

Southern Tier office plans four-part series on pastoral

By Teresa A. Parsons

Catholic social teaching has often been identified as the area of Church doctrine least-known by the most people.

It may well remain so if response to "Economic Justice for All," the bishops' 1986 pastoral letter on Catholic social teaching and the U.S. economy, is a fair indication of public interest in the subject.

Although a flurry of controversy surrounded the pastoral letter's release last November, many of those who have since attempted to present the document in parishes and at regional gatherings have met with mixed results.

"It's not going over that well," said Marvin Mich, an assistant professor of Christian ethics at St. Bernard's Institute. "People feel that economic questions are too complex ... I think there's also a suspicion that (an understanding of the pastoral letter) might require change. Catholics, with the exception of Hispanics, have moved into the middle- and upper-income range. They are benefiting from the way things are now."

Those who ignore the economics pastoral, whether out of fear or lack of interest, will miss what Anthony Barbaro regards as "one of the most stirring documents we have our hands on."

Barbaro, executive director of the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministries, and fellow staff members have dedicated a large part of their programming for the 1987-88 year to "breaking open" the economics pastoral for Southern Tier residents.

"There's a lot of mythology that surrounds all of the pastoral letters," explained Kathleen Dubel, Southern Tier director of justice and peace. "One of the things we so often hear from people, both those who are active in social ministry and those who attend Sunday liturgies, is that they seldom hear the pastoral teachings broken open at liturgies. When they do hear (them), it's a shock."

This weekend, the Southern Tier office will sponsor the first of four presentations scheduled during the coming year on the theme of "Making Peace — Doing Justice." On Saturday, Sept. 12, Mich, Bishop Mat-

thew H. Clark and Dr. James A. Gross, a professor of economics at Cornell University, will be featured speakers at a convocation on the pastoral letter.

In addition to their professional expertise in the field of economics and ethics, Gross and Mich served as members of the committee Bishop Clark assembled to offer reaction to the pastoral letter's initial drafts.

Both men classify negative reaction to the bishops' pastoral letter into two general categories; those who believe that the bishops had no business making a statement on the economy; and those who argue that the letter was poorly done.

Gross agrees with neither comment. "To say that the bishops weren't competent to do it is misleading, because they didn't do it themselves," he said. "They enlisted a staff of very competent economists to advise them ... They may have come out with different conclusions than others would have, but that doesn't mean they're incompetent. That means you disagree with them."

He labeled as "irrational" the argument that the bishops had no business applying moral values to the economy. In a country where economic policy so directly determines the quality of life for so many, Gross observed, it would have been irresponsible of the bishops to ignore such an opportunity.

Mich also pointed out that "Economic Justice for All" is not the first, but only the most recent of many occasions when the American bishops have addressed economic issues. And while terms such as "economic rights" and "preferential option for the poor" may be new to the ears of American Catholics, Mich said, those concepts are firmly rooted in both Gospel and Church tradition.

At the heart of the controversy over the economics pastoral lies what Gross terms a "terrible misconception" — that economics is an "an objective science governed by natural laws."

"All economic systems are designed and developed in historical context to achieve certain objectives," he pointed out. "We have poverty because we choose to have

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justice and peace director*



poverty, or at least those people in a position to choose, choose to have poverty."

By calling such historical choices and assumptions into question, the economics pastoral appears to threaten a system in which the majority of American Catholics have prospered. Nevertheless, Barbaro believes that the Church, and in particular those dedicated to the Church's social mission, are obliged to keep raising such questions.

"We have a desire to unpack (the pastoral) for people and work to implement some of the principles which it outlines," he said. "We don't intend it to be just an academic undertaking, but something they can take and apply to their own lives."

Last year was the first time the Southern Tier office initiated its fall activities by gathering those engaged in social ministry throughout its five-county area. Barbaro believes the event provided a much-needed forum for identifying and discussing regional concerns. "It's hard for people to know what people are doing in other parishes," he said. "There's a tremendous energy that comes from people being able to share that with one another."

Saturday's convocation begins at 10:15

a.m. in the Dunn Memorial Building of St. Joseph's Hospital, Elmira, and concludes at 5:30 p.m. with evening prayer.

The series will continue on December 12 when Thomas Gumbleton, auxiliary bishop of Detroit and president of Pax Christi, U.S.A., will visit Elmira. His talk will outline his personal evolution as a peace activist, and the links between the bishops' pastorals on peace and economic justice. Continuing education credits will be available for both the September 12 and December 12 sessions.

The connection between spiritual mysticism and social justice will be the topic of a two-day retreat and study program February 26 and 27. Leading the program will be Sister Judy Reger, SSJ, former director of counseling services at the Southern Tier office and currently a staff member at Spirituality Ministries of Rochester, and Kathleen Dubel.

The final component of the series, scheduled for June 11, will explore creation-centered spirituality and a theology of justice.

For information on any of the above programs, call the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry at (607)734-5893 or 734-5892.

School plan

Continued from Page 1

Criticism of the statement focused primarily on its lack of detail. It is not yet clear who will constitute the committee charged with developing the master plan nor how that committee will relate to such other groups as the Diocesan Board of Education, the Implementation Committee and its subcommittees — all of which are already engaged in school planning.

Within the next month, some type of representative group should be in place to begin developing the master plan, according to Father John Mulligan, a member of the Implementation Committee for last February's elementary school planning document. "There will be no planning in isolation," he said.

Listeners were also left to wonder how soon the master plan will begin to affect schools. Diocesan administrators envision that the plan should be complete within three years at most. No structural changes are planned during the current school year, however, according to Sister Roberta Tierney, director of the diocesan Division of Education.

While the bishop spoke explicitly in favor of broader support for a more centralized school system as opposed to parish-based schools, he endorsed no specific model or outline for the master plan to follow. "We are saying that indications are that we will be the healthier as we pull together some administration and some financing," he said.

To enforce whatever plan emerges, the bishop said that he would continue to rely largely on voluntary compliance.

Wednesday's statement did signal a change in diocesan administrators' approach to educational planning. To date, the broadest-based school planning in the diocese has focused primarily on elementary schools in Rochester and Monroe County. The master plan, however, is expected to address schools throughout the diocese, including secondary schools.

In recent years, the style of diocesan administrators has also been primarily consultative. As a result, they have tended to work mainly with school communities that already were enmeshed in crisis.

Experience has shown, however, that the most effective planning is done from a position of strength and involves schools that are strong as well as those that are struggling. "We will not succeed in this without a communal effort," the bishop said. "We must look beyond our own immediate concerns."

Such a mandate requires that both the Education Office staff and the bishop assume a more active role in decision making. "I would like to point out that while any decisions will certainly be based on information gained by the cooperative efforts of our parishes and Pastoral Center staff, that I as bishop and the chief teacher in the diocese have the responsibility for making the final judgment on major decisions affecting elementary and secondary education in our diocese," Bishop Clark said.

A new guidelines document issued at Wednesday's gathering spells out the responsibilities of school leaders for planning at the local level and the process they should follow in implementing structural change. "These criteria describe the factors we will be looking at as we make these decisions," Bishop Clark said.

"It's a tool around which to gather people."

Regardless of what changes the master plan eventually mandates, it is likely to require greater sacrifices from some parish communities than from others. "The one thing we have

to remember is that whether we have a school or not, we're all in the business of Catholic education," said Sister Nancy Kelly. "We as a Catholic Church need to come together and be supportive of that as a whole."

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