

Authors overlook the spiritual in study of U.S. religions

The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy, by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark; Rutgers University Press, 1992; 328 pages; \$22.95.

By E. Leo McMannus
Guest contributor

Back in 1827, New York state's own Monroe County was classified by the *Protestant American Home Missionary Society's* journal as a "moral waste," and "destitute of both religious and moral principles."

The indictment was unjustified. Although Baptist and Methodist minis-

ters were active in the area, they were a source of embarrassment to the eastern seaboard's mainline churches, with their well-educated and well-paid clergy — Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians — who were not self-supporting in New York state's western reaches.

This conflict between early America's mainline churches and the "upstart sects" of the Baptists and Methodists makes for an interesting, provocative, and controversial account in this holy rivalry for souls.

By the middle of the last century, the "winners," according to the subti-

tle, with the greatest increase in membership, were the sects, and the "losers" were the mainline churches. Catholics, who merit one of the book's seven chapters, showed a modest percentage of increase in 1850.

By the end of this "game" (1985), when the authors blew the final whistle, the "losers" are again the old mainline churches, and the "winners" are the evangelical sects such as the Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, Church of the Nazarene, and Church of God.

The Catholics post even a smaller percentage of increase.

Thus, the score: Sects 1, Churches 0. Why?

Both sociologists of religion, authors Roger Finke at Purdue and the University of Washington's Rodney Stark, give their detailed answer in their final chapter, "Why 'Mainline' Denominations Decline." Sects win because they demand more of their members, while churches lose because they exist too comfortably with their environment. This situation, they argue, has been going on since colonial times and not just since the 1960s, as others have claimed.

Continued on page 14

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Does the Synod promote the Catholic faith?

The Diocese of Rochester has been preparing for a General Synod which will meet on October 1-3, 1993. While the Synod's general themes of family life, parish life and social justice require our community's attention, the St. Thomas More Lawyers Guild is concerned that the synodal process has incorporated matters that are not appropriate for a Diocesan Synod. Procedurally, there appears to be a disregard of Canon Law and of the precedents of prior Synods. Substantively, issues have arisen that place in question this Diocese's loyalty to the Papacy and the Magisterium.

Let us turn first to the procedural concerns. There is no question that a Bishop may convene a Diocesan Synod. The question is: what is the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Diocesan Synod, and of those who participate in it?

Currently, Canons 460 through 468 of the Code of Canon Law govern the conduct and scope of a Diocesan Synod. Clearly, the bishop alone has legislative authority, and all other participants, lay or clerical, serve only in a consultative capacity.

The last Synod in this diocese occurred in 1954 under the jurisdiction of Bishop Kearney. The 1954 Synod established diocesan rules for the behavior of priests, and also fixed rules for the administration of the sacraments. Historically and canonically, the function of a Diocesan Synod is to attend to administrative and regulatory problems within a diocese. The Diocesan Synod was never a vehicle or mechanism to explore religious doctrine, or to examine or criticize the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the church on the questions of faith and morals. The Diocesan Synod has no authority or competence to determine the priority of doctrines in the Catholic faith. Such judgments, if they are to be made at all, are for general Councils of the entire church, and for the Ex-Cathedra pronouncements of a validly consecrated Pope.

The subject matter of the legislation framed at our Diocesan Synod should concern only the preservation of faith and discipline. Under no circumstances may such a Synod define any new article of faith or decide any doctrinal point in dispute.

The current Synod literature which Bishop Clark has published comes dangerously close to challenging the Magisterium. In the spring 1993 Synod booklet, the following statement appears:

"There was a time when we considered everything we believed and everything we did to be of equal importance. We now know better. Some things we thought to be essential to the Catholic Faith we now see as peripheral. Not everything in belief requires the same assent. In Catholic teaching, the Council wrote, there exists an order, or hierarchy of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian Faith."

While the Bishop is the sole legislative authority in a Diocesan Synod, such authority must be viewed in the context of a Bishop's powers and responsibilities under Canon Law.

The primary function of a Bishop is to defend and promulgate the teachings of the church, derived from the Magisterium, and no basis can be found in Canon law for experimental or innovative approaches toward the teachings of the Church, or the liturgy.

The Bishopric is primarily a "pastoral office," with the Bishop to serve as Shepherd for "all the Christian faithful who are committed to his care," and with the additional expectation that he will "act with kindness and charity toward those who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church, fostering and ecumenism as it is understood by the Church."

