

RSVP: Young adults seek place at parish feast

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Often lost amid the myriad concerns that occupy parish leaders is the fact that many Catholics find it difficult to involve themselves in parish life while they are entering adulthood, several observers pointed out. Busy establishing their homes, careers and personal relationships, young adults frequently find — through homilies that ignore their concerns or social events that fail to include them — that their local parishes have no interest in meeting young Catholics on their own terms.

"What sticks out for this age group is that they don't necessarily feel like they belong to the church," said Andy Zatyko, 24, president of twenty/thirtysomething, a young-adult group at St. John of Rochester Church in Fairport. "The perception is — rightly or wrongly — that the Catholic Church focuses on students or parents with students in the Catholic schools."

Indeed, a number of diocesan young adults asserted that they had switched parishes or found alternative ways of meeting their Catholic peers after feeling alienated from parish celebrations that catered to families, children or the elderly.

Still, the Diocese of Rochester is one of the few dioceses in the country that is working to welcome young adults into the

church's life, observed Father Bagley, who said he had formed that opinion after speaking about young-adult ministry over the last decade at a number of diocesan conferences and workshops.

Father Bagley illustrated his claim by praising the efforts of the Diocesan Commission on Young Adult Ministry, a volunteer group that supports parish young-adult ministry and has sponsored diocesan-wide liturgies and seminars.

Currently, the commission puts out a monthly newsletter that lists a number of parish and diocesan activities geared to individuals between the ages of 18 and 35+.

In the newsletter's May edition, for example, young adults will read about a folk Mass celebrated every third Tuesday of the month at Blessed Sacrament Parish in the city; consider a May 3-5 retreat exploring "singleness" at the Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal on East Avenue; and be able to jot down various phone numbers listed for 12 young-adult groups throughout the diocese.

These young-adult groups, in fact, represent the greatest formal attempt young-adult Catholics have made to stake their claim in the diocesan community. They encompass a broad range of young-adult types — from post-collegiate singles to married couples with small children.

And their members turn to young-adult groups for a variety of reasons.

A few years ago, Charley Hammon of Rochester joined Sunday Night Fellowship, a 10-member young-adult group, after finding parish-sponsored social and spiritual activities unsatisfactory.

"I'd been in two parishes," he recalled. "I really felt the parishes were oriented to families with children. ... The activities I did go to — the people there were older than I was." He explained that one of the two parishes boasted a men's club, but the average age of its members fell between 40 and 50.

Hammon added that he wanted to spend time with peers who shared his Catholic values — a drawing card that has led a number of people to join twenty/thirtysomething, Zatyko said.

"Common values — that's the primary motivation," Zatyko said when asked why people joined his group. He and other young-adult leaders commented that amid a society that discounts the need for community and faith, such groups can bring young adults back into the church. Having moved away from church-going families and graduated from supportive Catholic communities on campus, many young people need fresh encouragement to keep going to church, they said.

Such a need for a supportive faith community made Sue Arganbright want to join a parish that caters to young adults. A 1983 graduate of the State University of New York College at Geneseo, Arganbright — now co-chairperson of the young-adult planning team at Rochester's St. Boniface Parish — longed for the kind of intimate community she had experienced at the campus Newman Center. But she didn't find it in some of the parishes she initially attended.

"I guess after going from such a close community at Geneseo and going to a new community's parish, that was a difficult step," she said, noting that her first post-college parish was "more formal" than the "open, supportive community," she had experienced on campus.

But at St. Boniface, Arganbright found a young-adult group that "was a motivator to participate in the parish."

Some young-adult Catholics, on the other hand, join young-adult groups in search of an alternative to the secular social scene.

"I think I was looking for different ways of meeting people other than the bar scene," said 33-year-old Christine Spangenburg, who works on the diocesan young-adult newsletter. Spangenburg sought out the young-adult commission in the early 1980s because — as a full-time registered nurse — she felt her job prevented her from meeting men, and people in general, who shared her Catholic values.

A desire for a different social scene likewise attracted Joelle Mulch to Vision, a newly formed young-adult group at St. Mary's Parish in Rochester. Mulch, who described the bar scene as "a meat market," wanted a friendlier group of people with which to spend her time. "It's basically just a bunch of us getting together and having a good time," she said of Vision's social activities.

The possibility of a "good time" outside the normal social setting also drew Susan Perry to join the St. Boniface young-adult group.

"I think I was thinking of it more as a social group," said Susan Perry, 28, co-chairwoman of the young-adult group at St. Boniface. Since she joined the group in

1989, however, the group's service and spiritual aspects have come to interest her as much as its social characteristics.

"As a leader, I have purposely tried to make my programs that way," Perry said of what some young adults call the "three s's" — social life, service, and spirituality.

For the most part, young-adult leaders emphasized those three elements when they established their parish groups.

John Callard, 32, a parishioner at Blessed Sacrament Parish in Rochester, organizes the social events for his parish's young-adult group. Pointing out that he became involved in group activities when he was invited to a young-adult volleyball game at the parish, Callard said the game eventually led him to attend the group's monthly Masses and participate in its service projects.

