

We have some unfinished business

By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

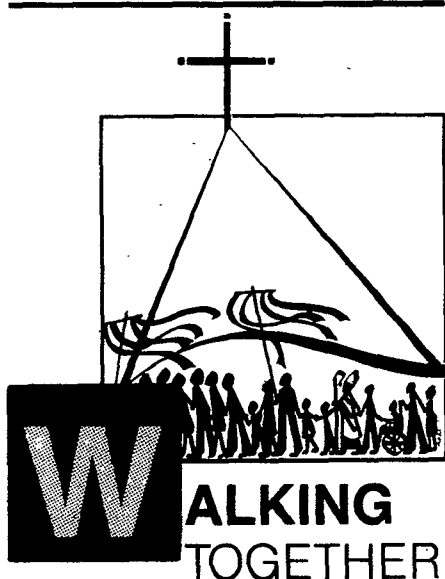
A reporter for the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle* approached me last Saturday, May 22, at the Yates-Ontario-Wayne Regional Synod, held at Canandaigua's St. Mary Church, to ask, "Are you enjoying yourself today?"

I must admit that I was momentarily taken aback. I wasn't expecting a newspaper reporter to be present and I guess I never thought that my feelings were particularly newsworthy. But, despite my hesitation, I answered truthfully, "Yes! I always find these Synod meetings wonderfully exhilarating!"

Much of my time of late has been taken up with organizational details, not just concerning last weekend's 11 Regional Synods, but also with the General Synod scheduled for October 1-3, 1993.

Although I attend lots of meetings, the Synod meetings are different. For me they are special days of listening to what ordinary people are saying about their faith, families and parish communities as well as about the pastoral directions the church should be taking in the future. Their faith and their hope are transparent and their love for the church is real. That is why these meetings are so exhilarating.

One small group discussion from last Saturday, however, still troubles me. Its implications are haunting. The



discussion was on religious education.

Most of the people in my discussion group were from the small towns that dot the Finger Lakes region. They all had the experience of raising children and many had volunteered in their parish's religious education program. They were neither liberal nor conservative. They had no axes to grind. But to a person they felt that their parishes' religious education programs were in trouble.

All of them recognized that we do not live in a vacuum. They understood the negative influences of TV soap operas and enticing advertising. They understood the force of peer pressure and the youth culture's anti-

religious manipulations. They didn't blame the church, the Pastoral Center or Vatican II for all the troubles that youths face today. But nevertheless they honestly feel that we have not done our best in passing on the Catholic tradition to a whole generation of people.

Many of these small town parishes never had a Catholic school or were forced by financial constraints to close their school years ago. Although some form of religious education has always been offered, the administrators of these programs for the most part have had no training in theology or pedagogy.

Despite diocesan requirements, almost none of the volunteer teachers in any of these programs has ever attended certification classes or received any training whatsoever. In addition, parents seem totally confused about what to teach and when to teach it. As a result, according to the people in my discussion group, a whole generation of Catholics in our diocese's smaller towns is almost totally ignorant of their faith.

"For too long," one woman said, "it's been the blind leading the blind."

On the one hand, from my own reading, I know that this is not just a problem in our diocese. Many bishops are alarmed by similar discoveries in their dioceses. Moreover, a recent nationwide study of 11th- and 12th-grade students enrolled in religious education programs found that

in the areas of Scripture, Christian doctrine, Christian life, and general religious knowledge they scored only 61 percent, 59 percent, 65 percent and 59 percent, respectively. (*Origins* 22/35: 596)

But, on the other hand, something significant is being said here, calling into question the way we do things as a diocese. I looked through the original parish recommendations and found that those recommendations calling for better catechist formation and more qualified religious education personnel, for example, were submitted mostly by rural and small town parishes.

Perhaps as a local church we are spending too much of our time and energy on those who already have resources and not enough on those who have so little available to them. Perhaps we've moved too quickly to start new initiatives without making sure we were covering the basics first. Perhaps we have not yet come to grips with the absolute necessity of training our volunteer catechist army. Or maybe we're afraid of demanding more of our volunteers for fear that we might end up with none.

