

# Synod is memorable event in church's life

## Process will live long for diocese

**EDITORS' NOTE:** This is the first installment in a series of columns that will focus on the ongoing Seventh Synod of the Diocese of Rochester. We hope this series - which is being prepared by the diocesan Office of the Synod - will help all members of the diocese prepare themselves for participating in this endeavor.

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Guest contributor

Everyone remembers certain very important events that will never happen again: first dates, the day they started their first jobs, the births of their first children, the day they bought their first cars. Some people treasure the day they met the pope or the president. Others recall fondly their wedding days.

The memories of these days are special because they will never be repeated. They happen once in a lifetime.

A diocesan synod is one of these rare events in the life of the local church. It is a memory in the making.

The last synod took place in the Diocese of Rochester on April 6, 1954. It was quite different from the one that begins next month.

In the 1954 synod, 299 secular and religious priests dressed in cassocks and surplices filed into Sacred Heart Cathedral to voice their approval to 106 regulations that Bishop James E. Kearney had drafted to govern the local church.

The agenda for that synod was fixed. The decisions actually had been made in advance. There was no discussion of the issues.

Bishop Kearney's synod reflected well the understanding of church that was current at that time. The hierarchical nature of the church was stressed. The role of the laity was a passive one at best.

All that began to change five years later when, on January 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council. It was to be a council of remembering. It remembered the ancient liturgy. It remembered the collegial nature of the church. It remembered the role of the laity.

Vatican II reminded pastors "... that they themselves were not established by Christ to carry on alone the whole salvific mission of the Church" (Constitution on the Church #30).

Rather, the bishops taught that all Roman Catholics, by the fact of their



baptisms, had an obligation, "to best of their ability, to carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world" (#31).

Based upon that teaching, then, every Roman Catholic in the Diocese of Rochester should have some say in how the diocese carries out its mission.

In its mission statement, the church of the Diocese of Rochester proclaims its mission is "to worship God, to preach the good news of Christ, to build up the community of faith and hope in the Holy Spirit, and to serve those in need."

Ideally, all 361,384 Catholics in the 12-county diocese should be consulted personally and regularly when the bishop plans programs and spends money to carry out this mission. But this is not very practical. So the bishop ordinarily consults with representatives joined in three distinct councils for this purpose: the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Diocesan Stewardship Council and the Diocesan Presbyteral (Priests') Council. All three were created after Vatican II precisely for this reason.

But once in a lifetime the bishop calls a synod.

A synod is an extraordinary meeting or series of meetings bringing together the laity, religious and clergy to make recommendations to the bishop about priorities, programs and resources to carry out the church's mission.

To allow every voice to be heard, Bishop Matthew H. Clark decided



that the Seventh Synod of the Diocese of Rochester should start from the grass roots.

In the spring of 1991, he mailed out a questionnaire to 129,000 Catholics households in the diocese, seeking to discover what people felt were the most important needs and how the church was meeting these needs. On the basis of almost 20,000 responses, he picked six general topic areas to be explored by the synod and asked six committees to write short papers as discussion starters.

The next stage is about to begin. All the parishes and communities of the diocese will be holding their own synodal discussions this fall and next spring, using the papers as jumping-off points. More than 2,300 facilitators have been trained to help their parish discussion groups conduct these two-1/2 hour sessions. The bishop is urging every Catholic to take part in these sessions.

The purpose of these gatherings is not just discussion. The airing of problems, expectations, hopes and dreams should lead quite naturally to a sharing of wisdom about possible ways that we, as church, can address our problems and achieve our dreams. Every parish will make its own synodal recommendations and establish its own priorities before sending on the results to the regional and general synods.

Eleven regional synods will prioritize the recommendations received from the 170 parishes and communities. Five of these regional synods will be held in Monroe County. Others will take place in the Livingston,

Yates-Ontario-Wayne, Cayuga-Seneca, Steuben, Schuyler-Chemung and Tompkins-Tioga regions. These regional synods will meet twice - on December 12, 1992, and May 22, 1993.

The General Synod will take place at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center on October 1-3, 1993. There, Bishop Clark and his staff will gather with 160 pastors and community leaders, representatives of the deacons and religious orders, and more than 1,000 delegates from the parishes and communities of the diocese.

This once-in-a-lifetime gathering of the church of Rochester will take the recommendations prioritized by the regional synods and forge them into a pastoral plan to help the church carry out its mission well into the next century.

The synod will end with a eucharistic celebration, which is also a birthday celebration. The Diocese of Rochester is marking the 125 anniversary of its founding by Pope Pius IX in 1868. Invited to join us in that celebration are bishops, clergy, religious and laity representing the eight dioceses of New York state; ecumenical representatives of many faiths; and thousands of Catholics from our own diocese.

A diocesan synod may happen only once in a lifetime, but its impact is immense. It promises to be an event, a process, a movement, a celebration that will live long in our memories.

Father Hart is diocesan director of the synod.

