

Diocesan Survey Still Very Useful

By FATHER ROBERT F. McNAMARA
First of Two Articles

Earlier this year, in connection with the Time of Renewal, the Diocese of Rochester sponsored a survey throughout its 12 counties.

The objective was stated as follows: "To solicit, compile, and evaluate the opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of Catholics in the Diocese of Rochester on key Church moral and social issues considered relevant by lay people." The data realized were intended to indicate to the Bishop of Rochester where his people stood on particular questions. With this information, he would be in a better position to arrange priorities in his effort to renew the faith and practice of his people.

Furthermore, the investigation itself was to inaugurate a fuller dialogue between the Bishop and the faithful. As an opener, the diocese planned to reveal certain aspects of the survey, with commentary, through nine weekly full-page paid advertisements, published not only in the Courier-Journal but in the secular newspapers of Rochester, Auburn, Ithaca, Elmira and Hornell.

When I say "opener," I mean that. These brief articles only scratched the surface. There is a great deal more gold to be mined in the 1973 "survey of Catholic Households in the Diocese of Rochester."

I am writing this and a subsequent article to point out the value of the survey to the many groups who can find it serviceable and stimulating.

Let me explain why I, rather than someone else, am undertaking the present task. On the recommendation of Father Daniel F. Holland, then director of the Time of Renewal, Bishop Joseph L. Hogan named me a member of the Survey's "Monitoring Committee." Our first assignment was to approve the questionnaire proposed by the independent research firm Market Action Plans (a division of Harvey Research Organization, Inc.) Our second assignment was to edit the reports and comments that were slated for appearance in the paid advertisements.

The committee members chose to remain anonymous, so I shall not name them. But I shall testify that the constructive point of view of these priests, sisters, laymen and laywomen was admirable, and that they worked very hard.

After the last article had appeared, in May, the full text of the survey was made available. Having had a chance to study it over the summer, I feel ready to make some selective comments on it, on its use in the newspaper advertisements, and on the great value that it can still have in the continuing renewal of the diocese. I shall pose several questions, and then try my best to answer them.

Were the paid advertisements a success?

The proposal to use paid advertisements in secular papers was based on this thought: there are many Catholics who do not subscribe to the diocesan paper; indeed, who do not go to Mass regularly. These read the secular press. A frank report on the results of the Survey, accompanied by a Catholic commentary on the

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subject under consideration, would, it was thought, reach a wide audience of non-practicing Catholics.

Although a number of diocesan priests took a dim view at the outset of such a costly undertaking, the advertisement project was approved and carried out.

I was in favor of this move. Even though it involves a risk, I thought the risk worth taking. It was imaginative, and just might work.

I don't think it did work. The advertising campaign evoked so little comment — even unfavorable comment — that it is pretty fair to conclude that few people read the ads.

I still say that it was worth the effort. And it taught one very valuable, if expensive lesson: a paid page in the secular press is no substitute for a diocesan paper.

This lesson is important. Some five years ago, when Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen was bishop of Rochester, he proposed just that: that the diocese abandon its newspaper, and instead communicate to its people by a regular paid page in the local press. At the time, some thought this was a good idea. Only circumstances prevented its fulfillment.

We of the monitoring committee will all be ready to testify now, I am sure, that it just won't work. In the first place, it would be very costly, for paid pages would have to be leased not only in the Rochester papers, but in other secular papers strategically located across the diocese.

In the second place, I felt, and I imagine the other committee members did too, that we were "pulling our punches" in what we said in our "Catholic Commentary." A secular newspaper is glad to sell space. But if a Catholic purchaser of space makes statements at variance with the paper's editorial policy, the editor, if he chooses, has many ways of retaliation. Our "advertisements" were not at all controversial in this sense. Maybe they were too bland, because we unconsciously backed away from the frankest Catholic statements.

Was the survey itself a success?

Yes. If it did not achieve a perfect score, perhaps, it was based despite certain built-in limitations, on sound methodology, and produced a wealth of useable material far beyond what was utilized in the paid advertisements.

Who can profit by the statistics it provides?

Almost everybody in the diocese.

The Bishop will find it helpful in judging what his flock most needs to be taught.

Parish priests (and parish sisters) will find it highly instructive in matters of liturgy, Mass obligation and attendance, the concepts of prayer, of confession, of Holy Communion; the notions of moral issues such as pre-marital sex, contraception, abortion, war, peace, and racial discrimination. That some of the replies are shocking is probably good; it shows us that everything is not O.K. in Kokomo.

Diocesan departments, hear ye: School Department; Confraternity of Christian Doctrine; Liturgical Commission; Office of Human Development; Cana Conferencers; vocational directors: the survey is a must for reading and meditation.

Women of the diocese, there are pages that apply to you.

Black Caucus, the survey has something of concern for you.

Valiant battlers against drug abuse and pornography, you too will find a few relevant statistics.

Teachers and principals, look here!

But the survey will perhaps prove most serviceable to our emerging parish councils. I can think of few better ways for a council or its constituent committees to begin a discussion of its own role than by faking as its text some of the more salient items reported in the survey.

The diocesan Time of Renewal has not ceased. It goes forward, and soon will blend with the "Time of Renewal" proclaimed by Pope Paul VI to begin with the Holy Year of 1975.

May I, as an individual, urge the special groups I have named above, and, indeed, all diocesan Catholics, to study the 1973 Survey of Catholic Households? It will show us all just where we are. Then we can judge better just where we must go.

In a followup article I shall present one man's reflections on a few of the items covered by the survey. I shall speak frankly on their implications. Feathers may even ruffle and sparks may fly.



Family Mass

A unique family get-together took place on Sunday, Oct. 21, at the Carmelite Motherhouse on Jefferson Road. Rather than having a family picnic or family dinner, nearly 75 members of the Wiest clan gather each year for a family Mass. Above, Mr. and Mrs. William Hotra offer roses to start the Mass. Tapestry at right tells why they gather.



Pope Describes Newsmen's Duty

Vatican City (RNS) — Pope Paul emphasized the importance of communications here, not only in bringing "beauty, truth and justice" to the world, but in "diffusing the Word of God and the charity of Christ" to all men.

"The channel of social communications constitutes a necessary and fertile road," the Pope told members and consultants of the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications during a special audience. The 25-year-old commission had been holding its 10th plenary assembly in Rome.

Stressing the pastoral importance of the mass media in particular, the pontiff praised those at diocesan, national and international levels "who have understood the importance of the mass media today." He said it is

from these "nerve centers" that the papal commission derives a great part of its vitality.

Pope Paul stressed to the commission members what he saw as the body's three principal duties with regard to pastoral activity — "to further fraternal communion among men . . . to serve the truth . . . and to bear witness to the Gospel."

Of its role in bearing witness to the Church, the pontiff described the mass media as not yet sufficiently aware of the importance of the instruments it has at its disposal and which it often uses in a superficial manner.

"Christians must not fear to offer in this field an explicit example of their faith, ideals and needs," he said.