

We must root our dreams in reality

By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

The wild flurry of Christmas shopping has begun once again. Merchants are whispering their annual fervent prayer, hoping that the recession disappears.

Children never worry about recessions or price tags. Christmas is a time of dreams and — in the age of television — those dreams can become mighty grand indeed.

Although parents often try to talk their kids into being realistic about what to expect from Santa, children dream nonetheless. Despite all difficulties, they believe that Santa will come through in the end.

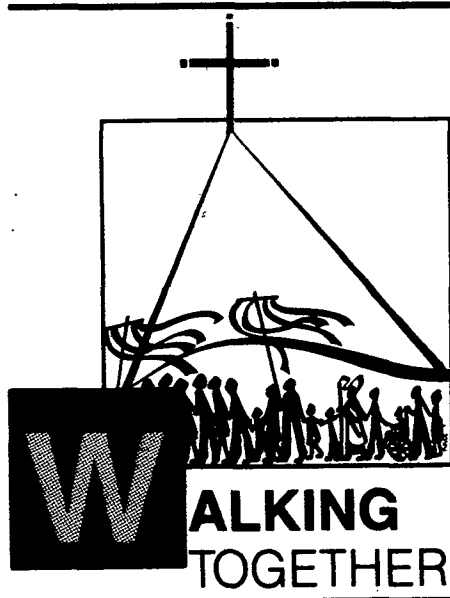
The Synod is a time of dreams for our local church. It is a time to imagine again what our local church could be if everyone pulled together and worked on behalf of our mission.

Throughout the process, however, we've tried to keep these dreams rooted in reality. The core of that reality is the realization of our limitedness.

A week before the first Regional Synods, I'd like to suggest that our Synod has five limitations all our dreams must take into account:

- First, we are limited because there is no magical way to make our dreams become reality. It is too easy to imagine a "dream church" with deep faith and uncompromising love, unlimited funds, wonderful people, an endless and talented volunteer pool, and ministers who never sleep. That dream will always be beyond our ability to realize.

In reality, we are a church of ordi-



nary human beings. We have limited resources as parishes and as a diocese. Fierce competition exists for our time, energy and dollars. For all of these reasons we must set our priorities wisely and focus our energies carefully to accomplish as much as we can. As wonderful as it is, our Synod will be limited necessarily by the restraints of what is possible.

- Secondly, we are limited because we are a Catholic Church. We live in communion with all the other Catholic Churches throughout the world in union with the Church of Rome. We must realize that we are not the only dreamers and our dreams may not be the other churches' dreams. In dialogue we must discover the ways our differing dreams support the same mission, or how our different dreams can be merged into one. In the meantime, our Synod will be limited

because being Catholic holds us back in love from implementing our dreams on our own.

- Thirdly, we are limited in implementing our synod dreams because we still want our pastor, diocesan bishop or parish staff to do it. We want the church to grow, to reach out, to include, to become a vibrant community of faith and action, but we still want someone else to do it for us. Although the synod themes asked "what can we as Church do," all too often we wrote our recommendations in such a way that we could hold the bishop, the diocese, the pastor or the staff responsible.

Our Synod will be limited and our dreams will never become reality until we all accept our baptismal call to work together in preaching the Gospel, building up the community, worshipping God and serving our brothers and sisters.

- Fourthly, our Synod is limited because it is not truly ecumenical. Last week I met with a number of representatives of Christian churches in our diocese who were disappointed not to be included in our synodal process. Although they understood that our Synod was a result of our canon law's requirements, they pointed out that our themes voiced universal concerns and that non-Catholic Churches could offer much in suggesting ways to tackle these problems together.

Much evidence is available to suggest that they are correct. We will be less effective in dealing with systemic social problems because we did not share our dreams with other dreamers. Perhaps the next Synod will be

different but this one will be limited because it is only Catholic.

- Finally, our Synod is limited because, as hard as we tried, the effort never really connected with those who have left the church. I am grateful to the 30,000 people who have participated thus far, but I know that most of these are very active, involved Catholics.

What about the other 40 percent of the Catholic population? Unfortunately, our Synod has not fully heard the voice of the angry and alienated. It has not tapped into the large pool of people who have given up on us entirely, or who tentatively stop by for a quick visit at Christmas and Easter. They have much to teach us and our synodal efforts will continue to be limited until we hear the Spirit's voice speaking through them.