Canon 386 states that it is the function of the Diocesan Bishop to "present and explain to the faithful the truths of the faith which are to be believed and applied to moral issues ..." and no basis can be found in Canon Law for any implication that the "truths of the faith" which he is to present and explain are any other than those consistently promulgated by the Magisterium.

In addition to the teaching function, the Bishop also has imposed upon him by Canon Law responsibility for the discipline of the faithful, which responsibility is more specifically set forth in Canon 392, which reads as follows:

"Since he must protect the unity of the universal Church, the Bishop is bound to promote the common discipline of the whole Church and therefore to urge the observance of all ecclesiastical laws. He is to be watchful lest abuses creep into ecclesiastical discipline, especially concerning the ministry of the word, the celebration of the sacraments and sacramentals, the worship of God and devotion to the saints, and, also the administration of property."

In applying the above powers and responsibilities of a Bishop under Canon Law to the function of a Diocesan Synod, it is clear that any attempt to develop a consensus on any issues of moral law, Church discipline or liturgy, contrary to those currently being promulgated by the Magisterium, is in clear violation of the Canon Law of the Church.

As the Diocesan Synod process unfolds, it becomes clearer that the goal of the Synod is to attack substantive issues of Catholic doctrine, discipline and faith. Specifically, the two "Prophetic Responses" that have emerged from this current Synod call for changes in Church doctrine regarding the ordination of women and the discipline of celibacy for priests.

You may be asking the same question we ask, namely, why has the laity of this diocese been asked to participate in a Synod process that allows for the expression of dissent from Catholic doctrine? As noted above, Canon Law and our church tradition limits the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of a Diocesan Synod to matters of administrative and regulatory problems within a diocese. Therefore, a Diocesan Synod has no authority to dissent from Catholic doctrine.

You may also be asking another disturbing question, namely, as the Bishop's primary function is to defend and promulgate the teachings of the Church as derived from the Magisterium, how can a Diocesan Synod, as convened by a Bishop, permit the synod process to substantively dissent from Church doctrine without violating Canon Law?

The Diocese of Rochester has disturbing history of dissent from the Roman Catholic Church. This rendezvous with dissent began with the Call to Action, a convocation of some 1,300 delegates who met in Detroit in October 1976, to recommend, *inter alia*, ordination of women and married priests. The Diocese of Rochester, then under the authority of Bishop Joseph Hogan, sent delegates to this convocation on behalf of our diocese.

The Call to Action was a call to revolution, a call to dissent. It was dominated by many special interest groups who were not representative of the Catholic Church. Yet many of the recommendations of that convocation, despite being inapposite to the teachings of the Catholic faith, have been pursued by our own diocese. Whether it be by standing beside and supporting Father Charles Curran, who was removed by the Catholic Church from his teaching position due to his dissenting theology, or the granting of an honorary degree at St. Bernard's Institute in May 1992, to Dr. Rosemary Radford Ruether, a well-known feminist figure who is also very critical of Catholic doctrine, our diocese has condoned views, based upon the whims and caprices of a misdirected laity, which are tolerant of secularism and which encourage liturgical abuses in company with dissenting and radical clerics.

The Synodal process in this Diocese is faulty because it involves the placing of innumerable propositions before a group of laity for discussion absent any appropriate guidance in conformity with the teachings of the Church, as derived from the Magisterium.

Perhaps you are also fearful that the present Synod's attempt to bring the Church into the modern world connotes estrangement from Rome. Many Catholic faithful are fearful that as long as the atmosphere of dissent pervades, the Church of Rochester will resemble less and less the Catholic Church, which is defined in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, Section 8, as an institution which is hierarchal in nature and governed by the Pope and bishops who are in union with the Pope.

Bishop Clark recently stated that with regard to the issue of female ordination, his position is "in tension" with that of the Holy Father, simultaneously criticizing the wisdom of the Pope's position (*Democrat and Chronicle*, April 11, 1993).

Are not Roman Catholics in this diocese entitled to have their diocese in union with the Church?

We urge Bishop Clark to use this Synod as an opportunity to end our Diocese's era of dissent, and renew our union with the Pope by defending and promulgating the rightful teachings of the Church.

Very Truly Yours,
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