

We'll never have enough regional synods

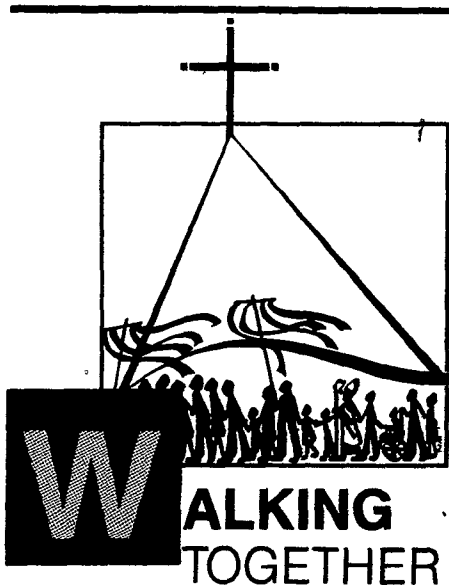
By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

Last Saturday I participated in my third Regional Synod. I think I am hooked! I am not addicted to the travel, to the free donuts, or to the voting (as a matter of fact, I have never subscribed to the old Chicago adage, "vote early and often," so I voted only once: at the Schuyler-Chemung Synod on Dec. 12). Rather, I'm high on the church itself.

Like many people I was thoroughly disappointed on Dec. 12 when five regional synods had to be cancelled on account of ice and snow. Because of this inconvenience, however, I was able to attend the Tompkins-Tioga Regional Synod on Jan. 9 and the Steuben Regional Synod on Jan. 16. At each of these meetings I was assigned at random to a discussion group that turned out to be nothing short of exceptional.

Maybe I'm too optimistic. None of the groups was perfect. The participants and the facilitators all made mistakes. Some people were more prepared than others. Someone always spoke a little too much, and someone else too little.

The process, however, allowed the church to carry on a dialogue with itself: lay people, religious and clergy speaking from their hearts about the church they loved and setting priori-



ties for its future as best they knew how. This is the church at its best.

Since the Second Vatican Council it has been often noted that the Catholic Church has been "meeting-ed to death." Pastors everywhere joke with their colleagues about looking forward to heaven where there is no more pain, no more sadness, no more meetings.

The problem is not really with meetings as such; it's with useless meetings without substance that go nowhere. One pastor at the Tompkins-Tioga Synod said to me: "What a joy it is to talk to committed people about the church's real problems, trying to

reach real solutions."

But I've been struck by something else. Each of the discussion groups in which I participated comprised people who were respectful of each other, who listened to each other, who tried to learn from each other. Each of the groups had people who were more educated than others, who had more experience than the rest, who perhaps understood the church's problems and society better than most, but still there was respectful listening.

Each of the groups of which I was a part contained people who were more liberal or more conservative than the rest of the group, but still the group was open to listening and learning. The group was influenced by them. This is the church's strength. This is the church at its best. In fact, it is only when the church listens to the Spirit's voice as it speaks through the pope, bishops and pastors as well as through the laity, that it can become all Christ intends it to be.

Over the past few weeks, as people have told me their own regional synod stories, I have not been surprised to find that most have been as positive as my experience.

The few that were negative had one thing in common: someone in their group had an agenda. They had come to crusade but not to dialogue and listen. They held the truth and were adamant that everyone else was

mired in falsehood.

They cared little for the participants, for the process, or for the topics under discussion. Facilitator or no, they had a point to make and everything had to stop until it was made.

The Diocese of Rochester's 1991-93 Synod is an attempt to draw up a prioritized pastoral plan for our 12-county church to guide us into the future. As we look for solutions to the problems that confront us, there are many possible ways to go. Some are better than others.

Our dialogue is an attempt, by the help of God's grace, to find the best route. No preconceived agenda will help us. No refusal to listen to one another will help us. No clinging to liberal or conservative ideology will help us. Only a careful listening to the Holy Spirit, who anoints the whole people of God, from the bishop to the last of the faithful, will guide our future course safely.

On Dec. 12, as well as Jan. 9 and 16, I felt the Spirit at work in our regional meetings: moving, probing, leading, nudging.

And the presence of the Spirit of God is addicting: we always long for more. If there were another Regional Synod tomorrow, I'd be there!

Father Hart is director of the diocesan Synod.

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