Service for members of young-adult groups has meant anything from helping out for a day at a home for senior citizens to cleaning up neighborhoods in the wake of March's devastating ice storm. The need for spirituality, meanwhile, is met by activities ranging from retreats on the stresses facing young adults, to communion services in which young adults distribute the Eucharist, select the readings and generally play a visible and important role in the liturgy.

Yet if the church wants young adults to continue to increase their participation in its life, parishes must specifically welcome their young adults by name, several observers agreed.

"I always tell people that part of the hallmarks of young-adult ministry are hospitality, welcome and personal invitation," Father Bagley said. "We ask people why they came to something, and it's always because someone personally invited them."

Several young-adult leaders concurred, noting that their members often attend parish after-Mass coffee hours to recruit new people or keep in touch with the parish staff members who apprise them of young adults who recently have moved into the area.

Callard speculated that one way for parishes to keep young adults in the fold is to employ ministers devoted to just such a venture. Given the reality of tight parish budgets, however, he suggested that the wave of the future may be three or more parishes sharing a full-time young-adult minister in the same way parishes now share catechists and even pastors.

On the other hand, some observers said it isn't necessary for parishes to start young-adult groups to retain the interest of young adults. According to Arganbright, parishes need only ensure that their young-adult members are specifically invited to participate in liturgies, outreach programs and other activities to that will make them feel at home.

One view shared by all the leaders and group members interviewed was that young-adult ministry won't happen unless the young adults themselves make it happen.

"Many pastors have so many duties, and their times are so structured," Zatyko said. "It's going to get harder and harder for them to minister to every segment of parish life."

Father Bagley echoed Zatyko's concerns, noting the need for young adults to minister to one another. "As a young adult, you have much more contact with people your age," he observed.

Chaplains

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The state's actions in recent years have taught chaplains that, "Whatever you've got, you've got," Sister Roland remarked. "If you lose it, you're not likely to get it back."

Indeed, the fear of losing ground has led Elmira's Council of Churches to ask its Protestant chaplains to postpone their retirements in order to protect positions, reported Sister Jeannine Scheg, SSJ, a member of the Catholic chaplaincy team that serves four facilities in the Elmira area.

Chaplains also have been hampered by budget constraints on purchases of equipment and supplies, Sister Scheg noted, and have faced cuts in other areas as well. At Elmira Correctional Facility, for example, the part-time secretarial position in the chaplains' office was cut, she noted.

When Father Daniel O'Shea left the chaplain's office at Sonyea's Groveland Correctional Facility last year, he was never replaced. The religious needs of Groveland's Catholic inmates now are being met by Sister Elizabeth Conheady, SSJ, and Deacon Paul Clement, who combine to fill one position.

The state has denied requests to increase Deacon Clement's hours, Sister Conheady reported, noting that during her eight-year tenure the prison's population has in-

creased from 250 to 1350.

"We don't have the people to counsel the inmates, we don't have the people to run the programs, we don't have people to work with the families," Sister Conheady said. "We're stretched to the limit. We rely on volunteers."

And now, Sister Roland said, some state officials appear to believe that the chaplaincy team at Groveland will be able to help meet the needs of inmates at nearby Livingston Correctional Facility. She said such a plan would be impossible because of the demands Sister Conheady and Deacon Clement already face at Groveland.

Sister Roland observed that the same kind of thinking among state officials is at work in Wayne County, where Father Robert Smith, pastor of the Northern Cayuga Cluster, serves as part-time chaplain to the Butler Shock Incarceration Camp in Westbury.

Father Smith is being asked to provide chaplaincy services for a 200-bed facility for inmates with drug dependencies. The state established the facility adjacent to Butler last year, but has approved no additional funding for a chaplaincy position.

"I think somewhere along the way, the state assumes we can spread these chaplains pretty thin," Sister Roland said.

Davitt said a change in the state's budgeting procedures is one reason that positions are being left unfilled.

In the past, he noted, hiring decisions were handled by the individual facilities and the State Department of Corrections. These decisions now are being reviewed by the state budget division.

"What's happening is the facilities' budgets are being reviewed almost on a case-by-case basis by the budget division rather than by the Department of Corrections," Davitt said, asserting that decisions of the budget division are based on economics, not on the needs of prisoners.

In delaying or even preventing the hiring of new chaplains, the state is denying the inmates their constitutional rights, Sister Conheady said.

"Inmates have the right to have a chaplain present to take care of their religious needs," she concluded.

Synod office announces extension of deadline

ROCHESTER — The diocesan Office of the Synod has extended the deadline to return surveys for the seventh diocesan synod from April 26 to May 15.

According to Father Joseph A. Hart, synod director, the aim of the extension is to provide more time for people who did not receive surveys in the original mailing.

A problem with the mailing resulted in approximately 6,500 people not receiving the survey. In addition, approximately 6,500 other people received duplicate mailings of the form.

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