

A Challenge to Parish Councils

By FRANK AND SUE STAROPOLI

We can't create an alive, loving, serving parish community if its families are indifferent. Nothing can be achieved at a broad community level that is not already a reality in the basic communities — the families — of a parish. Inadvertently, though, we tend to fall into the trap of focusing on individuals or groups of individuals (youth, mothers, the elderly, etc.). While at times this is necessary, over a period of years we would find that the majority of our programs actually divide families, rather than drawing on the strengths and serving the needs of families as families. We would find our most "committed" families broken into different evenings of service — one person on the Council, another on liturgy, another in the folk group, etc. In searching out talent for particular functions, we would seek individuals to serve other individuals. This approach tends to disunite the strongest families and further disrupt the family life of those we're attempting to serve.

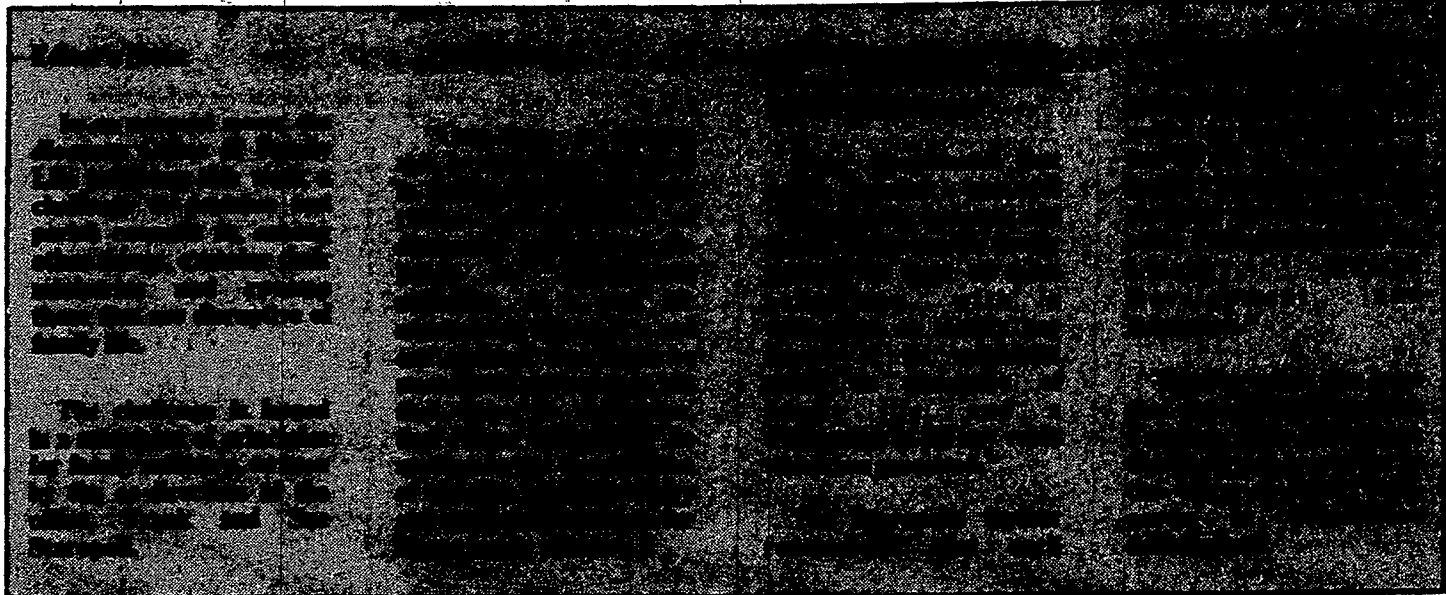
We're suggesting a set of principles for family ministry in a parish which would not only help avoid such a tragic irony, but which will foster a parish community renewal arising out of the renewal of its basic component, the family.

First and foremost always must be an affirmation of our faith: We are children of a loving God. Jesus is our Lord and Savior and Brother. The Holy Spirit is in charge.

These are not pious phrases. It is only when we are aware of these realities of our faith that our "work" can be kept in perspective — that we can truly be instruments in His work. These truths are always appropriate for what they say about ourselves and those we intend to serve: We are one Body of essentially equal people; we and all others are created in His image; we are saved, but need to affirm that in one another; we need to be carefully prayerfully discerning every step of the way; His Word is ever new and lives in us and all others. These kinds of affirmations of ourselves and others are essential in all that we undertake.

