

Synod occurs when Spirit is ready

By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

An official from one of the United States' largest dioceses called last week to tell me that his local church will not be calling a Synod after all. He was very disappointed because he had already put several years into the planning and was discouraged because he felt a Synod would give his community a much needed "shot in the arm."

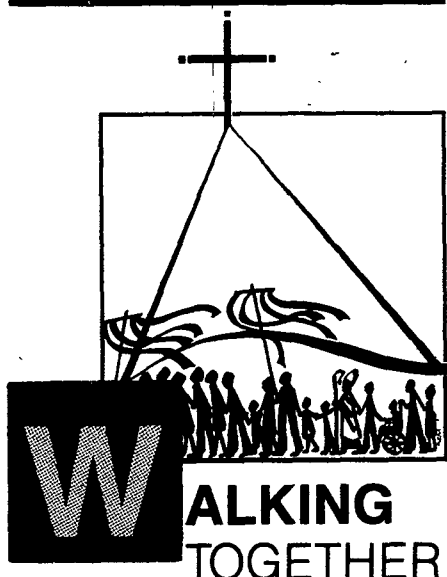
"The Presbyteral Council was the problem," he said. "They voted it down. People from our chancery convinced them that it was too much effort and too expensive. In reality, the chancery people are afraid of people messing with their turf."

I told him not to get rid of his plans and to be patient. A Synod will happen in his diocese when the Holy Spirit is ready.

I used two examples to illustrate my point.

The first concerned the Second Vatican Council. It seems that the possibility of an ecumenical council had been in the air for a long time. According to published sources, the Holy Office's Monsignor Alfredo Ottaviani had proposed it to Pope Pius XII as early as 1948.

Pius thought the proposal a good idea and went so far as to set up an exploratory commission and to consult privately with 65 select bishops



around the world about whether a council was opportune. Although most of these consultants gave their wholehearted endorsement, Pius XII eventually decided that a council would be too complicated and costly and so he settled for an elaborate Holy Year in 1950 instead.

It was left to his 76-year-old successor, Pope John XXIII, to actually convoke the Second Vatican Council 11 years later. But unlike Pope Pius' council, which was planning to condemn the modern world's errors, the council Pope John summoned on Jan. 25, 1959, was to be a pastoral council in which the church would update itself while in dialogue with the mod-

ern world.

If John's plan seems quite vague, journalist and biographer Peter Hebblethwaite has recently written that "Pope John had no idea what the content of the Council should be. He cherished the illusion that the Council would be over in a single session, lasting two months at the most. His readiness to improvise got the Council under way but it could never have brought it to a conclusion." (Paul VI, p.301)

The Council's success was really Paul VI's doing. Hebblethwaite claims that Paul VI (who was elected after the council's first session), knowing all the work it would entail, would never have called an ecumenical council. And yet it was Paul's organizational ability that brought the potentially unwieldy council of almost 2,500 bishops to its successful conclusion after only four sessions.

It is not possible to say with absolute assurance that this pattern is the result of the Holy Spirit's action, but I have often thought that it is much more than a coincidence. It is my firm belief that when the Holy Spirit was ready, the Council happened.

The second illustration concerned our own Synod. On Nov. 4, 1986, Bishop Matthew H. Clark proposed to our Presbyteral Council that the time was right for a Synod to develop "a commonly held mission statement and supporting pastoral plan which

will guide us toward the year 2000." After considerable debate, they turned him down. They felt that a Synod was not needed.

Two-and-a-half years later, Presbyteral Council members — on their own initiative — reversed themselves. On May 2, 1989, they passed a resolution advising Bishop Clark that "the most adequate way to address the issue of unified diocesan pastoral planning would be through the convening of a Synod of the Church of Rochester."

This too may be a coincidence. I have no proof to the contrary. But if you were ever to hear the convoluted story of how a Presbyteral Council's subcommittee was named to deal with the pastoral planning issue to begin with, you would be as convinced as I that the Holy Spirit was at work. When the Spirit was ready, our Synod was scheduled.

I don't know if these stories were of any help to my priest friend but they are certainly reminders to me of how much the church's life is influenced by the Spirit's promptings. I admit that I am often too impatient with the church. I want to see now the concrete signs of growth and renewal. I want the ancient institution to be ever new.

