

Arriving at our destination is assured

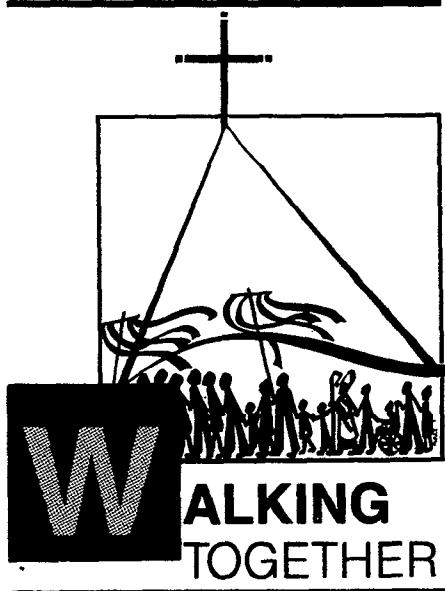
By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

Any traveler can tell you that to get to your destination you have to know not only where you are going but how you plan to get there. So too with the church. That is why, from time to time, we draw up a mission statement. In addition to serving as a road map, the mission statement is a quick way to focus once again on what we are about, where we're going, and how we plan to get there.

The Diocese of Rochester's 1991 mission statement begins, "We joyfully embrace our baptismal call 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." Right up front it isolates four main elements of what we are about as a local church: worship, teaching, community and service.

Last week the data-processing people at the Pastoral Center finished tabulating the ballots cast at the 11 regional synods. The results were slowed a bit because a few of the December synods were delayed by snow until mid-January. The results are quite interesting, especially if you keep our mission statement in mind, remembering that our diocesan Synod is meant to help us carry out our mission.

In the area of the first theme ("How can we as Church help strengthen Christian marriage and family life in all its forms?"), the delegates focused



on our mission of teaching. They emphasized, at this point in the process, that our first priority should be the more effective teaching of moral issues, especially life issues, and the formation of conscience.

Agreeing with many parish recommendations, the delegates felt that the church's moral teachings — and the way the church has arrived at these teachings — are not being effectively or consistently communicated by our pastors and teachers. There seems to be little understanding of the church's consistent life ethic and a general misunderstanding of the nature of conscience. I can see how the implementation of this one recommendation alone could help us as a diocese refocus our efforts in carrying out our mission to teach.

In prioritizing the recommendations from the second theme ("How can we support our parishes in being faith-filled celebrating communities?"), the 1,500 delegates' top choice focused on our mission to form community.

Their first priority asked parishes to explore new ways of deepening parish community life. The delegates agreed that many Catholic parishes are too large or too impersonal. They suggested the formation of smaller groups within our parishes — to better care for many people now lost in the crowd; to increase the opportunities for Catholics to share their faith and put their faith into action.

It is no surprise to me that this recommendation made its way to the top. It speaks to a generally felt need across our diocese. If this ends up as one of the top recommendations at the General Synod, it will go a long way to helping our parishes and diocesan support staff rethink the nature of parish life and refocus our energies in carrying out our mission to form Christian community.

When facing the many excellent recommendations in the area of the third theme ("How can we as Church help those facing violence, addiction, burdensome pregnancy or terminal illness?"), the delegates voted in a surprise. In reflecting on our mission to serve, delegates felt the greatest need was not in starting new programs but in better communicating about the programs and services we already have.

Since its founding 125 years ago, the Rochester diocese has always taken care of the poor and needy. As times and circumstances changed, the programs and services have also changed but the loving care offered freely has never subsided. Currently, however, even though the diocese's social ministry offices daily touch the lives of thousands of people and skillfully run multi-million dollar operations in many sites throughout our 12 counties, few people in the parishes know of these services that are offered.

This recommendation points out the need of the various social ministry agencies to re-establish their links with the parishes in assessing needs, in recruiting support, and in communicating programs and services. The parishes, likewise, need to work at letting parishioners know what help is available and where it can be found.

We are only half way through our synod process and already the details on our road map to the future are taking shape. There's still more discussions to be held and recommendations to be formulated but already the results are gratifying. Because from the beginning we have been clear about how we can better carry out that mission. The road ahead may be rocky or smooth but when we plan our route together, with the Lord at our side, arriving at our destination is assured.

