

# Conference offers vision of partnership in parish ministry

By Teresa A. Parsons

Jesus' friendship with His disciples was the ideal offered to more than 400 partners in diocesan ministry who gathered Tuesday, April 29, at the Henrietta Holiday for the biannual diocesan ministry conference.

"Jesus was not a spiritual 'Long Ranger,'" said Father John Heagle, one of the conference speakers. "The first thing He did in His public ministry — before He preached a homily, before He worked a miracle, before He did anything — was to call disciples to Himself to begin a community."

As partners in ministry, men and women are also called to intimacy in Christian communities. The implications of their partnership provided the topic of the conference, which drew a record turnout, according to Father James Schwartz, organizer of the event. He credited the large crowd to the topic as well as to a new group registration fee for parish staffs.

Sister Fran and Father Heagle, both from Therapy and Renewal Associates in Milwaukee, Wis., were the featured guest speakers. Father Heagle has earned degrees in philosophy and theology from the Catholic University of America and the Pontifical Lateran University. A practicing psychotherapist, Sister Fran holds degrees in clinical psychology and ministry, and lectures around the country on human relationships, sexuality, justice and peace.

They began their all-day presentation by

tracing the scriptural history of male-female partnership and its place in early Christian ministry. Subsequently, they explored the types and levels of intimacy that exist between males and females, and the implications of these levels on ministry. In the final session, the pair discussed ways of dealing with creative tensions and conflicts within pastoral teams.

Sharing intimacy is not an option for those who have been baptized, whatever their lifestyle, Sister Fran claimed. "All of us, by virtue of our baptism, are called to make love," she said. "Celibates are not exempt from that. We may not use our celibacy as an excuse to avoid relationships of intimacy in our lives."

But one of the difficulties inherent in intimacy is the differing patterns of behavior men and women often exhibit. In dealing with one another, the presenters said, adults typically respond in much the same ways as male and female children.

To male children, for instance, competitiveness and rules are all-important. Among girls, on the other hand, rules are less important than relationships. When the rules are under dispute, men fight, while women either change rules or quit, Sister Fran observed.

Both presenters agreed that such tendencies produced by childrearing techniques and environmental influences are not exclusively masculine or feminine characteristics. But the speakers asserted that such tendencies have im-

plications for parish teams.

Among women, "female" characteristics may lead to burnout. "Again and again, we have young ministers . . . many of them women, directors of religious education or pastoral associates, who say, 'I've got the training, I've got the competency, I've got the experience, but it's not working,'" Father Heagle said. In part, he ascribed that tendency to "the human condition," but added that rules imposed upon women "working within a patriarchal, somewhat sexist Church" are also to blame.

On the other hand, Father Heagle noted that in the midst of what Karl Rahner calls "the second great axial shift in the Church," the underlying mood of priests today is "bone-weariness."

Priests are caught in the midst of that shift. "They in many ways want to move to collaborative models. They're wanting to do team ministry. They know, realistically speaking, that's where the future is, and yet the structures in which they are called to that — their training — are not conducive to moving to a collaborative model easily. It's coming at, I think, a great deal of personal cost," he said.

"There's an awful lot of discouragement and a lot of heaviness. It's not the sort of bone-weariness that you can go to the Bahamas for two weeks and it will go away."

Women and men are also conditioned to respond differently to intimacy. Those who choose to work as part of a pastoral team must learn to distinguish appropriate levels of self-disclosure. "As a therapist and a minister, I hear a lot of stories where this gets messed up," Sister Fran said. "There are circles of friendship. There are times when you say too much

to the wrong person and there are often times when we say too little."

At the very least, parish team members must be willing to share their expectations for ministry with one another. "Saying nothing at all is destructive to teams; it's destructive to ministry; and it's a crummy witness," Sister Fran said. "There are going to be people on a team that you don't quite rub smoothly with, but that doesn't mean you have to destroy each other. At some point you have to try to say 'We're different, we're here together and we're not going to put each other down!'"

Not everyone is cut out for parish ministry, the speakers pointed out. "There are some people who do not, in fact, have the personality characteristics or the psychological health to experience and sustain community in their lives," Sister Fran said. She described as ill-suited to ministry someone who is rigid, unable to express feelings or deal with conflict, needy, dependent or jealous, and who has low self-esteem.

"That isn't to say they are bad people. They need help," she explained.

Despite the elusive nature of a healthy sense of community among parish staffs, it has an impact far beyond the parish grounds. "It's more than just a healthy human need," Father Heagle said. "It's the most significant form of Christian witness that we can give in our parish communities. If people that we share ministry with in our parishes see that there are teams that really share with each other — that are committed to the long process of conflict resolution, of faithfulness to each other and trust in each other — if they see that happening, it'll say more than 16 homilies!"



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