

Parish liturgy coordinators enhance common worship

By Teresa A. Parsons

In the life of a parish, the times when the community gathers to worship are akin to mealtimes for a busy family. A pleasant dinner with absorbing conversation, like an enriching, inspiring Mass or prayer service, draws people together and strengthens the bonds between them.

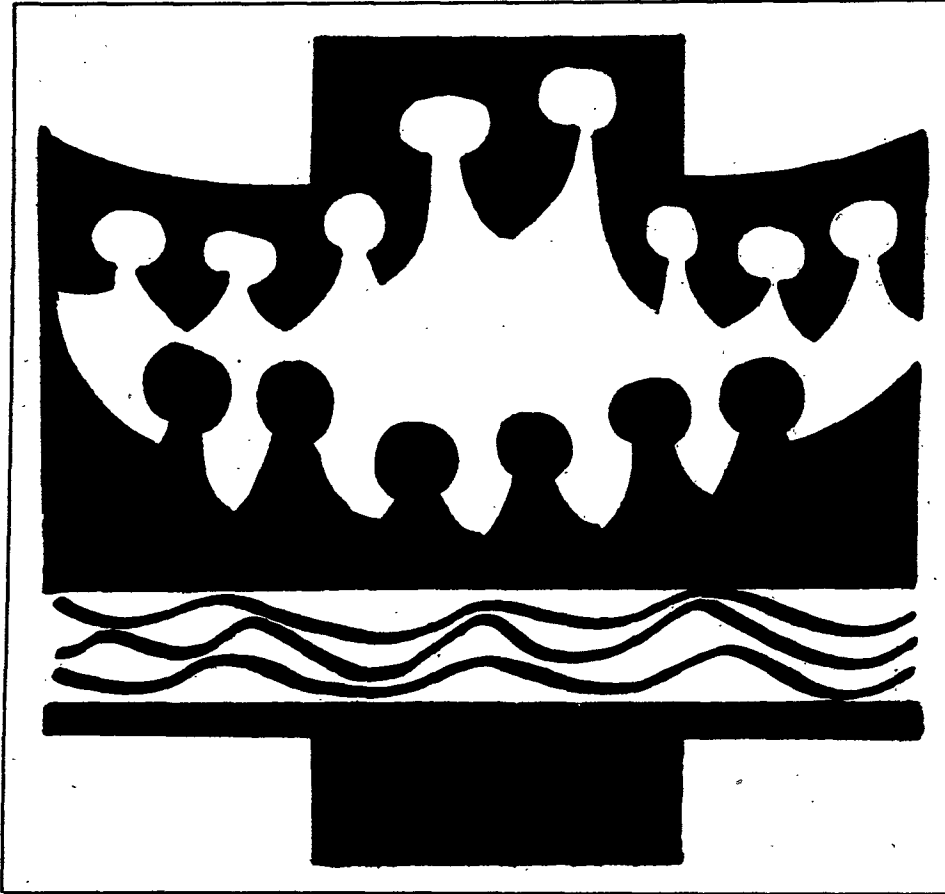
Good liturgy and good meals both require planning and effort. Most parishes can point to someone who performs the former task. In many cases, it's the pastor or another priest on staff. Often, it's a volunteer — perhaps the liturgy committee chairman. Other times, it's a pastoral assistant or parish deacon, who finds some time for liturgy a schedule crowded with half-a-dozen other areas of ministry.

Amid the burgeoning of new lay ministries, a few people have come to regard coordinating liturgy as a job rather than a task.

Nancy Giordano and Mary Lu Coffey are two of the pioneers among parish liturgy coordinators. Middle-aged, married women with children, both re-entered the job market in 1985 after they were each hired by different parishes and under varied circumstances.

Six years ago, an overwhelming majority of the parishioners at St. Christopher's Church in North Chili indicated on a survey that praying together was their most important shared activity.

Based on the survey results, St. Christopher's parish council considered hiring a part-time liturgy coordinator. At the time, almost no one knew quite how to define such a position. But liturgy chairwomen Gretchen Dent and Bar-



doubts about taking the job. "I hadn't had a job since I was married, and in the meantime we had seven children," she said.

Along with her husband, Deacon William Coffey, she had participated in the diocesan permanent diaconate formation program, which included several courses on liturgy. But Coffey considered her prime qualification for the job to be an abiding love of liturgy.

