

# CATHOLIC COURIER

Diocese of Rochester

Thursday, April 13, 1989

50¢

24 Pages

## Liberating language

Composer and musician Ray Repp describes his vision of liturgical music as a powerful instrument for sending the Gospel message home with the People of God.



## Local priests weather storm of morale woes

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

Many U.S. priests feel trapped, overworked and frustrated, according to a recently released study on priests' morale.

"Reflections on the Morale of Priests," a study conducted by the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, cites loneliness, declining numbers of priests, tensions over sexual issues and differing views of the church as key factors causing the low morale.

Although diocesan officials concede that the document is essentially accurate and that priests of the Diocese of Rochester are dealing with many of the issues the study raises, they contend that the morale situation in this diocese is not as bad as it appears to be elsewhere in the country.

"From what the report was talking about overall, I have the impression things are better here," observed Father Gary Tyman, a member of the diocesan Ministry to Priests team. "In Ministry to Priests, we hear from people outside the diocese who will say, 'Your diocese seems to be pretty good.' Although we have our problems, relatively speaking, it's not so bad here."

That assessment was echoed by Father Frank McNulty, one of the writers of the morale study, who addressed the 1989 Convocation of Rochester's diocesan priests. Based on what he saw and heard during the April 3-5 gathering, he said of the Diocese of Rochester, "I find a strong and very healthy priesthood."

Father McNulty noted that the diocese has taken great strides to ensure the health of its priests through retreats, annual convocations and the Ministry to Priests program. Because of these efforts, he said, the diocese has served as a model for others.

Nevertheless, even in the Rochester diocese, these can be difficult days to be a priest, acknowledged Father Dan Tormey, who directs the Ministry to Priests program. "I think morale is a kind of cyclic thing," he observed. "I think currently, the church in general is going through a cycle of difficulties."

Father McNulty attributes the current "down" cycle to changes in society and changes Vatican II produced in the church. Efforts to redefine the church, the development of collaborative ministry and the changing roles of priests have led to a crisis, he said.

"The bark of Peter is bouncing around on pretty rough waters these days," Father McNulty said. Priests sitting in that ship, he added, "must decide what we are going to do with the rest of our lives. Are we merely going to survive ... or are we going to do a little better?"

Each priest is responsible for his own life and feelings, and each has a choice whether to "survive with style," or withdraw, Father McNulty observed. The saddest part of his work with the bishops' committee, he said, was seeing priests who had chosen just to survive, who were going through the motions without feeling.

The bishops' report suggests that some priests choose the latter course because of conflicting role expectations — both self-imposed and those placed on them by others. This problem is aggravated by the declining numbers of priests, which forces those who remain active to take on additional tasks. "A lot of parishes operate as if they had two or three priests instead of one," Father Tormey said. Some parishioners fail to adjust to the new situation, he explained, and some priests fail to let go of the old models.

Father William Barrett, who also serves his colleagues as a member of the Ministry to Priests team, agreed that despite dwindling numbers of priests, "a lot of people seem to be expecting that it's going to be business as usual." Priests face conflicting demands as various groups in the parish call for more attention to their particular areas of concern, he observed. When priests are unable to meet all the demands, they experience guilt, he added.

These increased demands on priests have cut down on the time priests can seek out companionship with other priests, observed Father Robert Smith, pastor of the Community of the Blessed Trinity in Wayne County. "Thirty-five years ago, at 9 o'clock you were through for the day," he said. Priests then had time to meet with other priests, to recreate, or simply to relax. "Now you've got meetings. The parish council, the youth committee — and if you haven't got them, the other priest has."

One factor adding to this problem, Father Tyman pointed out, is that priests live where they work. "People expect us to live in the rectory," he said. "That represents something to them about our availability all the time. That seems increasingly to be an unreal expectation."

