

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Parish as Sacrament

The Church is a mystery, rich in its meaning, inexhaustible in its depth, catholic in its vitality and scope. In the end, it can only be described; it cannot be fully defined.



That is why Vatican Council II spoke of the Church with a variety of images. No one image or model of the Church adequately captures the whole mystery: each has its insights and each has its limitations.

Last week, in writing on the Church as herald, I focused on the Church's mission to proclaim the Good News to the whole world through its preaching and teaching. Now I want to turn to the model of Church and parish as sacrament.

Father Avery Dulles, in his book Models of the Church, describes a sacrament as the efficacious sign of the life Christ made visible for us, a sign that produces and intensifies this life within us, the privileged event which makes visible the invisible realities of this life in the Spirit. He then goes on to describe the Church as the sacrament par excellence, the place where God's saving purpose is made effectively present. In the Church, God's redemptive love for us is proclaimed in a full, life-giving sign and extended toward all humanity.

Now, if this is applied to a parish, Church-as-

sacrament is a powerful role and mission to be undertaken. Yet the parish is the Church "where we are," and so it is a mission that rightfully belongs to it. Our parishes are a sacrament for our people: places where people can touch the saving mystery of God's love and where it touches them. The parish gives this love visible, symbolic form; it is a sign, visible to all humanity, that God's saving purpose is active and having an effect.

A clear example of this is the way many parishes have tried to implement the Rite of Anointing and Pastoral Care of the Sick. They have developed programs of eucharistic ministry to those shut into their own homes or confined to nursing homes. Such programs of visitation by designated parish members are, first of all, symbolic of the Church's concern for its sick and infirm members, and a real ministry of care that nourishes the faith and spirit of these people. Through the hands of these eucharistic ministers, the parish-as-sacrament is made manifest.

Both bringers and recipients of this ministry will testify how much their faith has deepened by this experience. This points to another aspect of this model of Church: for a sacrament to work its full power, there must be participation in it. It is not for casual observers or outsiders; it is a beneficial reality for those who know by faith the mystery of God's plan to save us. We know because we have experienced the saving death and resurrection of Christ in our own lives, and

can find its vitality made visible in our own parish community. We sacramentalize this faith in a variety of ways: teaching, preaching, common prayer, works of service. By participating in these "sacraments," we intensify and deepen the life Christ produces in us.

Primary among these sacramental activities of the parish and Church is the celebration of the liturgy. Here God's redemptive purpose is proclaimed, professed, made present and visible. It "is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her power flows. For the goal of apostolic works is that all who are made children of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in her sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's Supper." (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #10) The celebration of the liturgy gathers our past efforts together, proclaims praise of God for His saving purpose already accomplished on our behalf, and fills us with hope for the fulfillment of that purpose in the future. In short, the liturgy gives purpose and meaning to everything else we do in a parish because in its celebration we touch and proclaim the core mystery of our lives.

The parish as sacrament is manifest every time the interior life of the Church is made visible. It is produced in and by people who love the Church and are dedicated wholeheartedly to its mission. It is happening all over the Diocese, and it is a hopeful sign!

vatican news

Revival of 'The Catechumenate'

Following is the address of Pope Paul VI at his general audience of Jan. 12.

The presence at this audience of a group, remarkable for its numbers and for the dignity of its participants, of members of the "Neo-catechumenal Communities," offers us the opportunity to draw the attention of our visitors and of those who join in listening in to these informal words of ours, to two events of the Catholic Church. The first is the 1974 Synod of Bishops, which had as its subject "evangelization" in our time, and which provided the subject matter of our subsequent Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi.

The second event is the coming Synod of Bishops which, God willing, will be celebrated in the autumn of 1977, beginning on Sept. 30, with the subject of catechetics.

This shows that awareness of the Church's fundamental mission, which is that of spreading the Gospel message, according to Jesus' last command at the end of his visible presence on earth: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" is keenly alive and active in the Church herself. Thus the Church is committed entirely, ministers and faithful, to proclaiming the Gospel. And this is true today more than ever, both on account of the difficulties and on account of the possibilities met with at the same time in the modern world as regards the diffusion of this proclamation.

We are, therefore, in an extremely clearly-marked apostolic, missionary and didactic phase in the life of the Church. We must all take part in

it: the building up of the Mystical Body of Christ on earth, which is our present Church, is the duty of every believer.

In this perspective it is clear and desirable that efforts should be multiplied to put this immense and urgent program into practice: to evangelize and to catechize. We witness the flourishing of works and means to give the proclamation of the Gospel message greater diffusion. We will observe how this multiform phenomenon in the holy Church does not regard only the scholastic, didactic aspect of her activity, but rather the wider aspect, pedagogical and vital, in which the teaching of religious truths is parallel to, in fact united with, the profession of life, of which the teaching is the norm and principle.

In the second place we will note how this duty is not regarded by those who carry it out, and by those who benefit from it, as being a serious and difficult burden, even though it actually is, but rather as an honor, a fortune, an ennobling and exalting vocation. Its accomplishment is in itself recompense for the toil it involves. It makes its witnesses happy, it makes them certain, it makes them participants in advance in the goods of that kingdom of God which they are proclaiming.

And then we will say that those who, with simple and generous hearts, put themselves in the service of evangelization, undergo, certainly because of a secret but unfailing charism of the Holy Spirit, a characteristic psychological and moral metamorphosis. It is the one that changes difficulties into stimuli, dangers into attractions, and even defeats into titles of merit and therefore of serene peace.

We can now understand also the testimony that our visitors offer us today: it takes place around the foundation of Christian life which is Baptism, the sacrament of Christian

regeneration, which must return to being what it was in the conscience and morals of the first Christian generations. The practice and the norm of the Church have introduced the sacred custom of conferring baptism on infants, allowing the baptismal rite to concentrate liturgically the preparation which, in early times, when society was deeply pagan, preceded baptism, and which was called the catechumenate. But in the social environment of today, this method needs to be completed by instruction and by initiation into the lifestyle characteristic of the Christian, in the period following baptism. This should be attained by religious assistance, a practical training to Christian faithfulness, and actual integration in the community of believers, which is the Church.

Hence the revival of the name "catechumenate," which certainly does not wish to deny or diminish the importance of the baptismal discipline in force, but wishes to apply it with a gradual and intensive method of evangelization, which recalls and renews, in a certain way, the catechumenate of old.

He who has been baptized needs to understand, think over, appreciate and uphold the inestimable fortune of the sacrament he has received. And we are happy to see that today this need is understood by that most basic of the institutionalized ecclesiastic structures: the parish. In this way a catechetics is put forward which is subsequent to the one that baptism did not have. The "apostolate of adults," as it is said today, is taking shape, creating new methods and new programs. Also new subsidiary ministries sustain the assistance of the priest and the deacon, ever more in demand, in teaching and in participation in the liturgy, new forms of charity, culture and social solidarity increase the vitality of the Christian communion and make it, before the world, a defense, an apology, something which attracts.