The call through Baptism compels and empowers each and every person to total dedication to the Lord.

We all have a vocation. The single state, marriage, the permanent diaconate, the religious life and the priesthood are particular directions, all different and yet complimentary. In terms of the vitality of the Church, they are equally important. Unfortunately too many lay people, married and single, still equate vocation with the priesthood and religious orders. Why?



There is an assumed hierarchy of importance, a kind of scale of the totalness of one's dedication to the Lord. Either implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, we have understood that the priesthood and religious orders represent total commitment, and if we're not called to either, then we simply get married — or "stay" single. Many of us as young lay people went through a decision-making process at one time — a short or perhaps extended period of wondering and discernment about a call to religious life. Ultimately we made a decision based on a self-judgment that we weren't holy enough or weren't worthy enough or couldn't live a celibate lifestyle. So we were married — or stayed single. Not many of us chose marriage or the single state as one would choose the priesthood, with a sense of call from the Lord, a sense of total, faith-filled dedication. We just "got married" or "stayed single."

As lay people, we need to be reminded that each and every moment of our lives is sacred, is to be seen in the context of a vocation, is to be seen as a time for ministry. We can clearly see that a priest receiving a call from someone at 2 a.m. is responding to his call as a minister. So, too, are the parents who arise in the middle of the night to comfort a crying child. A sister caring for the elderly is no different from us caring for our parents. We need to see our entire lives as moments of call.

We resist this message. It's a demanding one. We delight in the thought that our dish-washing, home-repairing, diaper-changing can all be seen as sacred moments, responding to a call; but we also begin to see that some values we have are called into question. Is our lifestyle simple and non-materialistic? Are we living signs of the risen Lord for our neighbors, our fellow workers? Do we share our home, our possessions and our talents freely with anyone who asks?

We're dwelling on this because we have seen over and over again the difference it makes in the lives of people (and therefore of parishes) when married and single people understand that they have a vocation, that the Lord is

working through them. This principle has to be proclaimed loudly and clearly by parish staff and leadership at every opportunity — including on Vocation Sunday.

Once this is understood, people respond to parish needs spontaneously because their understanding of family has been expanded. When we hear the call to minister to one another, then our priests are truly freed and empowered for the kind of leadership that is essential to their vocation. Shepherding an alive community is far different from trying to tend a lifeless flock.

Families are their own greatest resource.

Every family has needs and strengths. Quite unconsciously, we tend to categorize communities into families with one or many problems, and families which are solid. The most broken family has gifts to share; the most "together" family has crying needs.

Henri Nouwen writes of the "authority of suffering." Once families experience trial or tragedy, they have the authority to speak to that situation. The experience itself confers a knowledge and privilege which others do not have. A widow of several years has more authority in speaking to a recent widow than would a very intelligent, well-intentioned, sensitive, happily married person. A family which has just lost a job will listen intently to a family which survived a year of unemployment. The Divorced Catholic Groups in our diocese are a prime example of the importance of this principle: a recent divorcee listens to one who has lived through the trauma who doesn't have to painstakingly explain what it's like, listens without the barrier of, "What would you know?" Tremendously healing and renewed hope is taking place in these groups because people are ministering to one another.

In Bishop Joseph L. Hogan's recent homily for divorced and separated people, his main message was not, "What can we do for you?" but rather, "Never forget that every member of the Christian community has a Spirit-given gift to share with others. You need to recognize yours and to

claim it as your own. We need you — your brokenness — your reconciliation — your pain — your awareness of how difficult it is to be healed. I look upon you as a great renewal group in our Church."

Again, this principle has tremendous implications for parish leadership. Naturally there are situations where this doesn't apply. But the focus is not so much "doing" for families, as being a catalyst, a resource, helping people to see their potential to care for others, their call as Christians, providing the structures and opportunities for people, families, to minister to one another.

Family happens wherever people are gathered together in a loving relationship.

As a Church we still tend to think of family as the traditional nuclear model: middle income, white, 2.4 children, and the like characteristics. But growing numbers of people don't fit this stereotype.

