

Priest holds mass to enlighten parish on group home

By MAUREEN SEABERG
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

A special mass brought the parishioners of St. Joseph's R.C. Church together with mentally-retarded and physically-handicapped Staten Islanders and their families yesterday in the Rosebank church.

The 4:30 p.m. mass was held in response to recent tensions in Rosebank over a proposal to open a residential group home on Hope Avenue for 11 mentally-retarded Staten Island men. Independent Living, a non-profit group has proposed the home to ease the burden on the men's families.

According to John Welch, executive director of the group, many of the men have aging parents who are having difficulty caring for their sons.

At an Oct. 25 meeting in Rosebank, residents angrily opposed the plan, and said the home was inappropriate for the neighborhood.

When Monsignor John T. Servodidio of St. Joseph's heard the negative opinions about developmentally-disabled adults expressed by some of those present at the meeting, he decided on silence.

"I went knowing people would have fears," he said. "But I was surprised and shocked because of their behavior — the hatred and the vulgarity. It was lynch-mob dynamics."

"You can't reason with people when they're like that."

Instead, he said, he went back to his church and gave a sermon the next Sunday on the subject. Yesterday's mass was a continuation of that theme, he said.

Monsignor Servodidio is also a member of the city's Human Rights Commission.

Some of those with negative feelings about the project are from his own congregation, he said, though not all were vocal at the meeting.

In his sermon, the pastor called for the help of the congregation, the enlightenment of those opposed and the forgiveness of the developmentally disabled.

"These people have as much right to live as anyone," he said.

"I don't know all of the men and women here tonight," he said of the many developmentally disabled who entered throughout the service. "But the way they all come up and greet me, you would think we knew each other for years."

Drawing from this example the monsignor said, "The people that we reject (as a society) are the very people that teach us to love."

And, addressing those people he said "I ask that you forgive and that you pray for us. That our minds be enlightened, that our minds be opened, and that we make you a part of the human family."

The monsignor attributed the negativity of those present at last month's meeting to fear.

George Doyle, a Community Board 1 member and parishioner of the church who supports the home, said he found the mass helpful.

"I thought it was a positive thing," he said. "I saw some of them here tonight, the people from that meeting. They looked amazed."

"I thought the monsignor gave an excellent homily," Bill Durden of Rosebank said.