

Stewardship can be the answer

By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

I find that I am dreading the end of June. For the second year in a row a number of good people will be let go at the diocesan Pastoral Center on June 30 because of the Thanks Giving Appeal's appeal projected shortfall.

This trend worries me for a number of reasons. First of all, in my opinion, it leaves too few people at the Pastoral Center to oversee the local church's essential ministries.

Secondly, the number of people who have been donating to the Thanks Giving Appeal has dropped from a high of 72,000 to last year's shocking low figure of 55,000. This means that only 43 percent of our 129,000 active households is supporting the local church's ministry.

Finally, with October's General Synod about to recommend to Bishop Matthew H. Clark the creation or expansion of ministry in a number of very important areas, I fear that if this trend continues there will be insufficient funds to put our new priorities into practice. This would be a tragedy of major proportions.

For most of our country's history the majority of Roman Catholics were quite poor, but churches and schools were built nonetheless because people gave what they could and raised the rest through raffles, bake sales and bingo. However, things have changed dramatically in the past generation.



Demographically, Roman Catholics are now listed among the most affluent of Americans yet our giving has not kept pace with our prosperity. Survey after survey shows that Catholics are far less generous to the church than are Protestants.

A recent Lily Foundation study found that "over half of the registered Catholic households who were studied are giving under \$100 per year — less than \$2 per week" even though "these are households with an average combined income of \$41,000 a year!" (*Origins* 22:30:522) Why is this so?

Some people feel that Catholics in the past have often given to the church out of a sense of obligation

and not out of a sense of gratitude. We have given to assuage our guilt and not return to the Lord a portion of what we have so generously received. As a consequence, we give reluctantly and sparingly.

A few months ago the U.S. bishops wrote a pastoral letter, trying to situate our contributions to the church on a firmer theological basis. Obligation and guilt play no part in their instruction. Rather, they argue that as Jesus's disciples, we are moved to practice responsible stewardship in every aspect of our lives. Wanting to care for all that God has entrusted to us — our vocations, our health, our intellectual and spiritual well-being, our material goods and resources, the natural environment, our cultural heritage, the community of disciples — becomes a total way of life that requires continuing conversion. (cf. *Origins* 22:27:463)

The bishops understand that raising money to fund the church's ministries is secondary to the conversion that needs to take place in our hearts. They are saying that a concept such as stewardship only makes sense when our faith influences the way we live day-to-day. Stewardship, really, is not about giving money; it's about bringing balance to our lives. It's about living our lives as God has called us to live in Christ Jesus.

It would be too easy to say that the stewardship problem all rests with the Catholics in the pew. As Fred

Hofheinz pointed out: "If giving as a percentage of income is indeed a valid indicator of people's commitment to their church, then, friends, we Catholics are in serious trouble." (*Origins* 22:30:522) Sociology tells us that we are committed to what we feel a part of, to what we feel some ownership. If Catholics do not feel a part of the church, then that is everyone's problem.

In the Church of Rochester, our three-year Synod process has not been just about forming a pastoral plan for the future. It has also tried to act out the understanding of church taught by the Second Vatican Council. Flowing from our baptismal commitment, we are all responsible for the church, its mission, its teaching, its life and health. By God's gracious goodness, we are the church, the Body of Christ. More ownership than that cannot be obtained.

But it remains to be seen whether the Synod will have any permanent influence on the way people think about the church and about the ways that people involve themselves in the church. It remains to be seen whether the Church of Rochester, in all its local communities, will develop the human and financial resources it desperately needs to carry out its mission.

It remains to be seen whether the seventh Synod was all talk or whether we — as a local church — will begin to put our money, talents and resources where our mouth is.

Love's transforming power can overcome

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 10:26-33; (R1) Jeremiah 20:10-13; (R2) Romans 5:12-15.

