

# God's ways are not our ways

By Father Joseph A. Hart  
Guest contributor

Barney is not the only dinosaur familiar to today's kids. Surely you've been amazed at some point by a 6-year-old's dissertation on the allosaurus, the brachiosaurus and the tyrannosaurus rex. Their awesome size and power are enough to capture any child's imagination — and not a few adults.

The fossil records from the age of dinosaurs remind us of how little we understand the ways of God in creation: why such mammoth creatures ever existed, why they disappeared, and why human-kind played no part at all in such a world are riddles without answers.

Mammals are as old as dinosaurs and yet, as a recent *National Geographic* article pointed out, "for 165 million years they would remain minor players on the land. No one knows why. Mammals even then had relatively large brains and presumably more efficient, warm-blooded metabolisms." (183:1:14)

Is it any wonder that the Scriptures remind us again and again that God's ways are not our ways? Or to put it another way, from our point of view, "God writes straight with crooked lines."

It is the same with the church's evolution. In our imaginations we can conjure up early church images that resemble very much contemporary



U.S. Catholicism. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

In the age of the apostles, a board of bishops presided over most local churches. One of the board members was temporarily elected to preside, taking the role of preacher and teacher for that period. The first change to this order was the addition of the deacon, a minister whose primary role was direct service to those in need. This allowed the bishops more time for prayer, preparation, teaching, and administration.

The next change took place early in the second century. The temporary presiding bishop's office evolved into that of a permanent overseer and the board of bishops became an advisory

presbyteral board. During the era that followed, the deacons became more and more prominent, taking over much of the local church's administration.

In many local churches by the third century, male deacons were joined by female counterparts who in their own way assisted the bishop in charity works, teaching and liturgical ministry. The Council of Chalcedon's (451 AD) canons tell us that these deaconesses were full members of the clergy.

Pastoral necessity forced fourth-century bishops to establish communities outside of the cities and — for the first time — to appoint presbyters as the permanent head of those faith communities that were independent of the bishop's own community. Until this time, the bishop alone presided at Eucharist.

It is clear from this very brief overview that the church evolved little by little over many centuries into the diocesan and parish structure that we are so familiar with today. It is clear to us from hindsight that God's Spirit directed this evolution, but at the time of change the path was not so clear to the participants. In fact, sometimes the church proceeded down blind alleys arriving at dead ends.

This happened for two reasons: First of all, we are co-creators of human history with God. Our individual and collective choices made in freedom change the course of history

... and affect the church's shape and its ministry.

Secondly, although we are confident that the Holy Spirit guides the church, that guidance is not always straight forward. God writes straight with crooked lines. Like Abraham, commanded by God to sacrifice his son but at the last minute directed instead to sacrifice a ram, we are sometimes led in one direction only to be redirected at last to another path.

And so it is with our Synod recommendations, including those labeled prophetic. Although we have prayed for God's help in making recommendations to guide our local church's mission, we are in the process of co-creating our future with God by the choices we make in freedom.

Moreover, even if we confidently discern that the Holy Spirit is moving our local church to follow one direction and not another, to affirm one change or to vote down another does not guarantee that our actions accurately foretell the church's future. We may be used by the Spirit to bring about another and entirely unforeseen history.

All this may seem confusing, complicated and cloudy. It's certainly not the way we would do it if we were in charge. But God's ways are not our ways. God writes straight with crooked lines.

Father Hart is director of the diocesan synod.

## Jesus is definitive manifestation of God

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 14:1-12; (R1) Acts 6:1-7; (R2) 1 Peter 2:4-9.

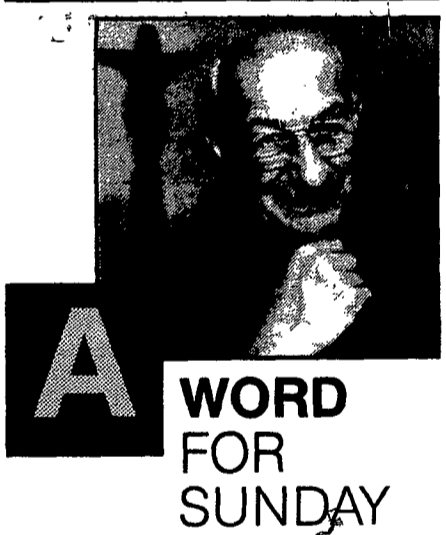
Sunday's Gospel includes part of the talk Jesus gave after the Last Supper.

When a child is afraid, sick or in danger, it wants its mother above all people. The child will call for its mother repeatedly. When confronted with the frightful death of crucifixion in the last moments of His life, Jesus repeatedly called on His Father.

He spoke of His Father 40 times during His Last Supper discourse. The word "Father" occurs 12 times even in the small part of the discourse in Sunday's Gospel.

Philip once asked Jesus, "Show us the Father." Jesus answered, "whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

Jesus is the definitive manifestation of God. We discover what God is through Him. Jesus loved sinners, the Father loves sinners. Jesus showed concern for the poor, the Father is con-



cerned about the poor. Jesus died for us, the Father is the One who sent His Son because He loved us so much. Jesus loved his followers, the Father loves His Son's followers.

What Jesus was, we are meant to be. He revealed the Father to His disciples, so we must reveal the Father to

the world in which we move.

We are called to be a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation." Chosen, to be different; royal, to serve; and consecrated, therefore committed to dare to be different and to serve steadfastly.

But that is a tall order. How can we do it?

The first reading shows how the early Christians translated high ideals into everyday language. When early followers were confronted by the same economic problems we face today they did not just talk, they took action.

The "haves" helped the "have-nots." The rich saw to it that the poor were not needy. In addition, the charity to the poor supplied the rich's needs. To each was given according to his need; and each gave according to his ability.

When discord broke out in the community (it happened even then when the church was in its first fervor) the Palestinian Jewish Christians discriminated in the daily distribution of food against the Jewish Christians who

lived outside of Palestine. The apostles were asked to intervene. Although they did get involved, the apostles did not make the mistake of assuming this responsibility themselves. Instead they created the permanent diaconate to meet the crisis.

A danger in the church today is confusion over the roles of priest and laity. Pope John Paul II observed, "The ministries are wonderful in the Church. The only trouble is that the laity are heading in the wrong direction: they are going into the sanctuary, when they should be going into the world."

The proper sphere of action for the laity is the temporal, the world.

Note that the apostles themselves did not let either economics or dissension distract them from their essential vocation: to pray and to be ministers of the word and sacraments. God's people — not the world — were their proper sphere of activity.

The sequence is this: the clergy must sanctify the laity and the laity must sanctify the world (be to it salt, light and leaven).

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