

Panel examines questions about 'marginal' Catholics

By Tracy Early
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Panelists in a discussion on baptizing infant children of "marginal" Catholics agreed the situation was challenging for the church, but reached no consensus on imposing requirements on the parents or godparents.

They examined the issue in an Oct. 3 teleconference, one of a series sponsored by the National Pastoral Life Center in New York. Father Philip J. Murnion, director of the center, served as moderator.

Held in the Archdiocese of New York studios, the program was transmitted to listening groups in various parts of the country — including the Diocese of Rochester — by the Washington-based Catholic Telecommunications Network of America.

Although titled "Pastoring Marginal Catholics at Baptisms and Marriages," the discussion focused almost exclusively on baptisms.

Father Murnion initiated the discussion by suggesting cases where parents or godparents with little if any involvement in church life asked for baptism of babies. Canon law, he pointed out, requires a reasonable expectation that the child will be brought up in the Catholic religion.

Father Robert D. Duggan, pastor of St. Rose of Lima Church in Gaithersburg, Md., argued for relatively strict standards.

"Jesus called people into a discipleship that required commitment," he said. Later, he also commented that "an institution

that fails to ask for or demand commitment from its members is doomed."

Father Murnion suggested cases of immigrants from cultures where baptism was given to all children regardless of their parents' level of Mass attendance or other church involvement.

In societies where a "cultural Catholicism" prevailed, Father Duggan suggested, a child could be expected to receive some degree of Catholic formation from the culture, whether the parents or godparents made church an important dimension to their lives.

But that expectation loses validity, he said, when the family is transferred "into the American secular, basically godless culture."

Father Duggan acknowledged that parents commonly went to a neighboring parish for baptism when they did not want to meet his requirements. He said that he never actually denied baptism, but often delayed it, telling the parents, "Maybe you are not ready for this."

Monsignor Joseph M. Champlin, pastor of St. Joseph Church in Camillus, N.Y., said he "wouldn't be as strict" as Father Duggan.

He also observed that "the sacrament has its own power," and should not be seen exclusively as dependent on a community relationship.

"Our task is to explain what the church expects," he said. "How they respond is up to the person and the Lord."

Elise Bourne-Thomas, principal of St. Anthony of Padua School in Passaic, N.J.,



AP/Wide World Photos
UNIFICATION PROTEST — Thousands of demonstrators gather in Berlin Oct. 3 to protest what they termed poor social and economic conditions in former East Germany on the first anniversary of German unification.

emphasized the need of the parish to make marginal Catholics feel welcome if they attend church for occasional special events. Their desire to have a child baptized represents an opportunity that should not be lost, she said.

Church leaders, she said, should press to find out why marginal Catholics feel a lack of enthusiasm. Many parents will need a lot of help to carry out their role, she said, and the church should make special efforts to provide such help or — for special services — assist them in finding it.

Mary Ann Keiner, religious education director for Our Lady of Grace Church in Noblesville, Ind., said the church should

welcome first, and then make demands. "We should make demands on people," she said. "But we should be careful about the kinds of demands we make so they will be growth-producing."

Father Duggan said young parents who have no active church life may have suffered a "crushing alienation," but in many cases were simply taking the "young adult sabbatical."

That, he said, normally lasts from about age 18 to 28, when young people "drop out" and take a prolonged "rite of passage into adulthood." If they come to talk about baptism for a child, he said, "I invite them to end the young adult sabbatical."

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