

Bishop confirms catechesis as cornerstone of parish life

By Teresa A. Parsons

Bishop Matthew H. Clark has called on every diocesan parish to evaluate the scope and quality of its catechetical plan.

Speaking to more than 100 religious educators and nearly 40 pastors who gathered in Henrietta on Monday, Sept. 28, for a workshop entitled "Catechesis in the 90s," the bishop urged that comprehensive, lifelong catechesis be recognized as "the cornerstone of parish life."

"God help us all if we don't take seriously the call to make this work of catechesis very much the heart of all of our communities," he said. "I fear that if we don't do that, our communities will become museums. They will not be lively, Christ-bearing, Christ-proclaiming bodies of people who are touched by excitement, who attract other people, who excite them and make them want to learn and to proclaim and to serve."

Specifically, Bishop Clark proposed three points to guide parishes in their self-evaluation. His guidelines, developed during the past year in conjunction with staff of the diocesan Office of Religious Education, direct that:

- each parish should have a "well-integrated catechetical plan;"
- each parish should provide adequate personnel and resources to fulfill this plan;
- each parish's catechetical leader should provide adequate formation for catechists.

A "well-integrated catechetical plan," Bishop Clark explained, can no longer be child-centered. Nor can such a plan neglect elderly, Hispanic or black parishioners, young adults, or the disabled. Instead, opportunities for formation in faith should be offered to people of all ages and

backgrounds.

"The documents of Vatican II and the bishops' own document on catechesis, 'Sharing the Light of Faith,' make clear that the focus of catechesis is ongoing faith formation directed especially toward ongoing formation of adults," he said. "This demands a coordinated catechetical plan centering on adults, but recognizing the importance of child and youth catechesis. At all levels, catechetical programs must be considered for the poor and disabled."

Father William J. Amann, pastor at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Hamlin, pointed out that at least in his parish, a lack of opportunities for adult education is not the problem. "It's a question of whether the folks respond," he said. "I guess we need to motivate them somehow. That's always the challenge."

One way to motivate adults toward continuing formation, the bishop responded, might be to address adult education to questions in which parishioners seem to be interested. "What are people really wrestling with, what's interesting them? It seems to me that's not a bad place to start when developing a catechetical plan," Bishop Clark said.

Let his vision appear to place an unrealistic burden on a few individuals, Bishop Clark pointed out that parish catechetical programs are not only the responsibility of the pastor or the director of religious education, but of the entire parish. "Parish catechesis is the right and responsibility of all parishioners," he said. "We must seek out and use the gifts of the community more fully than we have."

Parish clustering, sharing of resources,

and mentoring programs were among the specific ideas the bishop proffered as possibilities for using community resources more effectively.

Among the most crucial of those resources are qualified and effective catechetical leaders. Bishop Clark described a qualified leader as one who, by virtue of education or experience, is able to handle the scope of a parish's program in such areas as theology, catechetics, program development, catechist development, administration and budget management.

As a means of ensuring that catechetical leaders are qualified, staff members at the Office of Religious Education are developing a diocesan certification program for religious educators. In addition, Bishop Clark has asked the office's staff to develop a plan for parishes to help them identify catechetical leaders and assess their competencies and needs.

Catechetical leaders, in turn, need sufficient salaries, budgets, volunteers and facilities to implement a comprehensive parish plan. All of those resources are limited, Bishop Clark acknowledged. Yet the need for catechetical ministry has never been greater. "We cannot continue to cut budgets designated for catechesis in parishes; we cannot continue to hire people to coordinate parish catechetical programs and not provide them with adequate funding and training to do their ministry; we cannot take a minimalist approach to catechetics in our parishes," he said.

During the question-and-answer session that followed his address, Bishop Clark was asked whether the Office of Religious Education or parishes could expect additional

resources to help bring about adult-centered catechesis. He responded that while he was willing to consider allocating such resources, he had no particular plan for making them available.

Bishop Clark did restate a policy — first announced as part of last year's diocesan salary and benefits guidelines — that directs parishes to budget \$250 annually for continuing education for catechetical leaders. That amount is scheduled to increase to \$450 by 1989.

He likewise reaffirmed a diocesan guideline adopted in June, 1987, that requires every catechist and catechetical leader to take at least 10 hours of course work in catechesis every two years. "I do not take this policy lightly," he said. "I consider it, in fact, a minimum requirement for formation."

"If we don't do that," he added, "the world and the Church, which change every day, will go right by us."

Parish religious educators in the audience regarded Bishop Clark's address as challenging. In fact, several agreed that the prospect of trying to carry out his catechetical vision for the 1990s "scared the hell" out of them.

"It is scary," acknowledged Irene Goodwin, religious-education coordinator at St. Peter and Paul Church in Rochester. "We only have 20 children in our program. Our parish is struggling to stay alive."

Jesus' ministry was also humble and struggling, recalled James DeBoy, director of religious education for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, and the guest speaker for the morning session of Monday's gathering. "If you're not afraid, then you misunderstand the task," he concluded.

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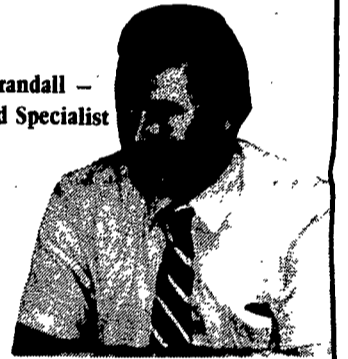
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