

Pastoral Perspective

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Family Ministry

Among the many insights into an understanding of Church provided by the documents of Vatican II, some of the most significant center on the Christian family. These insights have helped all of us, laity and hierarchy, to appreciate and affirm the gifts and responsibilities of all people in the renewal of the Church. The documents leave little doubt about our basic equality, the commonness of all Church members before the Lord Jesus. The Vatican II Council document entitled, THE DOGMATIC CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH, states this unequivocally: "It is, therefore, quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk in life are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of love..."



The family was affirmed numerous times as the basic cell of society and the Church, a very special embodiment of Church life. Vatican II, in fact, spoke of the family as the "domestic Church." My own life experience and years of pastoral experience tell me this is absolutely true. It is at home that Church becomes real and meaningful. It is also at home that Church can become seemingly devoid of meaning. Certainly the love and power of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ can touch anyone at any time, but without the foundation and support of that primary Christian community, that power is undermined.

A few weeks ago the New York State Bishops gathered in Albany with a number of people from around the State who are involved in family ministry. This was not a program-oriented meeting, but an opportunity for us as shepherds of local Churches to benefit from the insights of those involved in families and family ministries. That meeting was especially timely since our United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is considering a Pastoral Plan of Action for Family

Ministry at our Spring meeting, which is being held this very day in Chicago. I would like to share with you some of the fruit of that dialogue in Albany since I believe it holds great promise for all of us.

The keynote speaker, Dr. David Thomas, quickly set the tone when he rephrased a concern that had been stated in the introduction: "The question we should ask here," he said, "is not 'What can the Church do for families?' but 'How can the Church enrich its own life?'" This underscored a key principle in family ministry, one which I know is well understood by our own Office of Family Life: The key to family ministry is not in serving families but in calling families forth to serve one another. Every family has needs and every family has strengths. In our brokenness, in fact, is our strength most evident.

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As I think of the many separated or divorced Catholics in our diocese for example, particularly those involved in the many Divorced Catholic groups, I think of family people who have suffered

enormously. Their faith leads them to transform that brokenness into service particularly to those facing the same trials. In their brokenness their strength is most evident.

That one principle also brings to mind so many of you who have raised families, who have lived the struggle of raising children in a society that tends to entrap young people in self-centeredness. You have suffered the agony of helplessness as your teenagers passed through the traditional testing of every principle you ever tried to instill. You have so much to offer other families facing those trials now because in your brokenness you found strength.

I came away from Albany with an even deeper level of conviction about something I have believed for a long time. It was summarized in this way by nearly all of the small discussion groups: "Families are ready for deeper involvement in parish life as ministers and as persons open to ministry both from the parish and from one another." I say this deepened a conviction already present in me, because as I have traveled throughout the Church of Rochester these past several years I have seen you in action. I have witnessed your charisms, your gifts, your growing sense of call to minister to one another. I have tasted the love of Jesus in the affirmation and support you have given me so often. I have seen the vitalizing and renewing effect you have on our priests. I have witnessed the fact that when you are most aware of and immersed in YOUR vocation, you call forth from us the essence of our own vocation to spiritual, social, educational and liturgical leadership. I rejoice when I hear you proclaim "We are the Church," for indeed you are.

The Albany meeting and the United States Bishops' meeting, which I am presently attending, are significant signs of hope for you as they are for me. Our Church is vibrant and alive because your hearts are beating. The body of Christ is risen and alive in you and in your families.

More Opinions

Women Deacons? Editor:

In regard to John Dash's article "A Vision of Ministry" (C.J. April 12), I would like to express my pleasure and support upon the intended institution of a permanent diaconate program in the Diocese of Rochester.

The institution of deacons into the ministry is a definite asset to both the Church and the community. It is quite evident that men should become more involved in serving others and not just leave matters to the clergy. We all have special talents and abilities which can be used to contribute to the mission of Christ within our own communities and by exercising leadership and responsibility we can show our care and concern for the Church and the community.

