

Features

Convocation '88 views priests as proclaimers of the word

Although absent from their parishes for the better part of three days, the 141 priests who attended Convocation '88, the ninth-annual diocesan priests' conference, spent much of the session thinking of their congregations.

The theme of the April 11-13 convocation was "The priest as the proclaimer of the word of God." According to Father Robert Ring, pastoral assistant at the Church of St. Mary Our Mother in Horseheads, the advice repeated by each of the presenters was that for all forms of preaching, "your starting point is the people to whom you are speaking."

Preaching was chosen as the topic for this year's convocation from among approximately 20 suggestions made by priests who attended Convocation '87.

"Preaching is central to our ministry," explained Father Kevin Murphy, who organized this year's convocation. "I think the priests (chose it because they) felt a need for more updating about preaching. It's a practical topic that would help people immediately — something they could sink their teeth into."

Through presentations, discussions and workshops, the convocation examined the nature and content of preaching not only in terms of homilies, but also in terms of proclaiming the word of God in the one-on-one situations of counseling, spiritual direction and effective listening.

The broader nature of preaching was addressed through talks given by the featured presenters: Father Walter J. Burghardt, SJ, author of *Preaching: The Art and the Craft*; Father John Burke, OP, director of the National

Institute for the Word of God; and William H. Graham, chairman of the drama department of The Catholic University of America.

In the keynote address, Father Burghardt emphasized the need for preachers to be prepared — to study, pray, and search out the needs of the people. Preachers must talk about these needs, not just about the text, he said.

Father Burke also addressed the idea of meeting the needs of the congregation in his two presentations — "Preaching: Faith Speaks to Faith;" and "Reaching the Listener." People come to church looking for nourishment, he said, and the preacher's task is to recognize and meet that need. On a practical level, he also suggested that teams of priests meet to discuss and plan homilies.

In Graham's talk — "Self-image in Witness Preaching" — he urged preachers to be authentic in their preaching. One way to achieve authenticity is for preachers to share their own faith journeys, and to recognize and be true to their own styles, voices, gifts and limitations.

For Father William V. Spilly, pastor of the Cayuga Team Ministry, the speakers offered a challenging message. "They focused on one of the most important things homilists must be aware of: how we proclaim the word of God is so important to the people in the pews," Father Spilly noted.

Although he conceded that priests have other important duties, Father Spilly asserted that "how we bring people closer to God is how we preach."

In order to become more effective preachers, the speakers pointed out, priests must not only

be willing to study, practice and read the scriptures, but also to evaluate themselves. "The self-image that we have is our greatest single block that we have to how we preach," Father Spilly noted. Preachers must be willing to change, he said, because they are calling people to change as well. "We can preach by the lives that we live," he concluded.

Father Ring found Graham's talk particularly helpful. "He stressed beginning with what is going on in the lives of the people to whom you are speaking so that you speak to what they actually need, not what you think they need to hear," Father Ring said. When writing a homily, the preacher must look at the message he or she plans to present, and ask, "How does this message make a difference in their lives?"

Graham also suggested that while a preacher is reading the Gospel during the liturgy, he should look at the people and "be convinced that what this Gospel is saying is what they need to hear."

In addition to the presentations, a panel of diocesan priests discussed changes that have occurred in preaching during the past 20 years. One panel member, Father Louis Hohman, pointed out that the homily is now considered inspirational rather than catechetical in nature.

"The expectations of people have changed," Father Murphy observed. "People today are better educated, and are expecting the priest to do more. This puts expectations on a priest that are challenging."

Father Ring, who was also one of the panelists, pointed out that the homily shouldn't

be a lecture about specific issues. "I don't need to tell the congregation how to think about every issue — there are places for them to do that thinking and get the information, such as newspapers, magazines, books and religious-education classes."

The panel discussion also led to "a frank and open discussion on women and the laity as preachers," Father Murphy said. He acknowledged that this issue is becoming increasingly important as the number of priests declines, and as more non-ordained ministers assume leadership positions in the Church.

Reaction to the convocation as a whole was overwhelmingly positive, Father Murphy reported. "I went through the evaluations, and 90 percent of the priests rated the convocation from good to excellent," he said. "I think people liked the style of it, and (the fact) that it was something of substance."

He also noted that the priests appeared to like the convocation's current format. For the first seven years of their history, the convocations were conducted in two, 24-hour sessions, each of which accommodated half of the priests working within the diocese. Last year, the two sessions were consolidated into one, and the convocation was lengthened to stretch over three days.

This format change was made to allow for more sharing and for greater consistency, Father Murphy noted. In previous years, the separate sessions sometimes went in different directions, he said.

A second reason for the change was to allow in-depth coverage of a topic. Under the old format, "you always felt you were just scratching the surface," Father Murphy observed. "This way, there is time to talk, to recreate, to reflect on what was being said."

Father Murphy anticipates that future convocations will continue in the single-session format. "The value of having everyone together far outweighs any objections to it," he said.

