

Parishes engage in Sabbath reflections, schedule changes

By Teresa A. Parsons
On Sundays, St. Ambrose Parish celebrates with one less liturgy and four stronger communities.

Corpus Christi Parish celebrates Sunday by avoiding meetings and emphasizing fun with family and friends. Parishioners in Clyde and Savannah celebrate their Sundays with a multiplicity of Masses — a situation they realize is likely to change in the future.

Whether "Celebrating Sunday" prompted pastors and parishioners to change Mass schedules or only discuss them, the process has focused a new level of attention on the ways in which diocesan Catholics keep the Sabbath.

The Office of Liturgy initiated diocese-wide reflection on the subject of Sunday last January with the release of a four-page brochure entitled "Celebrating Sunday." The brochure traced the historical development of the sabbath and also outlined key points of a motion passed by the Priests' Council in May, 1986.

The Priests' Council motion urged the following: that parishes celebrate only one anticipatory Mass on Saturdays after 4 p.m.; that pastors and chaplains eliminate Masses that detract from the true purpose of Sunday gatherings; that Sunday Eucharistic celebrations be at least 90 minutes apart; that daily Masses not become a burden on individual priests; that pastors and chaplains avoid Mass schedules that compete with one another on a regional level; and that creative opportunities for prayer led by lay persons be explored.

Between January and May, Father Thomas J. Mull, director of the Liturgy Office, offered presentations on Celebrating Sunday to several regional assemblies. Pastors and parish staff members, in turn, were expected to discuss within their local churches the issues raised by the Priests' Council's motion.

By July 1, pastors had expected to report on their responses — whether or not they made schedule changes — by means of a survey distributed by the Liturgy Office.

Survey results are not expected until next month. But already, more than 100 of the diocese's 161 parishes and 21 missions have responded to the survey, according to Father Mull.

Some priests and parish staff members observed a lack of interest among parishioners in discussing Mass schedule changes before the fact. Once a change was announced, however, they found that the interest level increased rather dramatically.

That's about what Father William Hart expects of parish interest in a coming change at Holy Trinity in Webster. So far, the parish response to reducing Sunday Masses from five to four has been "minimal," he said.

"It's not a major change for anybody," he said. "As far as the priests are concerned, it'll be a little relief, celebrating four Masses instead of five."

St. Mary's in Auburn has organized one of the most extensive responses to Celebrating Sunday. Earlier this month, the parish staff distributed among parishioners 1,500 copies of the four-page Liturgy Office brochure.

On the following weekend, Father Edward Zimmer preached on the same topic at all Masses and polled the congregation by means of a questionnaire.

Of the roughly 2,500 parishioners who regularly attend weekend Masses at St. Mary's, 1,350 responded. The parish staff has yet to compile the results.

"A few people think (the decision to drop a Mass) is already cut and dried, but it isn't," Father Zimmer said. "I really want to see what the response is."

'In our world, we have less and less fun together and stack up our days with more and more meetings. Sunday as a day of rest is kind of lost.'

Sister Margery Henninger
associate, Corpus Christi Parish

Already this year, St. Mary's has dropped two daytime Masses on Saturday. Nevertheless, priests still celebrate at least eight Masses each weekend — one on Saturday morning, two Saturday vigil Masses, and five on Sunday — in addition to weddings.

Father Zimmer foresees some potential benefits in reducing Masses celebrated on Sunday from five to four. "I don't think we should do it just to be easier on the priests. We're here to serve," he said. "But there's not much to be said for exhausting yourself or killing yourself either . . . It is exhausting to preach at seven Masses."

He cautioned, however, that such a change would not necessarily strengthen the sense of community in a parish the size of St. Mary's. "When you're combining hundreds and hundreds of people, you're going from a large mass (of people) to a still larger mass that can become even more impersonal," he explained.

Parish staff members at an equally large parish — St. Ambrose in Rochester — are confident that eliminating the 12:30 p.m. Sunday Mass has already begun to create closer-knit communities at their other Eucharistic celebrations.

Liturgy coordinator Nancy Giordano pointed out that because St. Ambrose is so large, attending an unaccustomed Sunday Mass often seems like changing parishes.

"I think this will make the community stronger," she said. "Plus, it was terrible to look out into this huge church at the 12:30 Mass and see the emptiness of the pews."

The reduction from five Sunday Masses to four was motivated primarily by the small number of people who attended the noon-time Mass and by the dwindling number of diocesan priests, according to Father James J. Marvin, pastor.

"The comments have been very positive, and we now have a better community (with which) to celebrate," he said. "The end result is that all of us — priests, celebrants and people — are extremely pleased."

So pleased are parishioners that Giordano, the staffer who was most involved in the process leading up to the schedule change, has received just one complaint in the two weeks since the change was enacted.

She credited the unusual ease of the transition to nearly six months of preparation, which incorporated bulletin articles, town meetings and discussions among parish committees.

"We didn't try to hide it or make it something we were going to impose on the parish. It was generally known," she said. "Overall, people seemed to accept it, to understand the reason for it."

Parish leaders also demonstrated some flexibility by revising the proposed Mass schedule

Continued on Page 9

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