Our Synod will be limited. It won't accomplish all that we hope and dream. Yet, I remain very excited about the Synod, about its possibilities, about the life that it has already given to our parishes and our diocese.

I know that the Synod is only the beginning. It is only a human way of putting all the problems before us and then carefully and prayerfully picking the most important ways of addressing these problems.

Although it won't accomplish everything, I believe that by God's grace, much good, insight and progress will come from our efforts. Besides, what would life in the church be like if we no longer dreamed?

Father Hart is director of the diocesan Synod.

Our hearts should be open all the time

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

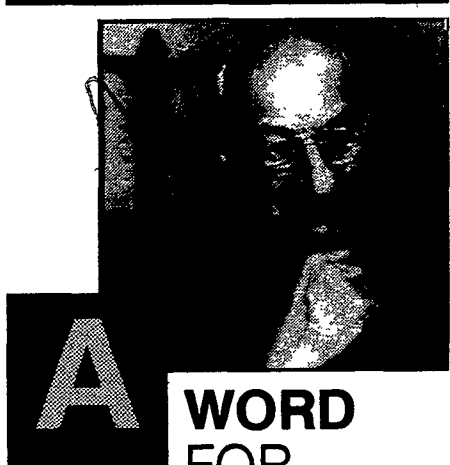
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 3:1-12; (R1) Isaiah 11:1-10; (R2) Romans 15:4-9.

Sunday's first reading gives Isaiah's famous alliterative, Messianic prophecy: "A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse."

Jesse was King David's father. By the time of Christ, however, David's royal house had been cut down to a mere stump. Juda was no longer a monarchy. The descendants of David's royal house were political nobodies, such as a carpenter Joseph and a mere housewife named Mary. That was why Isaiah did not use David's name — which connoted splendor and royal dignity — but the name of David's father, Jesse.

This prophecy has sprung the Jesse tree we use during Advent.

Some trees when cut down have enough sap and grip of the earth to send forth a shoot that eventually will sprout into a tree. From the stump of Jesse a shoot did sprout: Jesus, Son of David. When the sprout became a man, the Lord's Spirit at His baptism poured out upon Him wisdom, under-



standing, counsel, strength, knowledge and fear of the Lord. This Jesus then planted a mustard seed, the church, "a signal for the nations," which was to grow into a mighty tree harboring all the nations of the world.

He has come to bring two things to the world: justice and peace. Five times we say in the Responsorial Refrain: "Justice shall flourish in his time and fullness of peace for ever." He will bring justice because He won't

judge by appearances, nor by hearsay or rumor. And justice's fruit is peace. Pope Pius XII's motto was *Pax opus justitiae* — "Peace the Work of Justice."

He will bring peace between even those who are enemies by nature, like the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat. Even the lion will be tamed to eat hay like the ox, and the cobra so that the child can play near its den. Through his church He will reconcile even the irreconcilable.

So John the Baptist came out of the desert calling the Pharisees, a "brood of vipers" with the venom of cobras, to make peace with God by reforming their lives and confessing their sins.

Peace with God, peace within our hearts, is always the first step to peace in our homes and in our nation. That peace will always come from making a good confession. And surely, going to confession must top the list of our Advent projects.

In the second place, we should make peace with our neighbors during this Advent. St. Paul urged us "to live in perfect harmony with one another ... to accept one another," as Christ accepted us.

Once in a *Peanuts* comic strip, Lucy said that Christmas was a time of

goodness and good will; a time when we accept one another, welcoming others into our hearts and homes.

Charlie Brown then asked, "Why just at Christmas? Why can't we be kind and accepting and hospitable all the year round?"

Lucy glares at Charlie Brown and says, "What are you, some kind of a religious fanatic?"

Yet nothing so pleases God and is so desired by God as our living in harmony and in love with one another. We best welcome Christ at Christmas by having open hearts to others.

While Leonardo da Vinci was painting the Last Supper, he got into a terrible fight with another man. It even came to blows. After the fracas, da Vinci went back to his canvas to work on Jesus' face. He couldn't make a single stroke. Then he realized the problem. He put down his brush, went to the man with whom he had quarreled, and begged his forgiveness. Only then was he able to finish Jesus' face.

We are trying to become other Christs, but we will never engrave His image on our hearts as long as we are not reconciled to God through penance and to our neighbor by forgiveness, mercy and love.

Kids' Chronicle presents a Bible story, and such features as "King Solomon's Wisdom," the "Bible Times," and a weekly contest.

Another way to help you bring faith home to your kids.