

# Parish council at St. Paul's takes synod on laity seriously

By Teresa A. Parsons

St. Paul's Parish in Webster is the kind of congregation that has flourished in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

Its surroundings are pleasantly suburban. Its people are, for the most part, youthful, upper-middle class, well-educated, interested and involved in the day-to-day life of their parish. Currently, St. Paul's claims about 1,100 families, and continues to grow at the rate of 80 or more families per year.

Both the building — which parishioners term a parish center rather than a church — and the people are, if not liberal, then at least thoroughly contemporary. They share an easy-going, collegial relationship with the clergy and women religious on the parish staff. They avidly support parish education programs, such as an upcoming four-part series on homosexuality and homophobia.

But parishioners John and Margie Hart fear that congregations like St. Paul's will suffer, unless the voices of lay people are heard in Rome next October at the 1987 World Synod of Bishops. The synod will focus on "The Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World."

The Harts, who together chair St. Paul's parish council, believe that the Lineamenta or preliminary synod outline, which was drafted by the Vatican-appointed Synod Secretariat and released last year, reveals a divisive approach to current Church issues.

After studying the document, the Harts are concerned about some of the same questions raised by directors of two Washington-based organizations, the Pallottine Institute for Lay Leadership and Apostolate Research and the American Catholic Lay Network.

Those directors, who edited "Synod '87," a condensed version of the Lineamenta, wrote that while the document contains "many marvelous things," it also reveals a tendency to separate the spiritual from the secular experiences in lay people's lives. They likewise questioned why the Lineamenta stressed differences among the roles of clergy, religious and laity, and why it tended to disparage modern culture wholesale, without attempting to discern what our culture offers that may be good and positive.

"You see in St. Paul's the exact converse of what the document is calling for," John Hart said. "(The writers of the Lineamenta)

are saying they're trying to redefine Vatican II. I don't think it needs redefining in that direction. It needs strengthening."

For the past six months, the Harts and their fellow parish council members have studied the Lineamenta and have planned how to gather the most comprehensive response possible from St. Paul's and get it to Rome.

St. Paul's is one of relatively few parish communities in the diocese that has so far devoted a substantial amount of time and reflection to the synod.

In part, that may be due to lack of interest among parish leaders to whom the prospect of another consultative process is less than appealing.

Others, including Father John T. Walsh, pastor at St. Paul's, are uncertain what results to expect.

"It's a great idea . . . and maybe it's worthwhile to have people look at their position in the Church in any case," he said. "But you don't really know how much of what people say will actually be heard."

As an example, he noted that the Vatican document promulgated after the 1983 synod on the Sacrament of Reconciliation bore lit-

tle resemblance to the discussion at the synod itself. "Of course, things can always change a little," he conceded hopefully.

Had the Harts been any less determined, they probably would have given up on the synod by now. Like most of those who plunge wholeheartedly into a consultative process, they have encountered one obstacle after another.

First, Vatican officials issued a timeline that was barely within the realm of possibility. Then the Vatican's schedule was repeatedly encumbered by delays. To further complicate matters, the Lineamenta and other guidelines that have emerged so far have been couched in weighty language that's difficult to understand.

The Harts suspect that perhaps the delays and lack of organization are not entirely unintentional. "I think it's an attempt on the part of Rome to further distance themselves from the laity and the Catholic Church in America," Margie Hart said. "They're saying they do want input, but if they really truly wanted the opinion of lay persons, wouldn't you think they would give us something that's meaningful and understandable?"

Those suspicions have only compounded the Harts' determination to be heard. "If they don't get a lot of input, Rome may just assume that we're really not that interested," Margie Hart observed.

"There are not a lot of people who feel a sense of urgency about this," her husband added. "I'm not sure many people realize that it's the laity who are going to have to come through, if this Church is going to continue to be Church."

Claude Lester, diocesan director of parish services, originally interested St. Paul's parish council in the synod. For several years, he has worked closely with council members, keeping them abreast of various Church issues at the local level and beyond. Last September, shortly after the Harts were elected to the council, Lester described the upcoming synod to John Hart.

The Harts, in turn, grew convinced that St. Paul's contribution to the synod was important. "I think it's crucial that anybody who has an opinion ought to be heard," Margie Hart said. "Maybe we feel strongly about the laity being involved because we're involved, and we get so much out of it. Perhaps some other people don't even care. But they're the ones who'll sit back in 20 years and wonder what happened."

Through parish staff members, the Harts obtained several interpretive outlines of the Lineamenta, read them, and shared with fellow council members the best and most understandable versions they found.

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## Synod's tight timeline hindered consultation

The Second Vatican Council emphasized the responsibility of bishops to govern not only their local churches, but also to work in conjunction with the pope to govern the worldwide Church.

Since then, bishops from around the world have traditionally gathered every three years to confer on a particular theme. Reconciliation was the theme at the last synod in 1983. Earlier, in 1980, the synod focused on the Christian family.

Pope John Paul II first announced a synod on the laity almost three years ago, in May, 1984. At that time, the gathering was scheduled for autumn, 1986.

Early in 1985, even as the Lineamenta — or preliminary outline for the synod — was being written in Rome, the meeting was postponed until October, 1987.

With the exception of a few lay observers who are permitted neither to speak nor to vote, the only people who take part in a synod are the pope and those bishops and cardinals who have been chosen as delegates by bishops from all over the world.

U.S. delegates to this year's synod were elected at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' (NCCB) meeting last November in Washington. Chosen were Archbishop John May of St. Louis, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, Archbishop Rembert Weakland, OSB, of Milwaukee, and Bishop

Stanley Ott of Baton Rouge, La.

Since the topic of the synod will be "The Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World," Vatican officials recognized the importance of consulting with lay people prior to the gathering. When the Lineamenta was distributed to dioceses during the 1986 Lenten season, it called for consultation with the laity which was to be "timely, well-organized, and as broad in scope as possible."

In the United States, the call for consultation hasn't yet received widespread attention. On the other hand, diocesan officials charged with collecting the reflections of a broad cross-section of lay people have complained that the Vatican timeline allowed them little leeway.

For instance, the Lineamenta was sent to dioceses during Lent last year. Local reactions were due back to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' (NCCB) Committee on the Laity by April 1 — which turned out to be less than two weeks after the document arrived in Rochester.

The NCCB committee plans to begin collating in mid-April the responses of parishes and dioceses to the Lineamenta. Meanwhile, Rome is expected to issue the synod's final working document, or "Instrumentum Laboris," sometime next month.

A year ago, this was not known or even thought of on the local level," said Claude

Lester, director of parish services for the Diocese of Rochester. "We still have no idea as yet what the final questions even will be."

To date, fewer than 20 parishes in the Rochester diocese have undertaken extensive consultations to prepare for the synod.

Diocesan-level efforts to gather lay people's reactions for the synod are being woven together with the Lenten program, *Crossroads 1987*.

Three two-hour "listening sessions" of prayer and discussion are scheduled on the following dates and locations:

• Wednesday, March 18, St. Casimir, Elmira, 7:30-9:30 p.m.

• Wednesday, March 25, St. Patrick, Seneca Falls, 7:30-9:30 p.m.

• Saturday, March 28, St. Thomas, Rochester, 1-3 p.m.

The products of these sessions will be sent to the NCCB Committee on the Laity, which will prepare a background paper for use by the U.S. delegates.

From May 1-3, dioceses in the northeastern United States will send individual delegates to offer their reflections on the role and mission of the laity at a conference in Mount Holyoke, Mass. As of Monday, March 2, NCCB officials had yet to announce the names of delegates from the Diocese of Rochester.



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