

Cycle of love

Mother and grandmother Rosalie Muschal-Reinhardt and several third-graders share their musings on the enduring values of mothering. See pages 12 and 13.

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Parish councils' form, function evolving

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Betty Ann Cordero may not know it, but her pastor couldn't function without her.

Nor could he get along without the other members of the pastoral council Cordero chairs at Rochester's St. Francis of Assisi Parish.

"They're absolutely necessary," Father Peter A. Deckman said of his council members, noting that they are the "hands" and "spirit" of the parish.

Father Deckman's attitude toward his council embodies the intent of chapter IV, section 38 of Vatican II's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," which called for priests to "promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity" and "willingly use their prudent advice ... confidently assign(ing) duties to them in the service of the Church, leaving them freedom and scope for acting."

One of the more concrete ways U.S. parishes took up this challenge was by establishing parish pastoral councils, which Canon Law says should function as consultative bodies to pastors.

Currently, the vast majority of parishes within the Diocese of Rochester have some sort of pastoral council, according to Deacon Claude Lester, director of the diocesan Office of Parish Services. But the form such councils take and the processes by which they make decisions vary, he noted.

Lay people have always advised their pastors, Lester explained, but prior to Vatican II, pastors usually relied on the input of a small, informal group of parishioners.

As Vatican II mandated more involvement in parish life by lay people, American parishes — left without a

ing over the parish budget had taken the place of dreaming and envisioning the parish's role in God's kingdom, noted several parish council officials throughout the diocese.

Lester explained that decision making by consensus was one way out of the parliamentary mire. In about half of the parishes that currently have councils, the concept of consensus decision making is — in theory, if not always in practice — used to bridge the diverse opinions that may be held by council members, he explained.

Consensus decision makers use majority vote as a last resort to push through a motion, preferring instead to weigh every council member's opinion, and then make a decision that takes into account consenting and dissenting opinions.

For example, at Rochester's St. Francis of Assisi Church, consensus decision making is standard practice for the parish council's elected members.

Father Deckman pointed out that by waiting for all parties to agree before making a decision, the council spares members' feelings. "Everybody can really live with (decisions)," he said.

The pastor acknowledged that the council will go to a vote when it's "stuck," but that generally consensus can be reached.

Cordero also praised the consensus approach. "It slows (meetings) down a little bit, but it gives everybody a voice," she said.

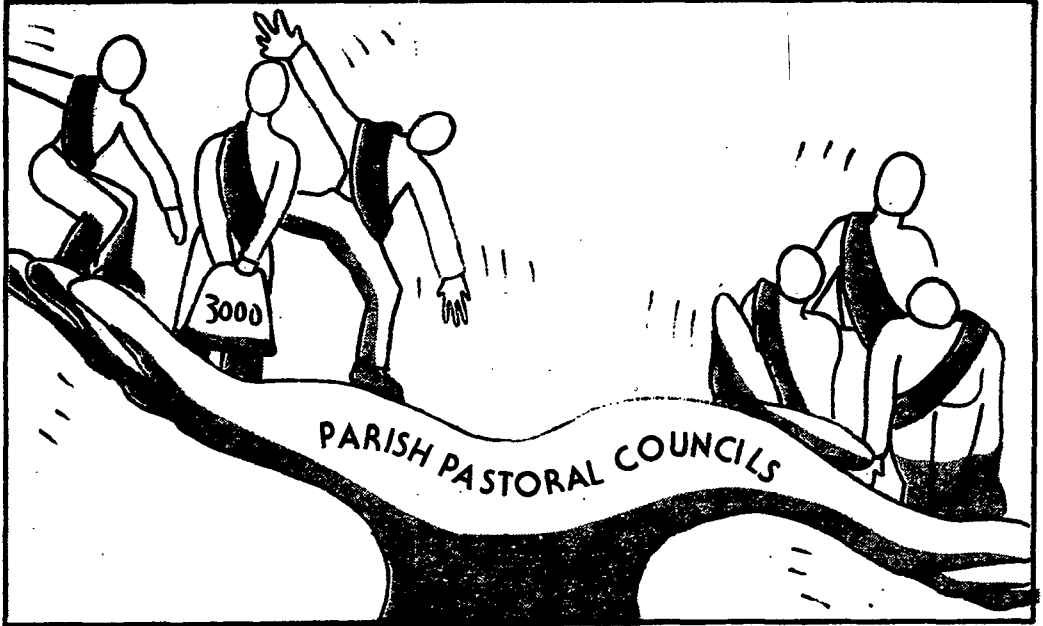
Her mother, Phyllis Burruto, an original member of St. Francis' first parish pastoral council, noted that the consensus method was used from the start because it was "more diplomatic" and "more amicable."