Beyond discussion of particular topics, he added, the chief value and original purpose of the convocations is that they allow Bishop Matthew H. Clark to meet with all the priests. The convocations will continue, he predicted, because "the priests still see a need to have this time with the bishop."

Father Ring added the annual convocation also offers "a concrete and visible sign that we're all working together and minister in the same Church."

— Lee Strong

Diocesan youths focus attention on vocations

If the projected decline in priests and women religious continues, today's youths may belong to a church community far different than what they now see at Mass on Sunday.

In an effort to make youths more aware of the grave situation facing parishes today, organizers of this year's Bishop's Youth Day focused the annual event on vocation to ministry in the Church.

In all, more than 750 youths from around the diocese turned out for the fifth-annual Bishop's Youth Day on Sunday, April 24, at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center. The program was planned by a leadership group of 17 young people who had been working on the makeup of the informal day since last August.

"We thought the theme of the day was most appropriate because it coincided with the day Pope John Paul II proclaimed as World Day of Prayer for Vocations," said Pat Fox, diocesan director of youth ministry. "I think the kids are very aware of it (the shortage of priests and women religious)."

Fox and Father Tom Valenti, diocesan director of vocations, worked closely together on this year's program to better acquaint diocesan youths with the problem of the shortage of priests, and men and women religious.

Organizers wasted little time in getting youths into the program by beginning the day with a presentation entitled "The Prophet." The 15-minute drama, which was based on Robert Crean's play "Prophet," was presented by a team of six students from Cardinal Mooney High School. The Mooney production was one of only two Rochester-area performances to reach the finals of the Martin Luther King Performing Arts competition last December.

The play's director was Robert Smyth, who has taught theology at the Catholic high school in Greece for the past four years.

According to Fox, the presentation of

Crean's play "Prophet," which revolves around middle-class racial attitudes during the 1960s, was designed to remind those in attendance that during their lifetimes young people must adopt attitudes that will have varying consequences and often may lead them in directions different than had been expected.

A panel discussion — tabbed a "peanut gallery" — followed an analysis of the play. The panel consisted of some 17 young people who are in the process of seeking a life of service to others.

Questions directed at panelists were as diverse as the ministries and services panel members were pursuing. Panelists ranged from boys seeking the priesthood and girls the sisterhood to a young man looking to join the diocesan mission team in Mexico and a girl looking to start a career in social work.

Although predictable inquiries as to why someone would want to become a priest or sister were asked, some youths displayed more innovative questioning. One person in the audience wanted to know how a panelist would tell his parents that he was seeking vocation to ministry in the Church if that vocation wasn't in line with what his parents expected him to do.

"There were times when there was disagreement among panel members," Fox said. "One of the teens is a part-time DJ at a high school radio station ... He told of how he has refused to play (offensive) records. Others on the panel asked why they should be censors."

"Among the panel members there was a mutual respect and a sincere searching to understand," Fox added.

Consistent with the other four youth days, this year's program offered an array of workshops dealing with such timely topics as AIDS, homelessness and grief to relationships, clown ministry and vocations.

The presentation of the Hands of Christ

Award was another highlight of the day. The annual awards, which recognize young people who have been an example for others of what being a Catholic means today, were presented by Bishop Matthew H. Clark. Recipients were high school seniors who were nominated by either their parishes or high schools.

Fox said the event was the best yet in the five years the youth day has been offered. "There was an excellent celebration of young people," he observed. "All day there were young people talking to young people; they were really involved with it. The spirit of the day was very positive."

— Richard A. Kiley

Elmira congregation slates seminar on women in prison

"Women in Captivity" will be the theme for the May 7 May Fellowship Day at St. John's Episcopal Church, 203 West 13th St. in Elmira Heights. Keynote speaker for the noon program will be Gail Vrabel, a former correctional officer in the women's division of the Chemung County Jail. Vrabel is a registered nurse, who currently serves as administrator of pre-K through sixth-grade religious-education classes at St. Mary Our Mother Church in Horseheads.

The worship service has been prepared by

women who have served time in federal, state or local institutions. Women from St. John's Church will host the noon luncheon by serving dessert and beverages. Those attending should bring sandwiches or salads.

During the service, the group will solicit an offering for the Church Women United fund. Church Women United, which was organized in 1941, is a national ecumenical movement of Christian women.

Call (607)734-2977 for information.

Women's commission plans Marian Year vesper service

The diocesan Commission on Women is sponsoring a vesper service on Thursday, April 28, in honor of the Marian Year, the feast of St. Catherine of Siena and the anniversary of the 1982 release of "Fire in the Thornbush," Bishop Matthew H. Clark's pastoral letter on women.

The event — which will take place at 7:30

p.m. at St. Augustine's Church, 410 Chili Ave., Rochester — will incorporate music, slides, Bible readings and prayers. It will feature St. Augustine's choir and be conducted by Terley Breley.

The service is free and open to all. For information, contact Father Thomas P. Mull in the diocesan liturgy office, (716) 328-3210.

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