

Seeing things in a different light

By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

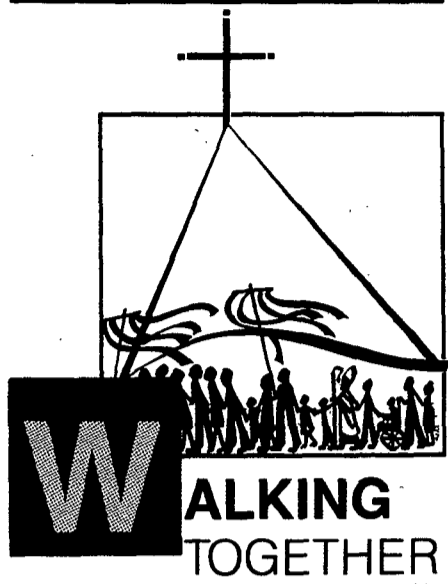
For most of us the age of ecumenism began in 1964 when the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism urged Roman Catholics not only to end all hostility toward other Christian churches but also to move positively toward prayer and dialogue with them.

In addition we were asked to "engage in that more intensive cooperation in carrying out any duties for the common good of humanity ..." in order to "... promote justice and truth, concord and collaboration, as well as the spirit of familial love and unity." (UR 4)

As a consequence, Bishop Fulton Sheen in 1967 led the Rochester diocese to become a founding member of the Genesee Ecumenical Ministries — currently known as the Greater Rochester Community of Churches — an organization comprising Catholic and Protestant churches working and praying together for unity.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark deepened the diocese's ecumenical commitment by entering into covenant with Rochester's Episcopal diocese in 1988, seeking "to do together all that can be done together, and separately only that which must be done separately."

It is one thing to write documents and quite another thing to move the church at its grass roots towards the kind of heartfelt cooperation between the churches, which the Vatican Council envisioned.



Ecumenism has made some inroads in the past few years: many parishes occasionally share a prayer service or pulpit exchange with their Protestant neighbors; a significant number of priests are active in regional clergy associations; and some social ministry projects — such as food banks, for example — are run on a cooperative basis. But for the most part ecumenism has still not reached our parishes. It is not part of our prayer, our planning, or our consciousness as a local church.

In very unexpected ways, however, signs of hope may be emerging through the Synod process.

First of all, I was quite surprised by the number of parishes recommending that youth ministries might be better carried on in cooperation with other

Christian churches in their area. Some smaller parishes find that their resources will not allow them to put together a full youth ministry program despite the fact that this ministry is sorely needed. Suspecting that their Protestant neighbors may have the same difficulty, they propose to work with them for the common good of all their youths.

Meanwhile several larger parishes believe that — although they now have very adequate youth ministry programs — some aspects could be greatly enhanced by occasionally joining with the youth fellowships of their Protestant neighbors.

These recommendations might be the grass-roots breakthrough for which many area Catholic ecumenists have been praying.

A second bright spot can also be seen on the ecumenical horizon. In response to Bishop Clark's invitation to area Protestant church leaders to attend as observers our General Synod in October, the Greater Rochester Community of Churches has sponsored a program for the pastors of its member churches called "The Synod of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester."

Despite their busy Lenten schedules, a number of Protestant leaders have met on three evenings to discuss the material presented in our fall and spring theme-discussion booklets. They are impressed by our Synod process and have praised our writing committees' work. Not surprisingly, they have found that the problems we

presented to our parishes are the same problems that they themselves are facing.

Each week, however, the discussion eventually turns to the same questions: How can we work together to solve these problems? Can we share expertise and resources for the Gospel's sake? Can we collaborate in our outreach to avoid wasteful duplication? Although there are no concrete answers yet, the fact that these questions are being raised in an open and receptive environment indicates that the fruits of Bishop Sheen's ecumenical outreach are beginning to ripen.

We still have far to go before ecumenism is part of our collective consciousness. In most of our diocese's 12 counties the number of Roman Catholics far exceeds the number of Protestants. As a result, our presence dominates even when we are not aware of it.