Such descriptions lie at the heart of what compels parish pastoral councils to adopt the consensus method — its basic Christian spirit, according to Lester, whose

comments were echoed by the president of Good Shepherd's parish council, Ron Jodoin.

Jodoin criticized the parliamentary approach to decision making, which his council no longer uses. "When you had issues that would come up and be reduced to a vote," he recalled, "you had the possibility of developing factions — people set against each other."

Consensus decision making allows everybody to be "a winner," Jodoin observed. If this is the case, then "winning" is a way of life for parishioners at the Church of the Transfiguration in Pittsford.



blueprint by the conciliar documents that inspired them — looked around at the democratic institutions that governed their civic lives for models of parish lay involvement.

Lester recalled that parishioners in the late 1960s and early '70s frequently asked themselves: "How does the Grange do it? How do the Elks do it? How does every other group we're a part of function?"

More often than not, those organizations functioned on the parliamentary model. Following suit, six-to-12 elected members of a typical parish council, guided by the late English General Henry Robert's *Rules of Order*, began to convene monthly meetings to discuss parish business, debate the pros and cons of various motions and decide the questions by vote.

Yet, as the 1990s unfold, the consensus model of decision making challenges debate-and-vote systems to become the preferred method of doing parish pastoral council business.

Consensus decision making is the fruit of an orientation toward parish consultative bodies that had its seed in Vatican II, but did not begin blossoming until the late 1970s, according to Deacon Lester. By the end of the '70s, he said, parish councils were looking anew at the parliamentary model and asking, "Is that all there is?"

Many parishes were — and still are — finding it difficult to attract new blood to council meetings in which debating and argu-

The 12-member parish council's monthly meetings draw an average of 30 people who listen and put in their own two cents, according to Wayne Swiecki, council moderator. Resembling New England town meetings more than congressional sessions, Transfiguration council meetings are open to input from everyone in attendance, and that input is taken into account before the council reaches consensus, Swiecki said.

To illustrate how far the parish will go to reach consensus before making a decision, Swiecki remembered the process by which the parish changed its Mass schedule a few years back.

Transfiguration used to have Sunday Masses at 8 and 10 a.m., and 12 p.m. The council commissioned a study to find out if parishioners would be willing to change the last two Mass times to 9:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m., respectively, to facilitate better scheduling of day care for children of Massgoers.

The council studied the matter, held meetings and sent questionnaires to parishioners asking their opinions. Those who did not respond were contacted individually by phone before the schedule change was made, Swiecki added.

That kind of lay involvement is reflected in the ease with which Swiecki finds people to run for the parish council. Yet few parishes attract the kind of numbers that Transfiguration Parish draws when it puts out a call for nominees.

"It's like pulling teeth," Jerry Hubble said of inducing people to run for the parish council over which he presides at Immaculate Conception in Ithaca. The commitment entailed by serving on a parish council seems daunting to many parishioners, Hubble admitted.

"If you are interested, good, get in," he said. "But if all you want to do is go to church on Sunday, don't bother." Hubble maintained that he ran to "have a say" in the making of parish policy. Unfortunately, the desire to affect parish life isn't enough incentive to make others want to run.

At St. Francis of Assisi — where one-third of the parishioners are Hispanic — Hubble's teeth-pulling analogy applies to getting English-speaking candidates to run for council. Nonetheless, one English-speaking council member saw her enthusiasm for office thwarted at the ballot box.

Mary Kirkpatrick was new to the parish a few years ago, and hoped to be elected to the parish council. But parishioners, unfamiliar with her face, chose another candidate.

Not that the other candidate was less qualified, but it seemed a pity Kirkpatrick was overlooked, Cordero said, considering Kirkpatrick was "very willing and a real hustler." Eventually, Father Deckman asked Kirkpatrick to serve on the finance committee, and when she ran for parish council a year later, she won.

But Kirkpatrick's happy ending is not shared by every parish-council candidate rejected by voters. Patricia O'Keefe, vice-chairman of the parish pastoral council at St. Margaret Mary's in Apalachin, recalled one electoral horror story from 1988.

"(That year), I knew somebody who did not win," O'Keefe recalled. "She was hurt — just devastated."

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