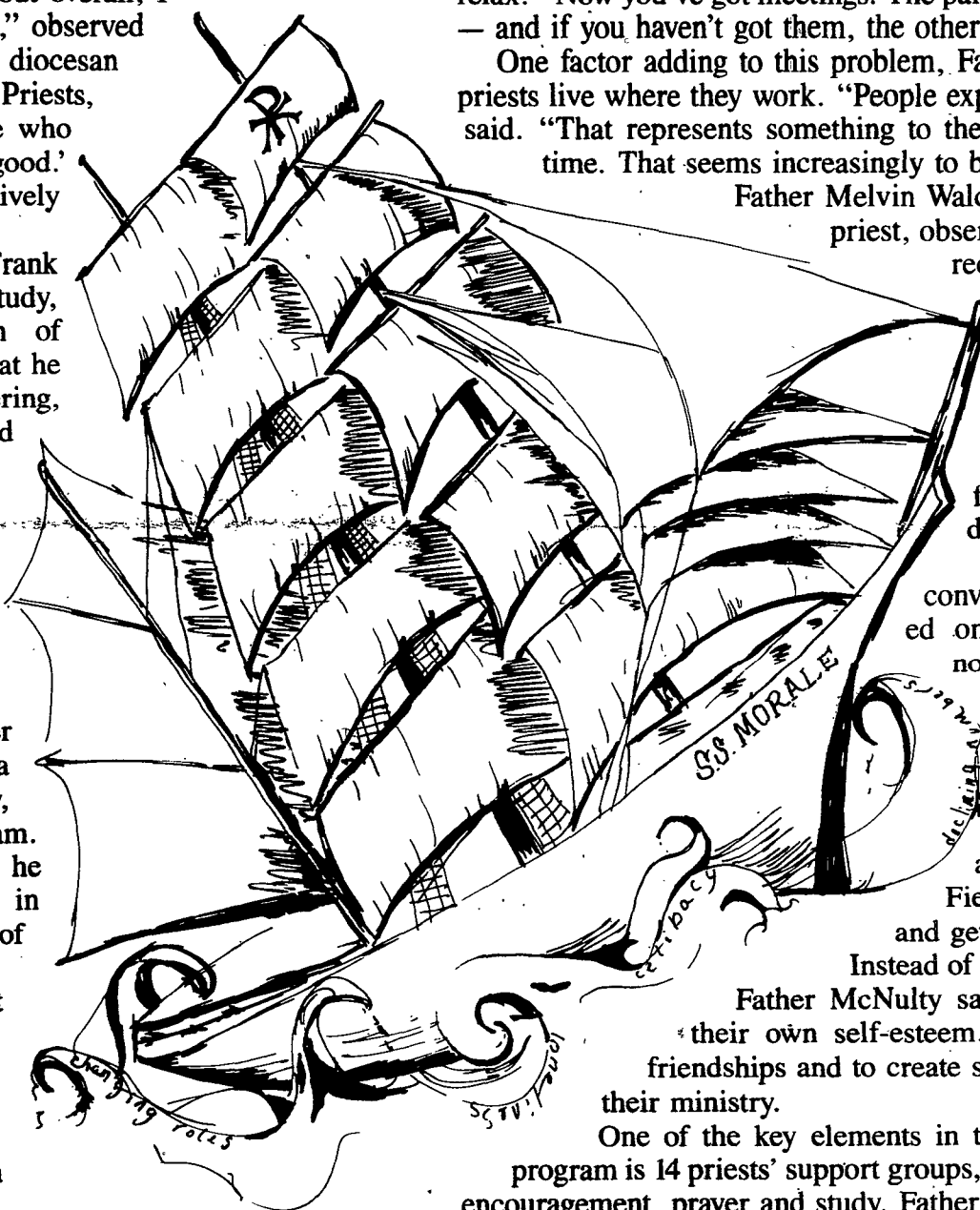
Father Melvin Walczak, the diocese's only married priest, observed that in an effort to make the rectory open, meetings and parish business have been allowed to take over. "The priest doesn't have a home, a real home," he said. And if priests wanted to live somewhere other than the rectory, their low salaries frequently prevent them from doing so, he added.

In his address to the convocation, Father McNulty touched on the problem of expectations, noting that priests tend to be hard on themselves. He urged them to seek balance, to permit themselves to fail once in awhile, and not to take themselves too seriously. "Too many of us have adopted the philosophy of W.C. Fields: 'Smile early in the morning and get it over with,'" he remarked.

Instead of dwelling on failure or past hurts, Father McNulty said, priests should seek to build their own self-esteem. He encouraged them to form friendships and to create support groups to affirm them in their ministry.

One of the key elements in the diocese's Ministry to Priests program is 14 priests' support groups, which meet regularly for mutual encouragement, prayer and study. Father Robert Schrader, director of the

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## Priest recalls address to pope

On Wednesday, April 5, Father Frank McNulty addressed the assembled priests of the Diocese of Rochester at their annual convocation.

On Sept. 10, 1987, at St. Martha's Church in Miami, Fla., Father McNulty had a similar message, but a different audience: Pope John Paul II.

The New Jersey pastor, who at the time was helping to write "Reflections on the Morale of Priests" for the Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, was chosen to represent U.S. priests in a "limited dialogue" with the pope on the life

of priests in the United States.

Father McNulty outlined for the pope the life, ministry and commitment of U.S. priests, along with their hopes and worries. He openly discussed such topics as the shortage of priests, celibacy, the role of women in the church, and the love of freedom and debate that is part of the U.S. heritage.

"When he spoke with the pope, Father McNulty said, he tried to be honest about the state of the priesthood in the United States. His remarks, which had to be submitted to the Vatican a month before the meeting so that the

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