

Pruning for an abundant harvest

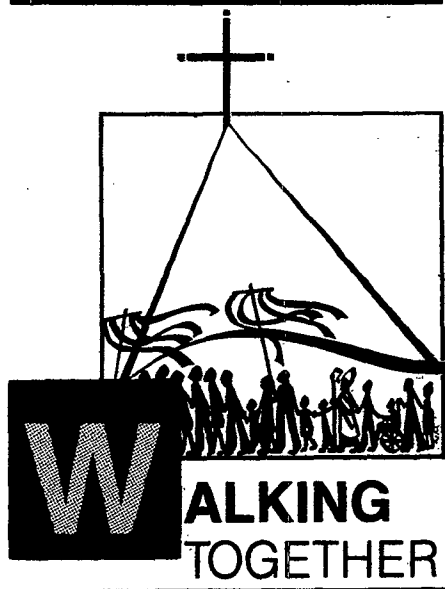
By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

While stopped at a red light one sunny day last week, I watched a gardener pruning branches from an ornamental fruit tree. To my surprise, he didn't shear off a stray branch here and there, leaving the rest of the beautiful tree to prosper. Rather, he hacked away at this poor tree with abandon, lopping off branches and limbs seemingly without plan or forethought.

I'd never make a good gardener. I'd hesitate when the instruction book would tell me to cut the plant in half, to pinch out the growing tip, to cut off branches, to remove blossom buds or to destroy a quarter of the setting fruit. I'd find it easy to prune if a branch were clearly dead or a blossom spent. But when asked to cut out perfectly good wood, to destroy part of a green and healthy plant, to pinch out truly beautiful blossoms, I'd find it hard to do because I'd get wrapped up in the beauty and life of the moment, and fail to imagine the future.

When plants are not trimmed back, they become misshapen and gangly. When flower buds are not pinched off, the final display is far less spectacular. When trees are not pruned to allow sunlight to penetrate, good fruit is not produced.

The Synod process was meant to be a pruning process. Although we brainstormed in small parish groups about many possible ways we could



carry on the church's mission and came up with many excellent recommendations, we pruned these down to three through a large group voting process.

Here in lies the problem. Many parishes held discussions on two or more occasions and generated several sets of three priorities. The Synod Commission had charged each Parish Synod Team — working with the pastor and staff — to arrive at the final three recommendations the parish would submit for the Regional Synod process.

Rather than pruning the various recommendations back to three, however, many Synod teams found ways to combine recommendations to honor

them all.

What a terrible problem they created. The Synod Office received all kinds of misshapen bushes, gangly plants, and monstrous graftings that proved almost impossible to sort into categories. One team combined a recommendation calling for emergency services for the poor with one dealing with sexism. Another lumped affordable housing with Catholic schools. A third called for adult day care and stronger moral teaching by pastors.

A hard lesson can be found here that we must learn again and again. If we do not prune, if we do not take the time to sort out not only the good from the bad but also the best from the better, then we will end up trying to accomplish too much and do too many things poorly or give up altogether.

Our Synod discussions over the past eight months have clearly laid out the many problems in our homes, schools, church communities and society. We know that we do not have the time, energy or resources to tackle all of these problems, but we can do many things.

That is why as parish communities we brainstormed solutions and then — begging God's help — voted to prioritize them. That is why the Regional Synod process took some 3,000 recommendations, combined them, and then asked Regional Synod delegates last December — and again this May — to put them once again in priority order.

At the General Synod in October, 1,400 delegates from all over the diocese will gather to vote one last time on our priorities. In the end, they will hand over to Bishop Matthew H. Clark a complete, prioritized list of 20 or so recommendations. But they will highlight only five. As a local church we will commit ourselves to these five recommendations for the next few years.

To list something as a lower priority does not mean that it is a bad idea. It could still be an excellent suggestion — an outstanding ministry in an area of real need. What it does mean is that, trusting in the Holy Spirit, the Rochester church's faith community has discerned that it must put its time and energy behind other recommendations addressing more pressing needs.

It's very hard to let some good and life-giving ministry go. It's very hard to see a problem and know that you cannot do anything about it. The church, however, asks us not to look so narrowly at the present. To be a life-giving community in the present and the future, the church must set its priorities and move forward in grace. The rest is left in God's hands.

