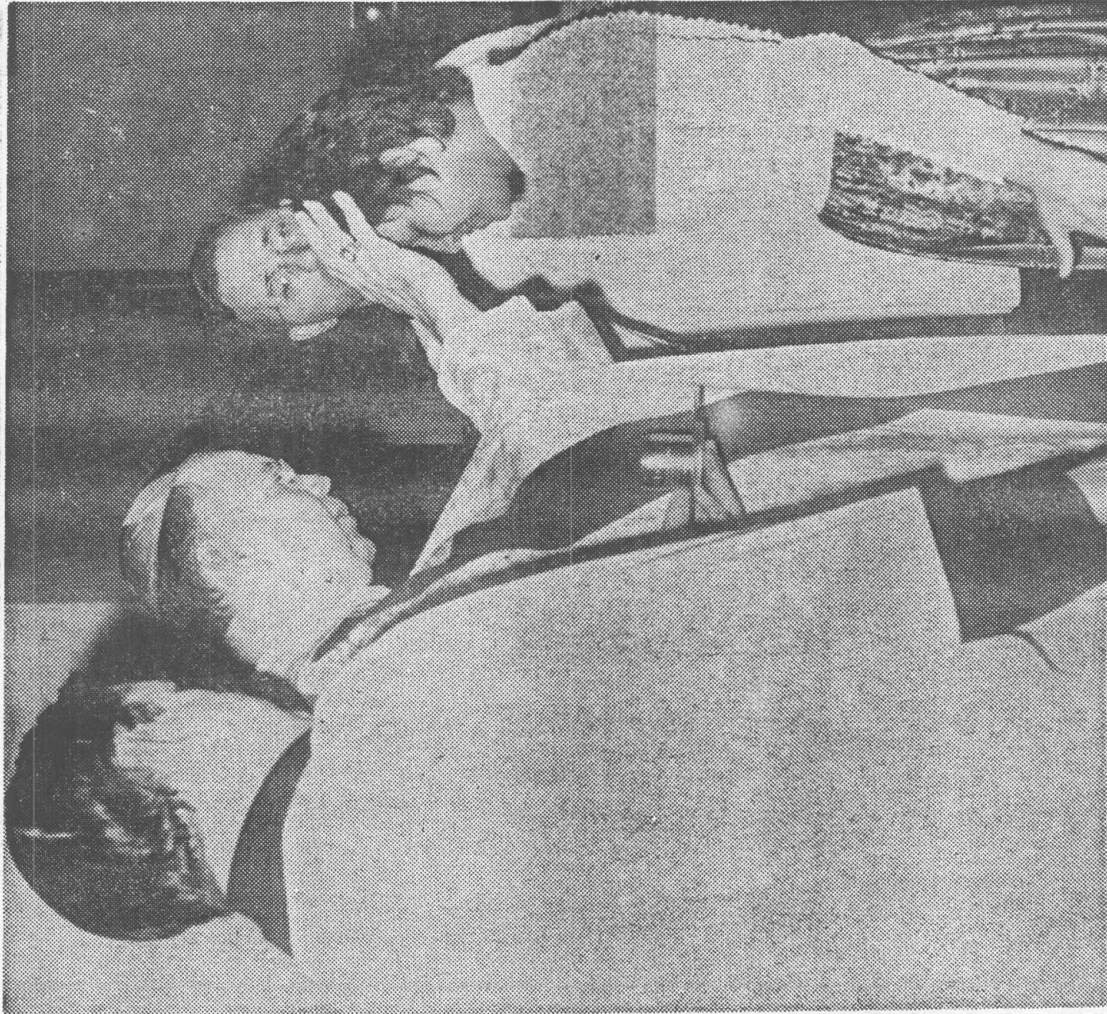


Cooke confirms 250 retarded



Terence Cardinal Cooke bestows blessings yesterday at the confirmation ceremony of 250 residents at Willowbrook State School.

S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons

Amid quiet tears and exclamations of joy and gratitude, residents came single-file before the holy sacrament of confirmation of the Roman Catholic Church was bestowed yesterday on 250 Willowbrook State School teenage residents by Terence Cardinal Cooke, the archbishop of New York.

The dramatic liturgy took place before a simple candlelit altar set up at the rear of the old auditorium on the school premises over the din of an inspired crowd of 400 parents, friends and institutional employees.

According to Catholic belief, confirmation is a sacrament of the Holy Spirit, whose strength is instilled into the child to make him a witness of Christ and an adult Christian.

It was the first confirmation at Willowbrook in eight years. The confirmands wore their best clothes and some sported fresh flower boutonnieres. The archbishop was resplendent in his white satin, gold-trimmed robe and carried the golden staff, the symbol of being the shepherd of the flock.

To the hymn, "Oh Holy God, we praise Thy name," pumped on an organ by a 32-year-old Willowbrook resident, the impressive nine-priest procession was led by another Willowbrook resident who carried the crucifix.

The highlight of the 90-minute ceremony was the signing of the confirmands' names in the sacramental card picture of Cardinal Cooke. Parents travelled from as far as Florida, Massachusetts to witness the event.

At the end the Cardinal gave a final blessing: "God bless you and all your loved ones. God Bless all of those who take care of you and who work with you."

A 18-year-old girl, unable to speak, nodded her head that she liked being confirmed.

CARD PART OF RITUAL

Because many suffer from speech defects, each resident carried a card which signified his confirmation name, a part of the ritual usually spoken.

The Rev. Edward Banks, for 19 years a pastor at Willowbrook, read the gospel which included the well-known verse: "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his life? What shall a man give in exchange for his life?"

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