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Dialogue for Renewal

"Active sharing . . . is necessary for the Church." —BISHOP JOSEPH L. HOGAN

INTERVIEW: Fr. Ehmann, St. Michael's

This week's survey report discusses the importance of prayer in the lives of area Catholics. It was written by Father Benedict Ehmann, pastor of St. Michael's Church, and a member of the diocesan liturgical commission.

One of the more interesting results of the survey to Father Ehmann is that 67 per cent of those questioned said that they found prayer most meaningful "alone in solitude."

"Personal prayer is an absolute must," he says. "Without it there can be no genuine prayer anywhere."

People must be able to pray by themselves, before they can begin to pray with others, he says.

Father Ehmann agrees that the progression from solitary prayer to family prayer during the Mass is a logical one.

In the Mass, he says, there are pauses for silent prayer — after the Communion, after the readings, and after the homily. An important part of the Mass, these pauses can be a time for "fruitful silence" and "pensive prayer."

"Family prayer will certainly enrich community prayer," he says. "A parish is ideally a family of families."

But prayer is not merely the repeating of the words of the Our Father or Hail Mary.

"The dimension of prayer . . . needs to be deepened," he says. Without meaningful prayer, "we are just marking time and wasting time."

The importance of community prayer, such as the Mass, lies in the opportunity for a group of people for "discovery . . . of the voice of the Holy Spirit."

Prayer should not stop with what Father Ehmann calls the "gimme" prayer of personal need. It must be allowed to "blossom" so that the "treasures of spirituality and mysticism" may be found.

Other motivations for prayer include thanksgiving, admiration or adoration, and praise. With these prayers, he said, we can "dial ourselves in" to God, or "the one 'who sees,'" as Father Ehmann said in the survey report.

Bishop Joseph L. Hogan has said in the past that during the Time of Renewal, he stresses "renewal of the spirit." Father Ehmann says that there have been many "tremendous movements" toward spirituality in history.

"Some of them were off center," he says, for example the Quietists of the 16th century, who believed solely in a contemplative life.

On the other hand, the impact of many spiritual writers is on target.

St. Francis de Sales, who wrote Introduction to the Devout Life, was "in his time a marvelous figure." He was able to "bring spirituality down to earth, out of the cloisters." Father Ehmann said that St. Francis found spirituality in "the common places of everyday living."

Father Ehmann spoke of current trends in prayer, such as the Pentecostal Movement, which he called "sincere," but "not my cup of tea."

The Pentecostals are "not for everybody," he said, and are "not necessarily a model" for prayer. He said that they may "frighten people off."

Another popular movement is in the interest in Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. "The whole thrust in looking to what the East has to offer, I think is legitimate," he said, "but they are not the be-all and end-all." The "Christian dimension of prayer," he said, must be included.

Prayer is necessary, Father Ehmann says. "It helps me pull myself together."

Analysis

The Survey and What Catholics Think of Prayer

Catholics in this diocese go to Mass every Sunday but they don't pray there.

These are some of the conclusions to be drawn from the survey released this week about the role of prayer in the life of Catholics of the Rochester diocese.

Close to 85 per cent claim to attend Mass once a week. In their analysis, the survey takers concluded "that respondents were candid" in reporting their attendance.

This is a very high percentage. It may be due in part to the traditional strictures compelling a "Mass-on-Sunday" type of church going. What the analysts call a surprisingly high 53 per cent of those asked think that "missing Sunday Mass is a sin."

Despite their regular attendance, most church going Catholics don't find Mass the best time to pray. Only 7.7 per cent find their prayers during the liturgy to be "most meaningful."

A solid 67 per cent find that prayer "alone in solitude" means most to them, but only about a fifth would turn to it as their first resource when "facing a serious problem."

The highest percentage (28.4) would go to their parish priest for help.

The meaning of prayer to most Catholics would seem to be as a private expression of faith and devotion; probably this means that the old practice of "praying for" something desired or needed has started to decline.

Religiously and emotionally, Catholics have strong ties to their families. Nearly half (45 per cent) always attend Mass as a family, and another 20 per cent do so frequently. And when asked who they turn to in time of need, 20 per cent said they would expect advice and help from their spouse first.

The analysts remarked that "Mass would appear to serve another purpose" than prayer, but offered no suggestion what it would be.

Without further data, it may be useless to speculate, but one is tempted to think that Mass attendance serves to tie Catholics together as a social group and make them aware of a common identity.

This could definitely be a valid religious experience, one that increases the ties between fellow Christians.

Regional Report: Father Frederick Bush, Monroe Northeast Region

The Monroe Northeast Region of the diocese comes under the coordination of Father Frederick Bush, pastor of Holy Spirit Church, Penfield.

The 13 parish region includes Penfield, Webster, Fairport, East Rochester, most of Irondequoit, and part of Rochester. It also contains Mercy High School, Mercy Motherhouse, and Holy Angels Home.

A regional conference has not yet been established, but Father Bush hopes to have something solid organized regionally by late May.

Father Bush likes the idea of a regional conference, as opposed to a regional council, because a conference would not exist as a governing body, or "just another committee." A conference would not interfere with the work of individual parish councils, but would allow for "sharing ideas."

A folk music workshop has been held, talks on regionalism and the Year of Renewal have been given, the priests of the region have had a day of recollection with Auxiliary Bishop Dennis Hickey, and parish councils have had training sessions.

But Father Bush feels that the most important work is on the grassroots level. "People have to get familiar with their own communities before they can begin to look outside," he said. At a parish council workshop, he recalls, one man told him that he felt that he had enough meetings with his own parish council, and that he did not have time to attend regional meetings as well.

Father Bush feels that regional progress in the northeast is "just beginning," and that a regional confernce will soon be realized.

All of the northeast parishes have parish councils, or are well on road to forming them.

Three regional committees, education, liturgy, and Human Development, are operating. Father Walter Wainwright, co-pastor of St. Joseph's, Penfield, is in charge of education; Sister Florian, SSJ, of St. Ambrose Church heads up liturgy, and Dr. Joseph Merrigan is the Human Development chairman.

The region's assistant coordinator is Father Robert Rice, associate pastor of St. Jerome's Church, East Rochester.