

March 24, 2002

## RELIGION; Virtual Devotion

By MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO

THE statue of St. Michael the Archangel no longer perches in its niche above the entrance to the former St. Michael's Church. It has been brought down to Earth, onto the grounds of St. Michael's Pavilion, a low-income housing unit where a 19th-century monastery founded by the Congregation of the Passion, a Roman Catholic religious order, once stood.

Among the earliest ministers to this area, the Passionists -- whose mission is to provide comfort to those in sorrow -- are celebrating their 150th anniversary in the Americas. Yet, the order itself is hurting. Its numbers have fallen from about 4,000 at its peak in the 1960's to 2,000. And since the Passionists closed the Monastery and Church of St. Michael the Archangel in 1982, Union City has never been the same.

When most of the 13-acre site was sold for \$1.2 million in 1984, there was talk of rehabilitating the monastery. Those plans went up in the smoke of a 1994 arson fire. St. Michael's Walk, a row of town houses, sits on the southern edge of the grounds. The former cemetery is a Board of Education ballfield on which the city plans to build a school. A sculpture garden has become a parking lot. The church is still used as a house of worship, now by its owners, the Hudson Korean American Presbyterian Church, which bought it and two acres of land in 1984 for \$700,000.

Many longtime residents can't bear to enter the building. "It's a feeling similar to when there's a death in the family," said Dolores Fabiano, a high school teacher. "It was such an integral part of my life for almost half a century."

In the shadow of their former stronghold, four Passionists continue their work, which has adapted to the times. A two-story amber brick building at Monastery Place and West Street houses the financial offices of the St. Paul of the Cross province, which comprises about 20 Passionist facilities on the East Coast, and the provincial archives.

From 1925 to 1982, the building where the Passionists live and work housed the offices of *The Sign*, a monthly magazine with a circulation of 500,000. It took its name from the Passionists' insignia, which they wear on their black habits: a heart, surmounted by a cross, enclosing the words "The Passion of Jesus" in Latin and Greek. That emblem, darkened by soot, remains on the facade of the church across the street. It is visible from the office of Father Victor Hoagland, director of the Passionist Press, a Bayonne native ordained at St. Michael's in 1959, when thousands would fill the church for a Monday night novena.

With his back to the window, Father Hoagland focuses on the computer he now primarily uses in his work. Besides preaching at parishes along the East Coast, Father Hoagland produces religious books and videos; *Compassion*, a quarterly magazine with a circulation of about 7,000; and *Bread on the Waters*, an Internet site ([www.cptryon.org](http://www.cptryon.org)).

"A lot of people out there are using the Internet for religious searching," Father Hoagland said. The site's material may be downloaded at no charge.

The first Passionists arrived in Pittsburgh from Europe in 1852. In 1861, they established a base in West Hoboken, which merged with Union Hill in 1925 to form Union City. "West Hoboken was filled with immigrants; no priests," Father Hoagland said. "So this was like going to Africa."

The Passionists founded a string of parishes in the area. The architectural gem was St. Michael's. Completed in 1875, the church was destroyed by fire in 1934, but rebuilt. Its 175-foot-high Romanesque dome and twin bell towers are a landmark to travelers on the turnpike and the Hudson.

A survey in the 1980's put the cost of repairing and maintaining the monastery and church at about \$3 million. "We looked at our budget and said, 'No way,' " Father Hoagland said. The Archdiocese of Newark did not want to assume the expense, and no help came from the order's headquarters in Rome.

Father Hoagland proposed closing some of the smaller churches in the area and consolidating the parishes. "The \$3 million voted me down," he said.

Instead, St. Michael's parishioners were moved to nearby St. Joseph's.

On a recent Sunday, about 50 people dotted the dusty pews of the church for the Korean-language service. Particle-board walls divide the church into several rooms. A partition bisects the gilded-wood canopy that once stood over the main altar, obscuring murals by Hildreth Meiere, who also decorated the exterior of Radio City Music Hall. Other artworks are peeling; some are gone. Space heaters dangle from the arches.

For his part, Father Hoagland attends to the virtual retreat house he has created on his computer.

Father Hoagland, communicating, as he often does these days, by e-mail message, wrote: "Some of the advances in technology can help us fulfill our mission. Maybe we are making a new beginning. And, of all places, here in Union City."

Photos: The Rev. Sebastian Kolinovsky, a Passionist priest, at his office in the order's residence in Union City. St. Michael's Church, still a city landmark, was once the order's home. (Photographs by Emile Wamsteker for The New York Times)