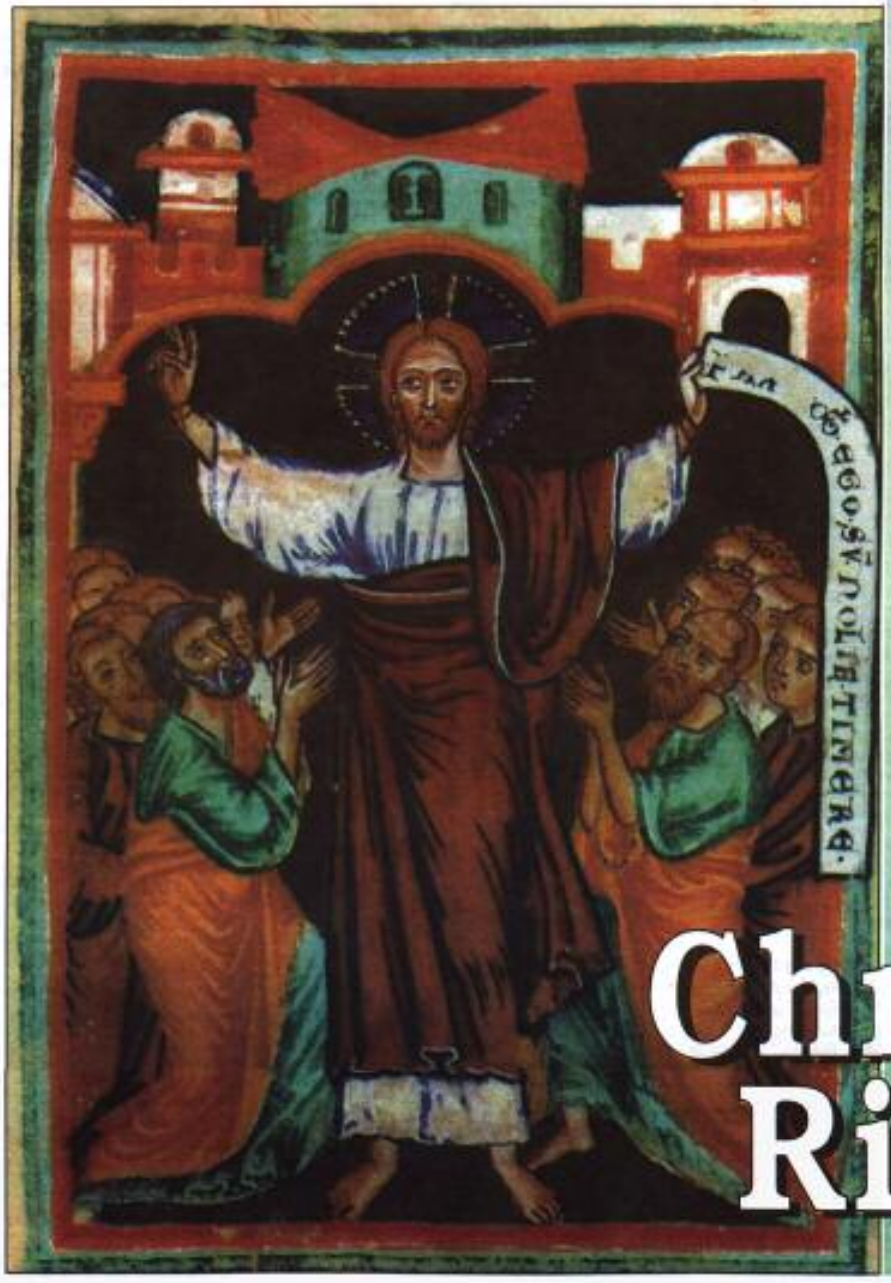

'It's never too late'

Pope John Paul II is urging a halt to violence and a return to dialogue on Kosovo.

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Why did they become Catholic?

Those being baptized into the church this week share their stories of conversion.

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Christ is Risen!

Computer system streamlines information access for parishes

By Brenda Rees
STAFF WRITER

JoAnn Zullo remembers the day she threw away the big red book that held all the handwritten notes about upcoming meetings in the church and various halls at St. Paschal Baylon Church in Thousand Oaks.