When we as a local church come to set our priorities, we may think that we do so in isolation but in reality our choices greatly affect the lives of many other Christian communities.

Almost 30 years ago, our bishops gathered in Council wrote: "The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principle concerns of the Second Vatican Council." (UR 1) In carrying out the Council's many reforms, unfortunately, ecumenism has not been one of our principle concerns.

But just maybe the Synod process has helped us all to open our eyes and see things from a wider perspective.

So intense was His passion He sweat blood

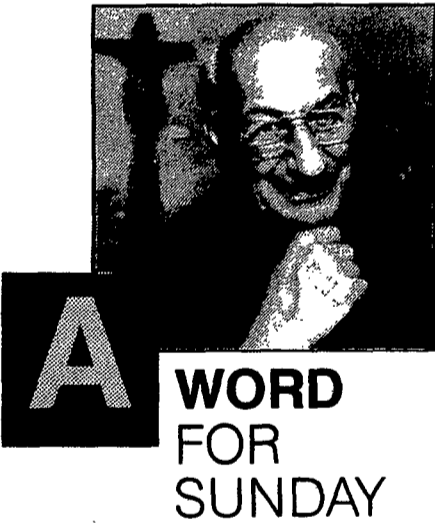
By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 26:14-27:66; (R1) Isaiah 50:4-7; (R2) Philippians 2:6-11.

Next Sunday is Passion or Palm Sunday. In philosophy, the word "passion" means a vehement feeling to or away from some sensible good or evil. The feeling is so intense that the body "suffers" a change. Anger, for example, is one of the 11 passions. A deep anger can blanch the face or redden it. Hate can make one livid. Fear can whiten hairs in a single night.

Passion does have another side, however. The feeling is so vehement that it can drive one either to or away from a sensate good or evil. It propels one, much as hunger causes a dog to lunge at a bone. That is why philosophers also call passions by another word, "emotions" — strong movement or motions to or away from a good or evil seen.

Feeling is a response to sensation; passion is a strong, strong response. Thus in the garden of Gethsemane our



Lord's feelings were so intense as to cause a bloody sweat and move Him to ask the Father — if possible — to remove the cup of suffering.

When our Lord knelt in the garden, His beloved disciples slept, but His enemies were wide awake. He foresaw the physical pain and suffering awaiting Him: the mockery, the blows, the

scourging, the spittle, the crowning with thorns, the crucifixion — which even the calloused Romans called *horrible tormentum*, a frightful torture.

The sins of the world, from Adam to the end of time — hatred flung in the face of love — paraded before His mind's eyes. Then He foresaw the futility of it all for so many, that in spite of His sufferings many would damn themselves. The mental anguish was nearly unbearable. So intense was His Passion He sweat blood.

Three times He sought the consolation of friends. Three times He found them asleep. He felt so alone. His anguish's intensity was almost enough to kill Him. It wrung out of Him the cry, "My soul is filled with sorrow even to the point of death."

Betrayal by one friend, denial by another, abandonment by all — these generated an agony so intense that His sweat became as drops of blood. Man that He was, He felt He had nowhere to turn but to His heavenly Father. Like a little child, He prayed and prayed and called out to Him, "Abba, Papa!" His father sent an angel, not to remove

His sufferings, but to strengthen Him. Jesus lived in the cross' shadow. He seemed preoccupied with death. Three times, like the tolling of funeral bell, on His last trip from Galilee to Jerusalem, He predicted in detail His sufferings, death and resurrections.

The beauty and uniqueness of our Lord's passion and death, however, was that He freely chose it. The prophet Second-Isaiah foretold His acceptance: "I have not rebelled ... I gave my back to those who beat me ... I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame" (R1).

Passion Sunday's message then is that we should freely join Jesus in His sufferings.

In his short story, "The Gift of the Magi," O. Henry wrote: "Life is made up of sobs, sniffles and smiles with the sniffles predominating." Yet if we accept the sniffles, the heartaches, the heartbreaks, the misunderstandings, freely, like the good thief, like Jesus, then our "passion" too shall become like His redemptive. Then our sufferings, like His, will help Love to be loved.

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