"Believing in the importance of our common worship was the main reason I took the job," she said. "Good liturgy requires the full, active participation of all the people. That means you can't write off the person in the back pew who comes late and leaves early because he doesn't understand what's going on. Until he does, you can't have good liturgy."

Coffey's job remains part-time, but has expanded beyond the parameters she originally envisioned. She organizes formation programs for lay ministers and sets up their schedules. She works with the parish liturgy committee, and serves as a resource person on liturgy for staff and parishioners.

In addition, Coffey has been consulted on the renovation of the church building and has developed medical emergency and church evacuation plans for the parish's hospitality ministers.

Giordano describes her job at St. Ambrose Parish as similar to Coffey's, with the exception of the renovation and emergency plans. She doesn't do the actual scheduling of ministers, but does occasionally write bulletin articles and deliver homilies.

In bygone days, when St. Ambrose could claim a pastor and several assistants, liturgy was the priest's province — usually right down to the scheduling of altar servers.

But the job has expanded since then with a rush of such new liturgical participants as lectors, eucharistic ministers and ushers, or hospitality ministers. Meanwhile, the number of priests has declined.

When Father James J. Marvin arrived as pastor of St. Ambrose, he could count on two assistants and one active retired priest in residence. Today, although St. Ambrose is among the diocese's larger parishes, he and Father Gary Tyman are the only priests on staff.

"There is no way I could ask a priest to (coordinate liturgies) and do everything else he is expected to do effectively," Father Marvin said. "From what I had read, this was the coming thing, to involve qualified people in this type of job."

Some parishioners questioned the need to pay someone for a job that is routinely performed by volunteers in other parishes. In Father Marvin's view, however, the importance of worship demanded accountability.

"It's the one time of the week when we meet with all the people," he explained. "Volunteers are volunteers, God bless them, and we wouldn't be able to run the church without them. But in this position, you need someone who will be accountable to the staff and to the parishioners. There's no way you can ask a volunteer to do that."

As head of the liturgy committee back in 1985, Giordano agreed with Father Marvin. She pushed hard for the appointment of a lay person as liturgy coordinator, even though she had only a vague idea of what was involved and no thought of filling the position herself.

Several years earlier, as her youngest child approached school-age, Giordano had begun looking for new directions in which to channel her energies.

"I had always been involved in the Church," she said, "but I felt a real desire to be involved in a more professional way."

While Giordano regarded the growth of opportunities for lay ministers as a source of joy, she realized that not everyone felt the same. "I think people recognize that you don't have to be a priest or sister to be a minister," she said. "But I'm aware that it is a source of sadness to some. I hoped to be able, by my presence,

to make a statement that a married woman, a mother of children, recognizes God in her life and wants to share that with others."

In the spring of 1982, Giordano described her hopes to Father Sebastian Falcone, dean and president of St. Bernard's Institute. By the time she left his office, she had "signed on the dotted line" and was on her way toward earning a master's degree in theology in 1986.

Although Giordano had no particular job in mind, she quickly focused on liturgy as a special interest.

"There's a great need to have people grow in their understanding of what liturgy is," she explained. "Because something looks great doesn't make it good liturgy."

Giordano hesitated before accepting the part-time liturgy coordinator's position in August, 1985. "Having been a member of the parish for so many years and then stepping into a staff position, I had questions about how I would be accepted," she said. "I also had reservations about the support system and the training process that was available for someone like me."

She had received personal and professional support from family members and fellow staff members. The diocesan Liturgy Office has also provided materials and answers for her specific questions. But as for a process of formation, a forum for sharing ideas and problems — they simply don't exist yet.

"I don't have other people to turn to who can say 'When I was doing that, I tried thus and so,'" Giordano said. "Sometimes you feel like you're in a foreign country."

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bara Englert did.

"We were blessed with some very forward-looking people," Coffey said. "They did a very good job of raising people's consciousness about the importance of worship. I have really reaped the fruits of their work."

Coffey was not the parish's first liturgy coordinator, but her predecessor, Maureen Markley, served for less than a year before moving out of the area.

Although Coffey had served on St. Christopher's liturgy committee, she had

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From what 1977 song do the following lyrics come from: "You go strolling through the crowd like Peter Lorre?"

A: _____

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