A strong faith and a willingness to give a permanent expression of supreme servanthood are essential qualities that make a deacon a true instrument of God's love and care on earth. However, I am disappointed at the exclusion of women from this ministry. Could women not offer the same qualities required of deacons as could a man? Too often the role of women in the Church is belittled or regarded as

unequal in importance to that of men and it is time that the Church realize that only through a combined effort can it achieve the faith and unity needed to make the Church what it should be — an instrument devoted and dedicated to the spread of God's love and truth to all mankind.

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Guidelines

Letters intended for publication must be addressed to Opinion, Courier-Journal, 67 Chestnut St., Rochester, N.Y. 14604.

Expressions of opinions should be brief, no longer than 1 1/2 pages, typed, double-spaced, with names and addresses.

We reserve the right to edit as to length, offensive words, libelous statements, or to reject altogether. Generally speaking, however, only limited grammatical corrections will be made and letters will reflect the writer's own style.

We encourage readers to submit opinions but since we try to print letters from as many different contributors as possible we will publish no more than one letter a month from the same individual.

Church that Prays and Believes

Following is the address of Pope Paul at the general audience on April 12.

Why do you come? Allow us to ask a question, which certainly does not intend to refuse to acknowledge the spiritual, mystical and real kinship of your blessed membership of the Church of God, of our common family of Christ; in it we live, and for it, in fact, many of you, Brothers and Sisters dedicated to the Church, luminously irradiate an exemplary testimony.



This question recognizes the secular reality of the society in which we are all immersed, and which, in some of its expressions, is not only distinct from the Church but is separated and declared to be self-sufficient, still more, in certain of its affirmations, hostile and adverse.

We all know these affirmations too well not to have their bitter memory engraved in our hearts; an aggressive and radical memory, which speaks out as an incontrovertible contestation. Why the Church? A lay, blind, intractable mentality presses on: is not the Church superfluous today? Is it not a result which is now superfluous for modern man? Is not its store of civilization now obsolete, outdated, redundant for the civilization of the new times? Sons and brothers, entering this house, where the voice of centuries past seems stronger than that of the present century, do you also bring this psychology of the outsider?

As exterior disciples, as we now consider ourselves, we may divide our enquiry into a twofold order of questions regarding the Church. What is she? What does she do? We refrain from studying the first question now. It calls for a doctrinal, theological answer, which we all know more or less, but which is certainly not simple and brief. The Credo offers us

material of study and knowledge for it. Let us give our attention now to the second question. What does the Church do? Here the answer is easier, because it is given to us by elements that we observe directly.

The first answer, at which we stop now, is a splendid one, but as vast as an ocean: the Church prays! Her first task, her first duty, her first purpose is prayer. Everyone knows it. But just try to define this act, specifically peculiar to the church, and you will see what immensity, what depth, what beauty prayer brings with it. It is the first operational reason for existence of the Church. Its very name defines the Church; is not the word Church (ecclesia) derived from that of a praying assembly? And is it not confused with the word that qualifies the building where the faithful gather to pray? And is not the Church a religious society the reason for being of which lies in worship of God? Does not the very fact of prayer imply a whole concept of life, a philosophy of being, which distinguishes men in a first fundamental category, the religious one? And what was the first affirmation of the recent Council if not that on the Liturgy? And what is the Liturgy if not the public worship of the Church, her community voice addressed to the mystery of God the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit? The liturgy does not exhaust the whole activity of the Church, just as it does not express all the individual voices of the faithful for whom there remains the obligation and the possibility of a personal dialogue of their own with God.

The subject could be continued endlessly. But let these short and fleeting references suffice to give you a first image of the Church: that of a praying humanity, which soars above the earth, which sings and weeps and implores and hopes, which unfolds its capacity for the infinite, and finds in its longing for heaven its direction and its strength to proceed on its earthly journey in a worthy way.