

Synod has provided the unexpected

By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

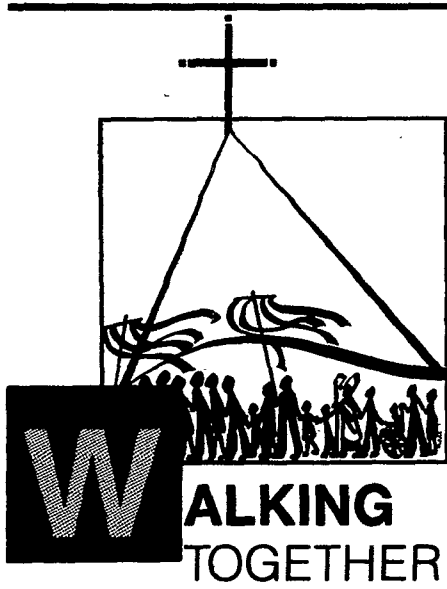
The Synod Commission met last week. This group of 24 individuals from all over the diocese first began meeting in 1990 to plan every step of our synodal process.

Hovering like new parents, they carefully reviewed many drafts of the synod survey, agonized over the number of themes and the length of the synodal process, and scrutinized the proposed theme papers. They put an enormous amount of time and energy into their work and are the people who deserve much credit for the Synod's success thus far.

The commission doesn't meet much anymore since most of its work is done. Members were called together this time to critique the developing plans for the General Synod in October and to look back at the process unfolding over the past five months. As always they had many helpful suggestions to improve our plans and suggested several ways that would better the parish and regional synods.

During the meeting — and in several conversations that followed — commission members suggested some wonderful benefits which have come to our local church that were not anticipated by the original synod process.

At the commission's first meeting on Sept. 18, 1990, they were charged by the words of Bishop Matthew H. Clark's pastoral letter: "My hope for this our Seventh Synod is that it will



build from the grass roots, that it will involve as many people as possible in the discussions, that it will address some of the outstanding issues which face us as a local church, and that it will arrive at specific and measurable recommendations for actions, to which we will commit our energies and our resources."

They carried out this charge to the letter.

As the bishop suggested, commission members planned a Synod where the primary impact would be at the diocesan level — namely, the formation of a pastoral plan for the future. Many commission members now feel that the Synod has had an equal and unforeseen impact on the parish communities in the following ways:

1. New pastors have found the

Synod a wonderful bonus. It is sometimes difficult to move into a strange community and be expected to take up the reins immediately. It usually takes quite a few months before a pastor begins to understand a community, its mission and its needs. The fall synod discussions, however, gathered community members, focused their attention directly on the local community and its needs, and involved the new pastor directly in the dialogue. It "jump-started" many new pastors in a way few thought possible. In addition, it provided a wonderful opportunity to meet many established leaders and to discover new leaders as well.

2. In like fashion, established pastors found that the fall synod sessions were a wonderful shot in the arm for their ministry. After one has been a pastor of a community for a while, it is very easy to fall into a ministerial rut. No matter how hard you try, you still see the same problems in the same limited way. The synod theme discussions, by looking at ministerial problems in new ways and suggesting possible solutions to them, have helped a number of parishes and pastors to establish a valuable agenda for years to come.

3. Parish pastoral councils have been invigorated. As one Synod Commission member put it: "I've been bored to death for years at parish council meetings. We talk for hours about the color of paint for the kindergarten, the advisability of repaving the parking lot, or how we

might balance our budget this year. For once we are spending time discussing the real questions of ministry in our parish. It's a miracle!"

In some way or other, each parish's pastoral council has been asked to spend some time over the past few months discussing the various recommendations made at their own parish's synod sessions. The councils were asked not to look solely at the recommendation's wording but to ask what need could be discovered behind the recommendation. It is in this situation of open discussion and creativity that many new ministerial directions have been traced out for the future.

4. Finally, and most importantly, the synod has created a forum where parishioners can discuss serious topics in a meaningful way. Since Vatican II, many have heard the rhetoric that "the baptized are the Church" but have found little evidence to support this claim. Many now feel energized by the Synod, believing that their suggestions have made some impact on local parish life. As one man told me recently: "That Synod of Bishop Clark's is really something. I made a suggestion and six weeks later my parish is doing it!"

