

Synods build up church from grass roots

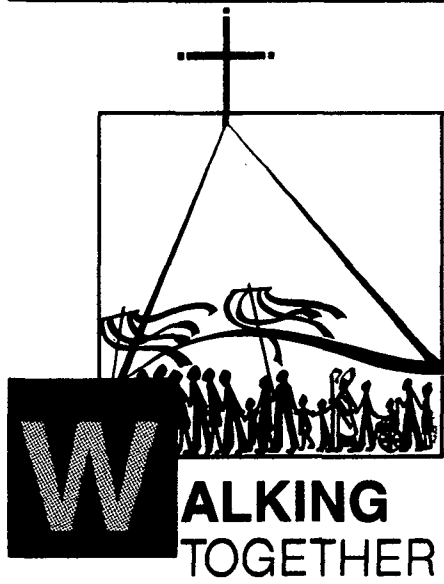
By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

The preliminary tabulation is in: from Rochester's Sacred Heart Cathedral to Apalachin's St. Margaret Mary Church, from the Correctional Facility at Groveland to the Cornell University Catholic Community in Ithaca. More than 25,000 diocesan Catholics participated in the first three weeks of our diocesan Synod.

What a powerhouse number of people praying, talking, listening and planning. It certainly fulfills Bishop Matthew H. Clark's dream of a Synod, which is to build from the grass roots to "challenge ourselves with outward vision and stretch out our arms in love to all God's people ... especially those with the greatest needs.

At the very same time on the other side of the world, the Diocese of Rome also began its first diocesan Synod in many years. Pope John Paul II began the synod in Rome on Oct. 3 by expressing his hopes to begin an era of "dialogue and service with all those who live in Rome, beginning with "those who have the greatest need.

Like the Diocese of Rochester's, the Roman synod will attempt to form a pastoral plan for families; for Christian education; for youths and



the elderly; for the unemployed; and for "those afflicted by material and moral poverty.

Rome is one of the oldest churches in the faith; Rochester celebrates only 125 years. The Bishop of Rome is among the older active bishops; the bishop of Rochester still one of the youngest. Rome presides over the church universal; Rochester is but one of several thousand local churches.

Despite these differences, our problems are remarkably the same. The Gospel that we preach is the same. The mission that we serve is the same. The Spirit that guides us is the same. Our synod process will be

governed by the same church law that governs theirs. Discussion participants in Rome will have the same freedom of expression that we enjoy. And, like us, they will formulate recommendations to forge a pastoral plan for the future.

On the other hand, our synods will be quite different because our pastoral approaches most likely will be quite different. This is why we all have diocesan synods. The church realizes that only so much can be accomplished through worldwide planning. Grass-roots planning allows us to find the right words and means to preach the Gospel effectively in this time and place. It is through planning at the grass roots that we discover the works of justice and love appropriate for this people and this culture.

The church has a word for grass-roots planning: subsidiarity.

Subsidiarity is a long-standing principle of Catholic social teaching, which Popes Pius XII and Paul VI applied to the church. It holds that social bodies, including the church, exist for the sake of the person. Therefore, what individuals are able to do for themselves should not be taken over by society. Also what smaller societies can do for themselves, larger societies should not take over.

When the Diocese of Rochester

planned a grass-roots synod, it was honoring this principle of subsidiarity. This is why we first hold parish/community synods, then regional synods and only finally a General Synod.

It is even more important that the principle of subsidiarity be followed now as we begin to think about implementing the various synod recommendations. The purpose of the Rochester diocese's seventh synod is not to enlarge the bureaucracy at the Pastoral Center nor is it to burden the pastors with more committees.

Diocesan offices are not set up to do ministry but to support ministry, not to take over planning but to spur local planning. Likewise, pastors are not appointed to every church to take over all the ministry in a particular locale. The pastor's primary role is to preside in love over a community of ministers, to call forth the community's gifts and to give some order to their use.

The synod's purpose — whether it takes place in Rochester or in Rome — is to take a hard look at the problems that confront us and then to draw up a plan that will help the grass-roots church — you and me, pastors and people in our ordinary daily lives — to meet these challenges as church.