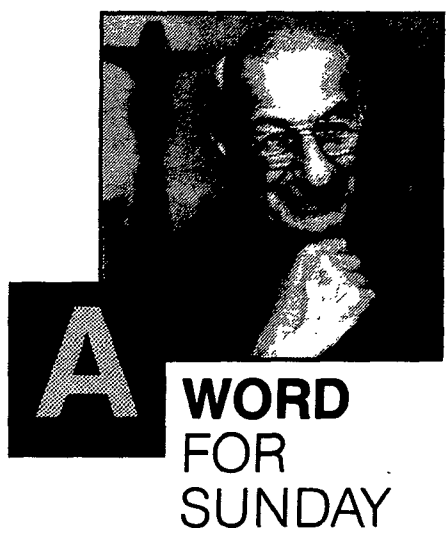
Sunday's readings call us to be courageous. The story of Jeremiah says, "Don't let your job get you down" (R1). St. Paul says, "Don't let the evil all around you get you down" (R2). And Jesus says, "Don't let people persecuting you get you down" (R3).

The key to changing the climate of one's job, the moral environment, and enemies is to retaliate with love. It is what you are on the inside that counts, not what you are on the outside.

Literature is filled with stories of love's transforming power. Love transforms "La Traviata;" love changes Eliza Doolittle into "My Fair Lady;" and Aldonza becomes Dulcinea because of the love of the "Man of La Mancha." The same theme recurs in Walt Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*.

The message again is that real beauty comes from within, not from without — and that it is love from within that changes the "beast" into a prince.

In the movie *Beauty and the Beast*, a



spell traps a handsome young prince in the body of a beast. He is miserable and lonely until Beauty comes to his castle and lives there in order to save her father's life.

The beast falls in love with her, treats her kindly, then saves her life from a pack of ravenous wolves. One kindness after another to Beauty soon wins her love for the beast. He reveals his kindness by allowing her to leave

the castle to visit her father.

During her absence, the beast is attacked and wounded mortally. Beauty learns the beast's life is in danger and rushes back to the castle to warn him. But she arrives too late and finds him on the ground dying. She throws herself upon him and pleads with him to live because she loves him and wants to marry him. Her expression of love breaks the spell and the beast is transformed once more into the handsome prince. And, of course, they live happily ever after.

We are the "beasts" of today — deformed so often by our meanness to others, our selfishness, our egoism. Christ is Beauty — selfless, humble, meek, loving all of us unconditionally. Again and again, He says to us, "Do not be afraid. You are worth much more than to be treated like a beast." These words of love are enough to break the spell of the world and the devils over us.

Jesus compared us to birds, not just any birds, but sparrows — the cheapest birds one could buy in His time. Jesus said His father takes care of these seemingly worthless birds, and knows when any one of them lands on the

ground and hops about. Then He argued, "How much more valuable are you! Greater by far is His care for you."

This same God values every good thought and desire that springs from the human heart. This thought is enough to transform many a "beast" into a prince, a child of God.

In 1990, the late Pete Pavia of Rochester was selected for the Golden Whistle Award as the world's top basketball referee. During the Final Four NCAA college basketball championship in 1992, he received the U.S. Basketball Writers Association's "Most Courageous" Award.

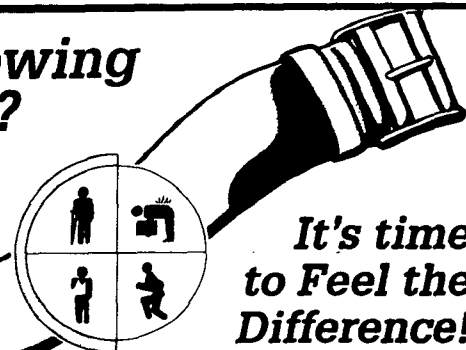
Mr. Pavia was voted "most courageous" because he valiantly struggled with cancer since 1979. During this battle, he lost a kidney, thyroid, and part of his left lung. Instead of getting down on himself, however, he got up and turned to helping other cancer victims. He organized four sports celebrity dinners to raise funds for special camps helping cancer-stricken children.

When you feel worthless, don't give up — get out of self by loving and giving to others. Man is more than an animal; he is capable of heroic courage against insurmountable obstacles.

Read about St. Paul's message to the Gentiles in next week's **Kids' Chronicle!**

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