

Are Catholics Turning to Secular Values?

By U.S. Catholic Conference

Washington — The emerging question for the Catholic community in the United States, according to a paper prepared by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), is whether it will continue to derive its fundamental beliefs and attitudes from the traditional value system of Catholic Christianity "or whether its beliefs and attitudes will be drawn more and more from the secularistic, humanistic value system of the society around it."

"At the very least, many would say that for a large number of Catholics, the influence of secular society — and all that it implies, for good as well as ill — counts more heavily than the influence of the Church," the paper states.

It also says this is only part of the story of the contemporary Catholic community in the United States. "The situation is considerably different for that other segment of the community for whom Catholic beliefs and attitudes do continue to hold a position of centrality."

Noting the crucial role of parents in the transmission of values, the paper says the Church must increase its direct assistance to parents who are engaged in this vital task. "Supportive efforts by the

Church are now more essential than ever," the document states "since society at large not only no longer offers assistance to Catholic parents but in many ways fosters values which directly contradict those they wish to transmit to their children."

The paper says that while the Catholic Church in the United States faces many difficult problems, "there are also many signs of underlying strength and vitality. American Catholicism is changing, not collapsing, and while a period of change is not a time for complacency, neither is it a time for gloom."

The paper, entitled "A Review of the Principal Trends in the Life of the Catholic Church in the United States," was prepared by the NCCB as part of its overall preparation for the Synod of Bishops which will be held at the Vatican this fall. The synod's topic is evangelization.

"Effective evangelization lies at the heart of what is needed now," the NCCB paper states. "In order to evangelize effectively in the modern world, however, the Church must achieve a clear understanding of what evangelization means in the contemporary context." It must also "assess all means of evangelization now at its disposal (and perhaps some which are not now at its disposal but which potentially could be) in order to determine which can best reach minds and hearts today."

It is "beyond question" that in the United States at the present time "transcendent religious belief finds itself engaged in direct contestation with a secularistic, humanistic worldview which rejects supernatural religion and absolute moral values."

Moreover, it is no longer true, according to the document, that the Catholic community in the United States lives in a certain isolation from attitudes and values which prevail in the larger society. A state of affairs in which a relatively isolated and homogenous Catholic community was regularly reinforced in the distinctiveness of "Catholic" beliefs, "Catholic" values, and "Catholic" practices "has changed markedly in the last 15 years and with increasing rapidity since the end of Vatican Council II."

Viewed in this light, the overview continues, "it comes as no surprise that the Catholic Church in the U.S. has many of the same problems as the rest of organized religion:

"Polarization and ferment are widespread in the Church, not least in the religious life. The shortage of vocations to the priesthood and religious life remains a serious problem," the paper says.

It adds there are indications that weekly Mass
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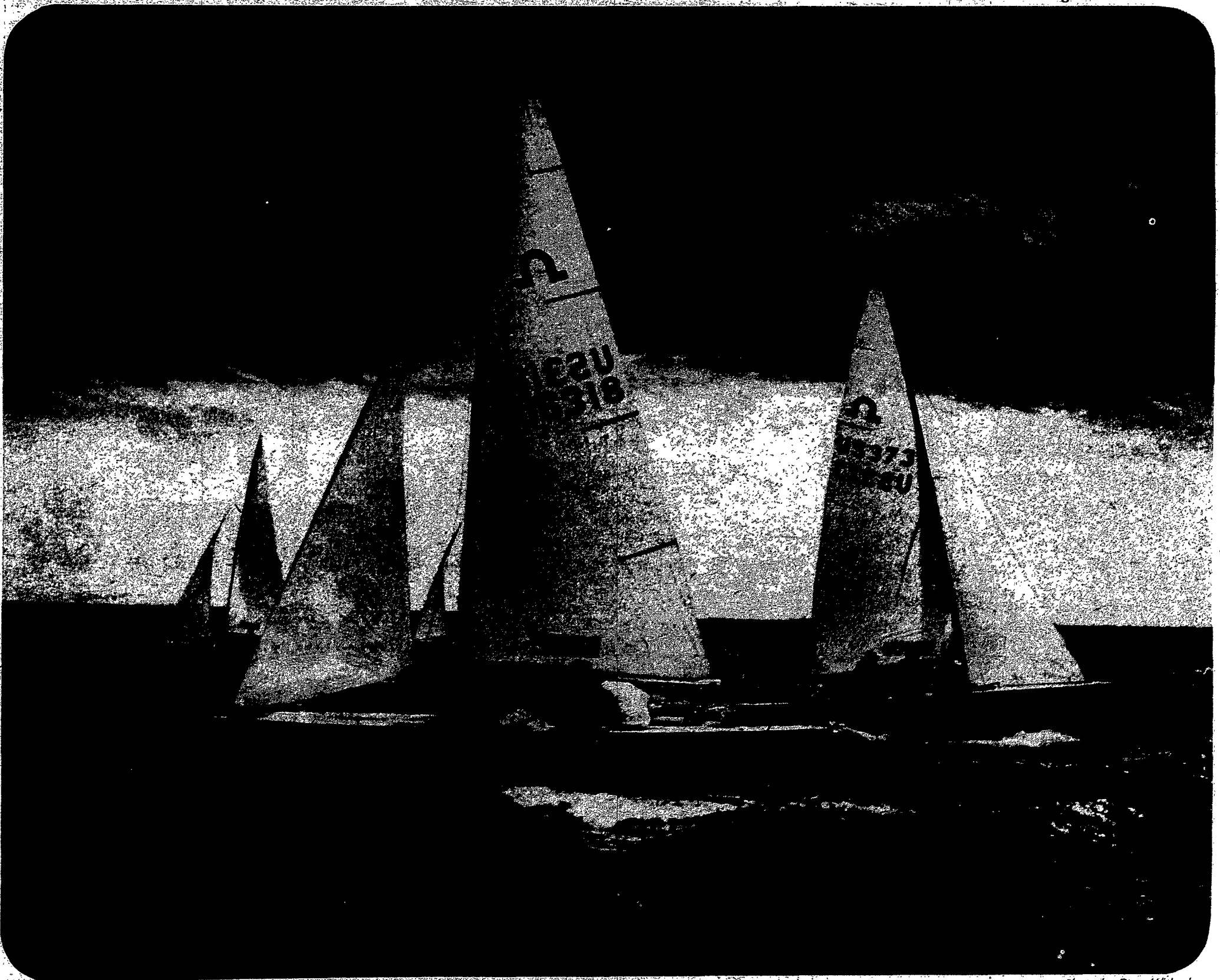


Photo by Dave Witbeck

Sail On!

An evening breeze stirs in the sails of boats returning to Rochester harbor against a darkening sky. Last weekend, many diocesans took to the seas and lakes for a few days relaxation and respite from their daily tasks. Pope Paul has often called such moments refreshing to the spirit, enabling men to renew their commitment to lives of service with a greater vigor, with deeper appreciation of nature and God.