Father Hart is director of the diocesan Synod.

Those with pure hearts shall see God

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 5:17-37; (R1) Sirach 15:15-20; (R2) 1 Corinthians 2:6-10.

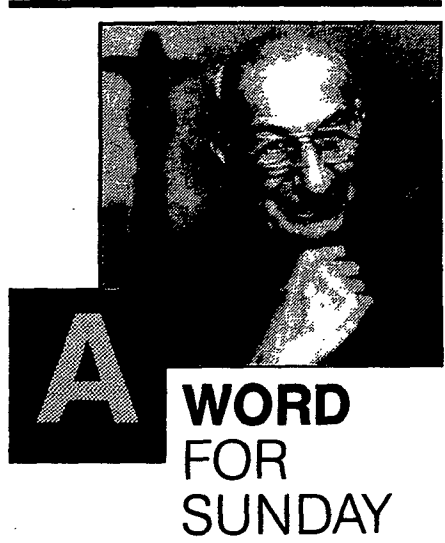
Sunday's readings are all about commandments. Sirach says, "If you choose you can keep the commandments." To choose means we are free. Freewill is the one gift God has given us that He will never violate.

Here are three things about choosing. First, we must choose. We can't drive in neutral. We can't straddle the fence. Not to choose is to choose.

Secondly, choice means there has to be alternatives, at least two possibilities. Sirach lists these as fire and water, life and death.

Thirdly, choices determine life's outcome, just as the moves you make in checkers determine whether or not you'll win the game. One of the biggest mistakes some people make in life is to think that they can go on making the wrong choices and end up a right person.

Nutritionists tell us that children's eating decisions may affect their quality of health later in life. We become what we choose. Sirach says that we



are responsible for our choices. We can choose fire or water — that which destroys or that which nourishes. We can choose life or death — that which makes life worth living or that which makes living a worthless life.

Jesus tells us also we can keep the commandments or not keep them. Two things stand out in His explanation. First is His authority. To the Jew the law was from God — in other words, it was divine. Yet five times

Jesus dared to enlarge it. "You have heard ... but I say to you." Not even the prophets dared to tamper with the law. Yet Jesus did, claiming implicitly to be greater than any prophet.

Musicians who played under Arturo Toscanini noted that you could feel the authority flowing from him the moment he took the podium. That was the way it was with Jesus. The authority was there, people felt it. So no one questioned Him. Thus, Matthew wrote: "The crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."

Secondly, Jesus pointed out that the heart is the heart of the law. Laws touch only external actions. They are help us to live together, to get along in society. One can keep all the laws and still be an evil person, as were some of the scribes and Pharisees. Thus Jesus said, "From the heart come evil thoughts" (Mt. 15:19). In Mark He cried out, "Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile (7:15).

Man judges by appearances, but God judges by the heart. As a jeweler

judges the worth of a watch by its inner workings, so God judges our worth by the inner movements of our minds and heart. Thus in perfecting the law regarding murder, adultery, divorce and oaths, Jesus emphasized the spirit behind the commandments.

Religion would be a cinch if all involved were keeping laws. Attending church on Sunday is no big deal, but to go and be reconciled to your brother is tough. Who worries about murder? But what about hate, revenge, anger, forgiveness, loving the unlovable — ah, there's the rub.

One may easily avoid adultery, but there is pornography, X-rated movies and videotapes, salacious novels, soap operas — how do I fare here? Today, divorce is the line of least resistance. Jesus spoke of lifelong commitment. Then there is lying, it is so easy, yet honesty and truthfulness are so hard.

Jesus taught that the Gospel's home is the heart. Blessed are the clean of heart, they shall see God. No man can call himself good just because he or she keeps rules or regulations. He alone is good whose heart is pure. We should pray each day with the Psalmist: "Create a clean heart in me, O God. Put in me a steadfast spirit."

ANSWER KEY

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|----------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah | 5. Fiery furnace |
| 2. Vegetables | 6. Lion's den |
| 3. Able to explain dreams | 7. An angel |
| 4. Golden statue | |

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