"It was a celebration; we should have had a burning of it!" she joked. "We were also using a huge Rolodex of parishioners' names, and that thing eventually went into the trash as well."

For Zullo, and many other parish administrators and secretaries around the Los Angeles Archdiocese, the reason for celebration is the Parish Computer System, a computer program that allows parishes to easily keep track of their finances, parish census, accounting, scheduling and many other aspects of parish management.

Created by OmniData for and with the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the program initially was developed four years ago using 10 parishes in the Santa Barbara Region, including St. Paschal's. Using feedback from those parish administrators, programmers fashioned a system that would serve parish needs of today — and for the future.

"The responses we got were wide and varied. Take any two parishes, and no one will do things the exact same way," said Larry McGovern, president of OmniData and a parishioner at St. Jude Church in Westlake Village. "The system we created is an open system — that is, we can add to it at anytime. It's flexible, but you don't have to use everything. Whatever feels comfortable."

McGovern has been working with Santa Barbara Region Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Curry on the Parish Computer System, now used by more than 70 parishes in the Los Angeles Archdiocese. About 20 parishes in the San Diego Diocese have adopted the program as well.

"We had about a year of experimentation with the program; people had questions and we came up with many different variations before we settled on this program," said Bishop Curry. "It's a customization of MS Office that can be upgraded easily. People at all different skill levels can use it effectively."

The system is loaded with various components, and not all parishes will initially take advantage of all of the possibilities, said McGovern. The four main areas that parishes are currently using the system for are:

• Census. Names of families and individuals are compiled as well as their weekly and special contributions, sacramental life and ministerial and council activities. If children are involved in the parish school, tuition-reduced volunteer hours are also tracked.

• Finance. A general ledger to record bills owed and paid. There is also a check writing program, budget tracking and the ability to generate reports, including an annual fiscal report.

• Payroll. The program processes and tracks payroll amounts, and creates reports and schedules.

• Scheduler. Replacing "master" calendars and meeting room books, all computer users have access to the component to see which spaces are available and when, but only designated people have the ability to input the information.

Zullo said that the mail-merge aspect of the program has made mass mailings easier, effective and practically painless.

"Before you had to make labels,

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then do the letters and then compile them together," she said. "Now we just pick out the target people — say those young people who are candidates for confirmation — and they get a letter addressed to them personally. We use a see-through address envelope so we don't have to do labels. Pop the letter in the envelope and it's done."

McGovern added that the program is capable of creating letters in various languages for those parishioners whose first language may not be English.

Learning how the program actually works was the biggest hurdle, said Zullo who credited the support staff at OmniData with being patient and always there to answer any question. "Their support is fantastic. I can call them anytime, and they will walk me through any problem or question I have."

Bishop Curry agreed. "What good is it," he asked, "to have the best program in the world, if you don't have the support to back it up? Especially when you are dealing with so many different skill levels of users who may be still trying to figure out some of the basic elements."

McGovern said that, in addition to its one-on-one initial instruction and follow-up phone support, OmniData is hosting a series of training classes to be held in area high schools. The first session is scheduled May 1 at Notre Dame High School in Sherman Oaks, with other classes being offered this summer.

As for the cost of the program, both Bishop Curry and McGovern say that it's a reasonable investment, considering that one copy can be used in various locations at the parish and school. "Many of our poorer parishes can afford it, especially now when computer equipment is so cheap," said McGovern. "We don't charge for networking the program to numerous computers either."

Still, the main reluctance to the program may not be the cost, but the fear associated with anything "high tech," said Zullo. "Sometimes people are afraid to change from the kind of system they have, but once you get the hang of it, computer programs, like this one, can make life a lot easier." ❖

OmniData offers its Scheduler Component free of charge to any parish in the Los Angeles Archdiocese. In addition, parishes can request to receive free of charge a CD-ROM demo of the entire Parish Computer System. For more information, call (805) 371-5620, ext. 401.

PUTTING THE PROGRAM TO WORK — Diane Schoenhofen (right), secretary/receptionist at St. Paschal Baylon Church, shows parish administrator JoAnne Zullo how she uses one of the many aspects of the Parish Computer System.