Whatever the causes, we must find solutions soon. Children's education in the ways of faith is one of the most important things we do as church. In my opinion, if we respond to this unfinished business alone, then our whole Synod process will have been worth it.

At least six 'pentecosts' occur in Acts

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

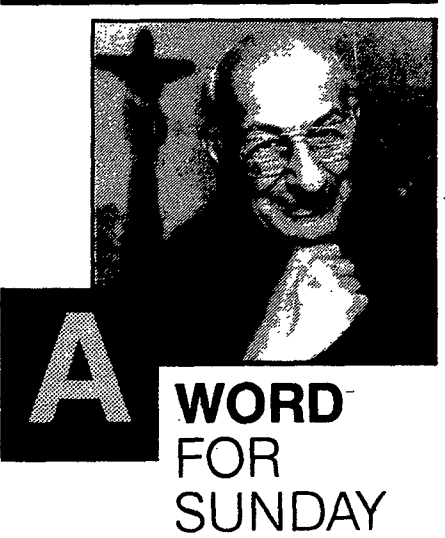
Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:19-23; (R1) Acts 2:1-11; (R2) 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13.

Acts of Apostles has been called the "Gospel of the Holy Spirit." In Acts we see that the Holy Spirit follows a very definite pattern. First, He comes more than once. Secondly, He always comes in answer to prayer, especially community prayer. And thirdly, after His coming, an appreciable growth in the church's unity, love, joy, courage and expansion always occurs.

Sometimes the Pentecost story creates the impression that the Holy Spirit came upon the church only once. Actually, in Acts, at least six "pentecosts" occur.

First came the *Jewish Pentecost*, with its wind and fire — the one with which most of us are familiar. The wind filled the house where the early church community had assembled to symbolize the Spirit's filling the church.

The fire (long the symbol of divinity for Jews) with flames flapping, bellying and tugging, like pennants in



the wind, burst like a sky bomb on the Fourth of July into a hundred sparks of flaming tongues, resting on each person to symbolize the one Spirit's diversity of operation — "different gifts but the same Spirit" (R2).

This Pentecost was so dramatic, because it was prefaced by the greatest prayers that ever went from earth to heaven. It was the Mother of God

and the Twelve who prayed in the Cenacle. They prayed not just for an hour, nor a day, but for nine days, a novena of prayers. No wonder they drew down fire from heaven.

This great Pentecost was followed by the *Little Pentecost*. After Peter had cured a lame man, he was warned never to preach of Jesus. Boldly Peter ignored the warning, went to the church and told his fellow Christians what had happened.

In response they sang a hymn of thanksgiving and they all prayed — not for boldness to preach the God's word. "As they prayed, the place where they were gathered shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31).

Next came the *Samaritan Pentecost*. The deacon Philip had evangelized Samaria. Peter and John came to confirm the baptized Samaritans. Both prayed that the Samaritans might receive the Holy Spirit; and, when they laid hands on them, they did. So wondrous was the effect that Simon, a magician, offered money to share in

the apostles' power (Acts 8:14-24).

Then came the *Pauline Pentecost*. Saul prayed after he was struck blind on the road to Damascus. Because he prayed, Ananias was sent to him to restore his sight and fill him with the Holy Spirit.

As the Holy Spirit prepared Paul to become the Gentiles' apostle, Peter was moved to the church's head to receive the Gentile Cornelius into the church, thus opening the church to the Gentiles. The Spirit's coming upon Cornelius resulted again from prayer. We might call this the *Roman Pentecost* (Acts 10).

Briefly, the Holy Spirit intervened in every one of the early church's major decisions.

Like a mighty wind, the Spirit is blowing through the church today, purifying it, causing her children to focus more on what goes on within a person than on what goes on outside of him.

"To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (R2).

Well might we pray the responsorial refrain: "Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth."

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