Believe me, neither the bishop nor the Synod Commission had expected all this when our journey began. But that's the excitement of a journey led by God's Spirit!

Father Hart is director of the diocesan Synod.

Jesus asks followers not to be retaliatory

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

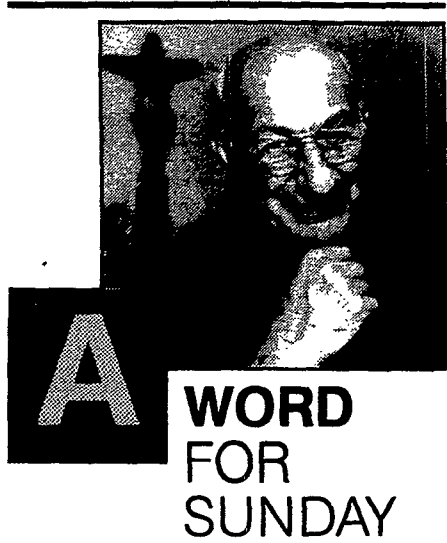
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 5:38-48; (R1) Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18; (R2) 1 Corinthians 3:16-23.

Leviticus (R1), the third book of the Bible, gets its name from all the laws regarding the worship of God. His worship was entrusted to the tribe of Levi — hence Leviticus.

Chapters 17-26 form a body of laws called the law of holiness. God said, "You shall be holy." Why? Because God made us to image Himself. "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy."

There are so many ideas around — and warped ones at that — about what holiness is that very few people want to be holy. Some reduce holiness to not doing anything they like, while others believe it comes down to being always on one's knees or always in church.

God said, in essence, holiness is loving your neighbor for the love of God. Here's how He put it: "You shall not bear hatred for your brother in your heart" — no revenge, no grudges. Then "You shall love your neighbor as yourself;" that is, don't wish anything for another you would



not wish for yourself. "I am the Lord."

In the Gospel, Jesus demanded much more than did the law in Leviticus. The law of the claw, for instance, "an eye for an eye" was all right in the days when relatives — not courts — exercised justice.

In their hands punishment often exceeded the crime. The law of the claw insisted that punishment must be in proportion to the crime, not in excess of it. Yet Jesus taught that even

this attempt at justice is not enough for His followers. He gave three examples.

First, if someone injures you, let it go or bear it. A mild answer breaketh wrath. Overcome evil by good. Secondly, if someone initiates legal action against you, if he takes your tunic, give him even your outer cloak. That ought to shame him into seeing his greed. Finally, if an unjust law exists, like that of Roman impressment, whereby a soldier could force anyone to carry his baggage one mile, Jesus said, "Go two miles." Look what this law did for Simon of Cyrene.

In other words, Jesus has asked His followers not to be retaliatory, no matter what. We are all human. It is human to err, but it is divine to forgive and to forget.

A college professor got a phone call at 3 a.m. The voice said, "This is your neighbor, Mr. Smith. Your dog is barking and keeping me awake."

The professor thanked him and hung up. The next day at 3 a.m., Mr. Smith got a phone call. The voice said, "This is the professor. I just wanted you to know I don't have a dog."

A pious, but cranky old lady was annoyed that her neighbors didn't ask her to go on their picnic.

On the morning of the picnic, they suddenly realized their mistake and sent someone to invite her. The old lady snapped, "It's too late now, I've already prayed for rain."

The end must never justify the meanness.

Lastly, Jesus said it was terribly wrong to love your neighbor and hate your enemy. That was scribal law. G.K. Chesterton said, "We're commanded to love our neighbors and our enemies. They're generally the same persons." It is easy to love people we don't know, but to love those we do — that's a different story.

Such love should begin at home. The best gift a father can give to his children is to love their mother. And vice versa.

Love must never stay at home: it should spill over to others — friends and foes alike. The reason is that God wants us to be like Himself. God does not discriminate. He lets His sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Likewise we must let the sunshine of our love shine on all, and the rain of our compassion and mercy fall on all.

You may not change others, but you will be changed: you will become like your Father in heaven.

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 St. Teresa of Avila