And by God's good grace, that's what we as church are doing.

Prayer is a cup held up to God

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 18:9-14; (R1) Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18; (R2) 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18.

Last week I wrote that if prayer is to be an effective force in one's life, it has to be a regular activity, not a hit or miss affair.

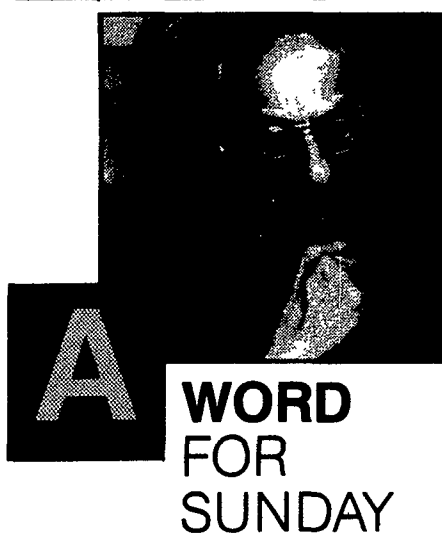
This Sunday's readings lay down another condition for effective prayer — namely, humility.

"The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds" (R1). "The Lord hears the cry of the poor" (Response) — not the economic poor, but the poor in spirit, the humble. "This man (the humble tax collector) went home from his prayer justified" (R3).

Humility is not grovelling in the dirt. Nor does it mean to be hurt, as Modred sang in *Camelot*. Humility is what one thinks himself to be in relation to God.

The humble person recognizes that God is everything, that God is needed and that without Him one can do nothing. That's the truth. But humility is more than truth. Knowledge is not virtue.

The other half of the concept of



humility is to admit the truth. If I realize that I cannot do anything without God, I shall — if I am truly humble — take the next step: I'll go to God in prayer. I'll never try to do anything without Him.

Prayer, therefore, begins in our minds. What do we think of ourselves — especially in relation to God? If we think like the Pharisee, and believe ourselves to be the whole cause of all our achievements, and

that God owes us for being so good, then we shall either never pray or — if we do — we shall pray like the Pharisee. Our prayer shall simply be a boasting, a cataloging of our achievements. In his short prayer, the Pharisee used "I" five times. Such prayer won't go any farther than the roof.

Consequently, our thoughts and feelings are of paramount importance for prayer. But equally important, one must realize that thoughts and feelings don't necessarily affect our lives. Only to those thoughts and feelings that affect our lives do we pay attention. We say, as you think, you act.

The mind is like soil. It will grow whatever we sow in it. If we constantly dwell on our own selves and harbor fears, anxieties, hate — well, that is precisely what we'll get back. If, however, we plant true thoughts about self, love, faith and joy, we will get those back. The thoughts that enfold you are the thoughts that will mold you.

The mind, like electricity, can be our servant or master. It will do what we tell it. We can make electricity light our rooms or power the electric

chair. If we dwell on ourselves — our fears, hates, resentments — then we'll react accordingly.

That is why spiritual reading is so important to prayer life. Spiritual reading is reading that fills us with good thoughts — uplifting, inspiring, and expansive thoughts. The mill will grind the wheat that is thrown into it: good wheat gives good flour, bad wheat yields bad flour. Thoughts about self will beget selfishness; thoughts about God will beget humility.

Prayer is a cup held up to God to be filled. First, it must be empty. But how large the cup will be — a thimble or a goblet — will depend on how big or small our thoughts, desires or affections may be.

*I bargained with Life for a penny,
And Life would pay no more,
However I begged at evening,
When I counted my scanty store,
For Life is a just employer,
He gives you what you ask,
But once you have set the wages,
Why, you must bear the task,
I worked for a menial's hire,
Only to learn, dismayed,
That any wage I had asked of Life,
Life would have paid.*

Wherever our economic arrangements fail to conform to the demands of human dignity lived in community they must be questioned and transformed.

U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*



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