As a faith community we live in the present and the future. Knowing that we have pruned wisely in springtime, we live in joyful hope of the abundant harvest yet to come.

Father Hart is director of the diocesan Synod.

The great sacrament of mercy is confession

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

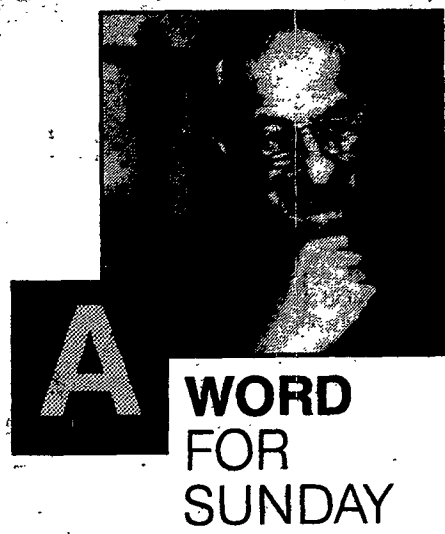
Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:19-31; (R1) Acts 2:42-47; (R2) 1 Peter 1:3-9.

Sister Maria Faustina Kowalska will be beatified in Rome on April 18, 1993. A group of pilgrims and I hope to be there for her beatification. We then hope to travel to Medjugorje. Please keep us in your prayers.

Her beatification is scheduled for April 18 because Sister Faustina quotes our Lord 14 times in her diary as requesting that a "feast of Mercy" be established in the church on the first Sunday after Easter. The feast happens to fall on April 18 this year.

Sister Faustina — her real name was Helen Kowalska — was born in central Poland on Aug. 25, 1905. On Aug. 1, 1925, she entered the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, which minister to disadvantaged girls. When she entered the novitiate in 1926, she was given the religious name of Sister Mary Faustina. On May 1, 1933, she took her perpetual vows.

After only a few weeks of convent life, her health began to deteriorate. In addition to contracting consumption,



she had several bouts with asthma, ending in tuberculosis. In 1938 she spent several months in the sanatorium in Pradnik near Cracow. As her condition worsened, she was brought back to the convent at Cracow and died there on Oct. 5, 1938.

In 1934 Sister Faustina — in obedience to her spiritual director, superiors and God Himself — kept a diary of the revelations and mystical experiences she had been receiving from

Jesus and Mary.

Her diary of more than 600 pages is a message from God to trust Him, to receive His mercy no matter how great our sins, and to be merciful to others.

Here are the ABC's of God's message of mercy.

A — Ask for God's Mercy. Jesus wants us to pray for mercy for ourselves and for the whole world. Jesus revealed three ways to do this: first, praying the chaplet of mercy; second making the novena to Divine Mercy from Good Friday to the Sunday after Easter; and then at 3 p.m. each day uttering a short prayer for His mercy for sinners ("In this hour," Jesus said, "I will refuse nothing to the soul who asks in virtue of my Passion)."

B — Be merciful. Jesus wants us to be loving and forgiving toward others just as He is. Jesus said, "I demand from you deeds of mercy which are to arise out of love for Me. You are to show mercy to your neighbors always and everywhere. You must not shrink from this or try to excuse yourself from it ... Even the strongest faith is of no avail without works ... If a soul does not exercise mercy in some way, it will not obtain My mercy on the day

of judgment."

"The measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you" (Luke 6:38).

C — Complete trust. Jesus demands trust no matter what. God's mercy is like a bottomless well. How much water we draw from the well depends on the size of the bucket we bring to the well. How much we draw from God's mercy depends on our trust.

The sacrament of mercy is confession. Jesus desired that on the "feast of Mercy," the first Sunday after Easter, all souls — especially sinners — perform this sacrament. "The soul that will go to Confession (within eight days before or after Mercy Sunday) and receive Holy Communion shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and the punishment due to them."

What a promise: the forgiveness of sins and the temporal punishment due to them! "Come," Jesus said, "with faith to my representative ... I Myself am waiting there for you. I am only hidden by the priest ... I Myself act in your soul."

God has promised us mercy whenever we ask for it, but He has not promised us tomorrow. Tomorrow, judgment; today, mercy.

Faith is to believe what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe.

St. Augustine



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