

# Synod to set direction for diocese's future

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

To this day, Marie Venaglia still does not know why she was selected to serve on the commission planning the Diocese of Rochester's seventh synod.

But when Venaglia received a letter from Bishop Matthew H. Clark inviting her to serve on the commission, she agreed.

"I think it's a very exciting experience for a diocese to go through," remarked Venaglia, director of Christian formation at Auburn's St. Alphonsus Parish. "The chance for everyone in the diocese of have the potential to be involved — that excited me."

Lynn Shreve, director of human services for the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry and another member of the commission, likewise described the synod as "exciting."

"It is exciting that the bishop is willing to put himself through the process, to open himself to suggestions," Shreve said. "If the synod can encourage people to become more active in the church, that would be the most important thing for me."

Bishop Clark selected Venaglia and Shreve as two of the 22-member commission to coordinate the synod, which will be the first held in the diocese since 1954. The synod is scheduled to conclude in September, 1993, to coincide with the diocese's 125th anniversary.

But the 1993 closing ceremonies will not really end the synod, Venaglia noted.

"The formal part ends in 1993, but then the implementation begins," Venaglia said.

Announcing the start of the synod on June 17 of this year, Bishop Clark said the process will set a vision for the future of the diocese. That vision will determine how diocesan resources and energies will be spent, what issues the diocesan church will address and, where needed and possible, what changes should be made in the diocese.

The bishop said one of his hopes for the synod is "that it will arrive at specific and measurable recommendations for action."

And it will be the people of the diocese who construct the vision and recommendations produced by the synod, noted Father Joseph Hart, selected by Bishop Clark to direct the synod.

"This is the broadest possible consultation — allowing people input into the direction our diocese takes," Father Hart said. "There is a way to run a synod where it is cut and dried. But (Bishop Clark) chose from the beginning to be broad-based and consultative."

To make synodal consultation as broad as possible, organizers plan to survey the views of each and every Catholic in the diocese, Father Hart explained.

The results of the survey — to be conducted in February or March of 1991 — will be used to develop general topics for the synod. A writing committee will then be appointed to develop a preliminary proposal for each topic.

The proposals will then be reviewed by parishioners attending synodal meetings



Collage by Babette G. Augustin

conducted in each parish in the diocese. Later, the proposals will receive further evaluation at regional synods.

During these initial phases, the proposals will be sent back to their respective writing committees for reworking. The final drafts of the proposals will be submitted at the full diocesan session of the synod in 1993.

Venaglia said this process will ensure that the people of the diocese are able to provide input into the synod. "The people have a chance to speak," she said. "So often, people don't get asked what they think. Oftentimes things come from above, and we've been told what to do."

Involving all the people of the diocese in the synodal process will also encourage people to realize that their input and involvement in the diocese is important, Shreve noted.

"My hopes are very much focused on an increasing awareness of the people of God in the Diocese of Rochester that we are the church and the church can be what we want it to be," Shreve commented.

The diverse composition of the synod commission also signifies Bishop Clark's intentions, noted Father John Mulligan, moderator of the Pastoral Center. The commission includes representatives from across the diocese, including priests, religious and lay people.

"We made a very early decision that we would not load up the synod commission with people who have curial (Pastoral Center) responsibilities," Father Mulligan said.

The priest explained that diocesan officials hoped that by choosing people not part of the diocesan hierarchy, the synod

would include a points of view not normally heard.

Father Mulligan said he hopes the synod will enable the local church to come to consensus on a number of priorities. He noted that such priorities will challenge the staff of the Pastoral Center to find ways of "structuring ourselves ... to meet those priorities."

Some administrative restructuring has already begun, Father Mulligan observed, citing the diocesan budgetary process as an example. This process has been revised to help develop measurable criteria for how all diocesan funds are spent, thus creating more accountability to those who provide funding through the Thanks Giving Appeal and other programs.

The Pastoral Center staff is also seeking ways to communicate more fully in order to create a greater understanding of diocesan operations among the people of the diocese.

"I think one of the things I'd like to see most of all is if people could understand us better, and understand who we are and how we try to serve them," Father Mulligan said.

Father Hart said preliminary meetings and listening sessions for the synod indicate that the synodal process is already helping to foster such understanding.

"What I have discovered so far is the process is important because it does build a sense of unity," Father Hart said.

Father Hart also said he hopes the synod will create "an understanding that we're really working together in mission and ministry."

Shreve said she hopes the process will

enable the people of the diocese to see that "it doesn't matter where you are, you are part of the diocese."

Yet Father Hart cautioned that the synod will not resolve every concern in the diocese.

"While I hope that we will challenge ourselves," he said, "I also know that we can not do everything in one synod. We will need to be selective in the topics we choose, so leading us to commit our precious resources to the greatest needs."

Moreover, Father Hart noted that the synod's open format and the many volatile issues facing the church today may combine to produce dissension among synod participants. Nevertheless, he said, disagreement should be viewed in a positive light.

"I'm worried more about apathy than people getting worked up over an issue," Father Hart said, "because it shows people care passionately about what happens to the diocese."


Thus Father Hart said he is optimistic about the potential the synod opens for the diocese.

"Any time one opens oneself to the Spirit and willingly allows the Spirit to lead you," Father Hart concluded, "how can you be anything but optimistic?"


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