

Regional delegates were at their best

By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

"How have you sinned?" asked the priest on the other end of my phone line last Friday, Dec. 10. He was wondering, of course, what I had done to deserve the winter storm that threatened to cancel some or all of the regional synods that were to take place at 11 sites around the diocese last Saturday.

"Or perhaps God is sending you a signal of his displeasure at the progress of our consultative process," he suggested.

I reminded him that the voting at the final session of the First Vatican Council in July of 1870 proceeded during a thunderstorm so violent that the glass in the clearstory windows kept breaking and falling to the floor of St. Peter's Basilica. Each bishop's vote was punctuated with a horrible crash.

Those who were happy with the vote's outcome thought the show of nature was a sign of divine pleasure; those opposed read into the apocalyptic scene a clear indication of God's wrath.

Usually we can draw no clear message from the weather except perhaps the wisdom that when we plan anything in the northeast we plan in uncertainty — with the resolution to do the best we can. Or, as one of my skiing buddies is wont to say, "You've gotta be the best



under the worst conditions!"

I kept thinking about being the best under the worst conditions as I drove through the snowy Finger Lakes region on Saturday, en route to participate in the Schuyler-Chemung regional synod at St. Mary Our Mother in Horseheads. Originally, I was thinking only about the weather and the roads, but four groups of people in our diocese reminded me of a much larger meaning to these words.

First, the Schuyler-Chemung regional synod. Although Saturday's weather conditions were far from ideal, regional delegates that gathered at St. Mary's were wonderfully

upbeat considering the sacrifices they made to be present. Contemporary religious and active businessmen, social workers and homemakers, gathered together prayerfully and shared openly in order to set the church's priorities in ministry for years to come. I thank them for their enthusiasm.

Secondly, my synod discussion group. This group of seven Catholics was determined that we, as church, find the ways to help each other prosper despite the dark forces around us. They recognized that we can sometimes fall into the habit of condemning the dark side of our culture, railing against the forces that threaten our relationships, our integrity, our health.

For them, being the best under the worst conditions meant teaching married people the skills to build relationships even in hard times; giving individuals the support to survive the pain of divorce; instilling our youths with the self-worth to ward off the temptations that threaten to destroy them.

Being the best under the worst conditions meant supporting women with burdensome pregnancies, not just decriing the evil of abortion; and gathering our resources and empowering a network of volunteers, not just being overwhelmed by our time's social evils.

I thank them for their love of the church — warts and all.

Thirdly, the five regional synods that did not meet. The foul weather forced the Tompkins-Tioga, Cayuga-Seneca, Yates-Ontario-Wayne, Livingston, and Steuben regions to postpone their regional synods until Jan. 9. They reminded me that sometimes, under the worst conditions, the best thing to do is to back off. They are the reminders of our limitedness, our fallibility, our powerlessness in the face of forces greater than ourselves. Being the best under the worst conditions sometimes means declaring defeat and moving on. I thank them for this reminder.

And finally, for Bishop Matthew H. Clark. In calling for a Synod, Bishop Clark has not only reminded us of our baptismal commitment to carry on the church's mission but he has challenged us to plan creatively with the resources and energy available. As a local church we do not have the finances we need to do all the things we ought to do. We do not have the answers to all the problems.

Despite all these discouraging factors, Bishop Clark has urged us to trust in the Holy Spirit, to set priorities, to remember most of all the poor and the alienated. I thank him for his guidance and empowerment. I thank him for his patience. I thank him most of all for his continual urging of us to be the best under the worst conditions.

Christmas can't be merry without Mary

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 1:18-24; (R1) Isaiah 7:10-14; (R2) Romans 1:1-7.

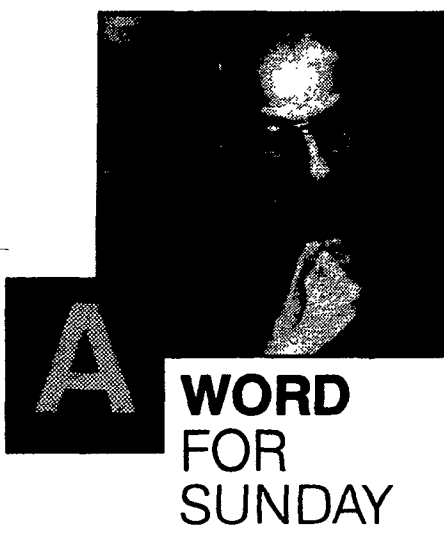
Achaz was Judah's king from 736 to 721 B.C. Twenty years old when he became king, he lacked experience and religious conviction. When two kings — Israel's Phacee and Damascus's Rasin — marched against him in 733, he decided to appeal to Assyria's Tiglath-pileser for help.

Isaiah advised him against this foolish alliance and promised a miracle if Achaz would only put his trust in God. Achaz refused under the guise of religion.

This made Isaiah angry. He said you'll get a sign anyway: the Messianic prophesy made to David will be fulfilled, a virgin shall be with child and bear a son ... Immanuel. God keeps His promises.

But since Achaz did not keep faithful to God, Isaiah foretold that he would suffer before this Messiah came. Then after His coming, David's house would become extinct.

Matthew sees Mary as the virgin



foretold by Isaiah and her child as Immanuel.

God offers grace even to sinners such as Achaz. And often His giving grace is occasioned by calamities. All He asks of us is simply trust, to break with evil associations. How many times people — such as Achaz — depend on their own resources instead of turning to God.

Often too a nation's fate depends

on a single decision. Achaz's decision determined Judah's fate for the next 700 years. How we should pray for our political leaders — in the White House and the Congress — as well as those who sit on the Supreme Court.

Deliverance often comes through small things. God never needs much to do much. He can do much with nothing. From nothing He created the entire world. From one who was nothing in her own eyes, He would remake the world — namely, through a lowly virgin. She, the Virgin Mother, would bring God to us. How often it is a woman who brings a man to God. The level of civilization depends on its women.

Then, too, lowly as was the Virgin, more lowly was the Child. Mary's Son came as a child to teach us to be like children. Children are loving, forgiving, trusting. What they are by nature, we must strive to become by grace.

A young family was going away for Christmas. The car was all packed. Arrangements had been made to stop any deliveries during their absence. A neighbor had promised to keep an eye on the

house. All gifts for parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, were crammed into the car's trunk and the luggage was safely stowed away.

As the car started out of the driveway, the young wife gasped, "Honey, we've forgotten the baby." It was true. In all the excitement of grabbing gifts and packing luggage, they had forgotten their most precious "cargo" — their baby.

At this time of the year, it is easy to forget the Baby Jesus. Yet He's the reason for the season.

To teach us that the world cannot produce God, a Virgin brought Him into the world. It is still the Virgin Mary who brings God to us and us to God.

Maybe we want someone to come back to the sacraments this Christmas. Pray to Mary.

Maybe we are faced with financial problems this Christmas. Seek out Mary, remember what she did at Cana.

Maybe we are the problem. Mary is our Mother.

Mary must be a part of every Christmas, for how can Christmas be merry without Mary?

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