But I have learned patience from our Synodal process, patience with the Spirit. I will gladly testify to one and all that good things happen in the church when the Spirit is ready.

Little kindnesses can reap big rewards

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

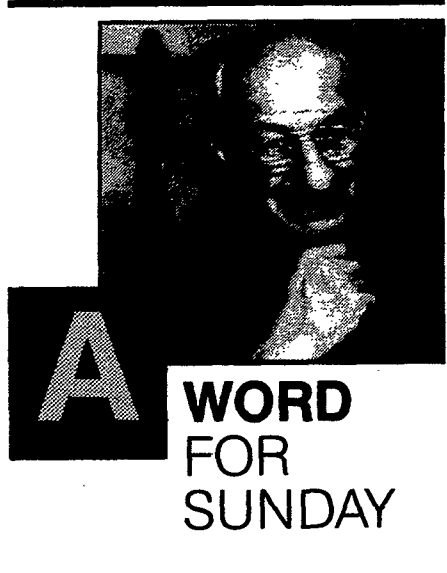
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 10:37-42; (R1) 2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16; (R2) Romans 6:3-4, 8-11.

On April 18, 1993, our Holy Father beatified Sister Mary Faustina Kowalska, the apostle of God's mercy. Her message's ABCs are: A — ask for mercy; B — be merciful; and C — complete confidence in God.

I wonder if our children today are being taught mercy's seven corporal and spiritual works. Jesus said to Sister Faustina, "I demand works of mercy." The Sunday readings say the same thing.

In the ancient world, kindness — especially hospitality to travelers — was a cardinal virtue. To deny food and lodging to a stranger was to run the risk of turning away even the gods, so the ancients believed.

Ovid tells the legend of how Jupiter, the father of the Olympian gods, and wing-footed Mercury, the messenger of the gods, one day walked through a village in Phrygia disguised as pilgrims. No one would give them food or shelter save a poor man, Philemon, and his wife, Baucis. In anger the gods destroyed the vil-



lage with a flood, but spared Philemon and Baucis and gave them whatever they desired.

Legend becomes fact in Christianity. God does walk the Earth today, but in the disguise of our neighbors. Jesus said, "Who welcomes you, welcomes Me." He so identifies Himself with each of us that He considers what is done to the least as done to Himself.

A woman in the prophet Elisha's

days welcomed the prophet into her home. She lived in Shunem, a village located a few miles south of what is now Nazareth. A simple woman, she was so unassuming that we do not even know her name. Yet she was a woman of influence, stemming in no small measure from her kindness, concern and care for others. Her piety manifested itself when she gave her husband as a reason for offering hospitality to Elisha that "he is a holy man of God."

The fact that she responded to Elisha as she did revealed her heart was kindred to his. A person whose soul is stirred by Beethoven's stormy thunder or lifted up by Mozart's sprightly strains has something of the musician in himself. The person who can appreciate the grand organ music of "Paradise Lost" or the rhapsodical sublimity of "The Hound of Heaven" has something of the poet in himself. So one who can do little deeds of kindness out of love for God has much of godliness in himself.

Kindness need not cost much. How simple was the woman of Shunem. She made no effort to impress the prophet with her wealth. All she gave him were the bare necessities: a bed in which to sleep; a table and a lamp for

eating and working; and a chair for sitting and relaxing. "How many things," said Socrates, "there are, which I do not need!" Jesus spoke of only a cup of cold water.

What really counts more than service rendered is the motive prompting them. A cup of cold water given because one is a disciple of Jesus; a bed, a chair, a table, a lamp given because one is a prophet — ah, great shall be the reward.

Elisha rewarded the woman for her little kindnesses. Elisha promised that God would give her a son, her heart's desire. Later on in the story, we learn that the boy died from sunstroke in his teen years. After the woman from Shunem went to Elisha, the prophet brought the boy back to life, heaping reward upon reward for her kindness.

Physiologists tell us we have two sets of nerves: the afferent and the efferent. One brings impressions to us from without (afferent); the other acts on the muscles and responds to the external stimuli (efferent). Life is receiving and giving; both activities are indispensable.

To receive and not to give is to die, like the Dead Sea. To give and not receive is impossible, especially if the giving is done in Jesus's name.

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