We don't intend to treat here the sociological or moral implications of this. We simply want to foster a broader understanding for the sake of family ministry, because too many presently tend to fall through the cracks in our efforts to serve families: single parent families, low-income and poverty-level families, childless couples, separated and divorced people with or without children, black families with their unique cultural needs and strengths, older couples or widowed persons whose children have grown and left. These are all families and a comprehensive family ministry must be conscious of them.

Finally, family ministry must be grounded in the reality of people's lives.

Here is a dual challenge: to be sensitive listeners to the needs of families as they experience them; to address these issues directly and knowledgeably with a faith perspective.

Families' most pressing concerns could be the

natural rebelliousness of teenagers or the high crime rate in their neighborhood, elderly parents, finances, a decision about having more children, loneliness, the need for better housing and the like.

In a way that transcends pious phrases, Gospel values apply to every situation. People rarely struggle with theological issues directly, but often struggle with everyday issues as though "theology" doesn't apply there.

An adult religious education program dealing with theological issues, for example, might be important, but seldom seems relevant to an unemployed breadwinner; or when a family is facing the trauma caused by a teenage pregnancy, it's difficult to care where an official agency stands on hunger in India. We need to help families see Jesus in every situation of everyday life, the major trials, the overwhelming joys and the humdrum routine. We need to articulate our faith in language that brings His love alive for us in the midst of the very concerns that fill our days.

These principles are certainly not novel. In a sense they are utterly obvious, fundamental. In our sophisticated, complex times, though, we — as Church — tend to brush over the basics. These kinds of principles are "assumed," so much so that we tend not to discuss them or measure our ministry against them. Our faith can be so "assumed" in our furious activity that it becomes virtually "subsumed" by that very activity.

Juspax A 'Healing Church' In S. Africa

On April 27 of this year, our Holy Father, Pope Paul promoted the bishop of Umtata, South Africa, the Most Rev. Peter John Butelezi, O.M.I., to the Archbishopric of the See of Bloemfontien, South Africa. The new archbishop is an African of the Zulu people, and was consecrated a Bishop in 1972. He has been the bishop of Umtata since 1975. He speaks English, Afrikaans, French, Italian, German, Zulu and Sesotho.

The Church of South Africa must be described as a healing Church, binding up the wounds of division, hatred and fear which

continue to tear South Africa apart. Archbishop Butelezi's appointment is just one example of this healing mission of the Church in South Africa.

If we were to choose a prayer of healing for South Africa's problems in these times, we would use these of Cardinal Laurian Rugambwa, written when he was the Bishop of Rutabo, Tanzania:

"It is the custom of my people always to accept gifts with both hands in order to show that we consider the gift so precious that we want to hold it carefully and with great love. For almost a hundred years we have had a gift so precious that we hold it best when our hands are clasped in prayer. It is the gift of Christianity, first given to us by the White Father in 1892, and it has changed our lives in many ways.

"The opportunity for

self-improvement is all the African asks. We have learned from Christianity that we have a place of dignity and self-respect in the brotherhood of mankind and we are anxious to assume it. In some parts of Africa, this has already been achieved. It is reasonable to believe that it will also be achieved throughout Africa as more of our people develop the requisites of leadership.

"That we have progressed as far as we have is due directly to the missionaries who came to us almost one hundred years ago. What they have done for the material progress of the African can only be surpassed in importance by what they have done for his soul. And what they have done for his soul has stirred nobility of the mind and purity of the heart which will produce a continent of just men dedicated to God and the welfare of all."

Redemptorist Assignments

Father Bernard Power has been reassigned as rector of Our Lady of Victory-St. Joseph Parish in downtown Rochester, it has been announced by Father John J. McGrath of the Baltimore Province of the Redemptorists.

Other Redemptorist appointments: Father Thomas Schmidt will continue as rector of Notre Dame Retreat House in Candandaigua. Named assistants at Our Lady of Victory-St. Joseph's are Father Joseph Comyns

and Father Patrick Mangier. Assigned to Notre Dame Retreat House are Father Richard Moran and Father Dennis Kellner. Reassigned outside the diocese are Fathers Dennis Foley, James May and Edward Tardiff.