

# Recommendation causes surprise

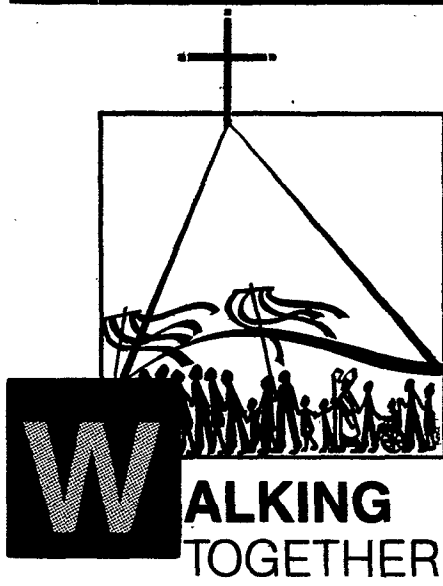
By Father Joseph A. Hart  
Guest contributor

Last week the priorities of the May 22 Regional Synod delegates were announced. Although a couple of cases surprised me, I am once again delighted with the results.

Because our local church has long prided itself in its fair treatment of women — the first U.S. parish with a woman pastoral associate; the first American Catholic seminary to grant a ministry degree to a woman; one of the first U.S. pastoral letters on women's concerns, and so on — I was surprised at the very strong vote for a recommendation calling for the local church to improve upon its treatment of women. The recommendation says that even this diocese has a long way to go.

Prejudice against women has infected the church almost since the beginning. With some kind of malice, an early unknown hand added 1 Co. 14:34-5 to Paul's original Corinthian letter to the make sure that women kept silence in the churches. "If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home."

As a consequence and despite the fact that the historical Paul had called some early Christian women "co-workers," "ministers" and "apostles," the author of 1 Timothy could write in Paul's name: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men" (3:11).



From that point onward, everyone justified their prejudice by quoting Paul. For example, Origen, the third-century Egyptian theologian, relying on these "pauline" texts, wrote: "It is improper for a woman to speak in the assembly, no matter what she says, even if she says admirable things, or even saintly things; that is of little consequence since they come from the mouth of a woman."

When the church's expanding ministry required women's official service — to visit Christian women in non-Christian households, to help with the anointing and plunging under the water in the baptismal ceremony, to help women and children find a place in the assembly, to be an intermediary

between Christian women and the hierarchy's male members, to instruct women and children in the ways of faith — the church appointed deaconesses, albeit very reluctantly.

The church emphasized that it had male deacons "for the performance of most things required" (Didasc. 3:1-13). In fact, the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. warns that these new deaconesses have only been "granted this status, for they do not receive any imposition of hands, so they are in all respects to be numbered among the laity" (c.19).

Although the prejudice against women had scarcely diminished, the deaconess' ministry had become accepted in the East by the time of the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.). It was so well accepted, in fact, that they had become members of the clergy: they were ordained and invested in the deacon's stole.

In his classic work *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, University of Louvain theologian Roger Gryson has written, "... in the milieu termed 'Syrian-Byzantine,' from the end of the fourth century in any case, women deacons received an ordination analogous to that of men deacons, and, as a consequence, if one refers to the 'concepts of modern theology,' it was a sacramental ordination. Since this is not a marginal fact or a fantasy rejected by legitimate authority, but, on the contrary, an institution peacefully accepted by a

large part of Christianity for several centuries, one can deduce from it, it seems to me, that when the Church judges it relevant, women can receive the sacrament of orders for a ministry of the diaconal type, whose limits the Church can establish" (p.120).

The church would still not permit women to teach men until modern times. In our day most of our Catholic school teachers are women and Catherine of Siena and Theresa of Avila have been named "Doctors of the Church." Until the 17th century, all religious women were kept from the mainstream of church life, confined by law to the cloister.

In our day, religious women are physicians, nurses, attorneys, social workers and parish ministers who form the very heart of the Christian community. Until the Second Vatican Council, women were not allowed in the sanctuary during the Mass' celebration. In our day, women are lecturers, cantors, eucharistic ministers and — in a priest's absence — often presiders at Communion services.

It has taken many painful centuries to shake off prejudice's effects against women but, thanks be to God, the church is slowly succeeding. But there is still much to be done. Our Synod recommendation urges the church, "recognizing its own inadequacies in the past, (to) take the lead in addressing the social sin of sexism."

The full recognition of women's ministry may be the best place to start.

# God's word will produce abundant harvest

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

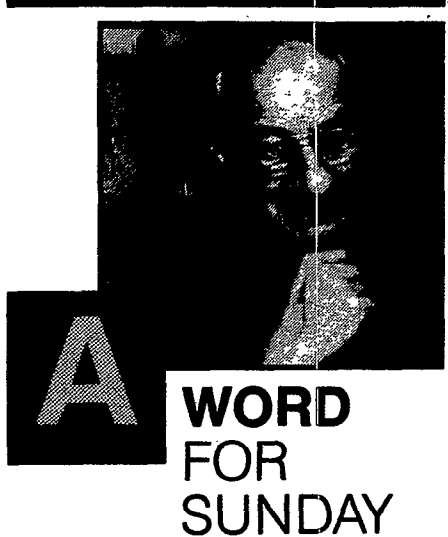
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mt. 13/1-23; (R1) Is. 55/10-11; (R2) Rom. 8/18-23.

Sunday's parable of the sower and the seed answers a perennial question: "If Christianity is true, why hasn't it worked for 2,000 years? It has preached love and still we have wars, violence, terrorism, the direct killing of the innocent unborn, and so on and on."

The parable presents a revolutionary concept: the coming of God's kingdom is not His work alone. It is the joint product of God and man — His giving and our receiving, His powerful word (the seed) and our willing response (the soil).

Thus Chesterton could say, "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found hard and not tried."

Water has been around ever since people walked this earth — and still, we see dirty people. Has water failed? Jesus' humanity definitely limited His activities. He could, for example, be in only one place at a time. So we



human beings can put limits on God's activities.

There are three kinds of obstacles people offer to the word, to God's coming among us.

The first is culture — the parable's footpath. Culture is the values, priorities and assumptions "worshipped" by a society. Thus culture is related to "cult." A culture is something "cultivated" over centuries. It is society's

habits — the footpath made by walking over the same ideas year in and year out. Like a habit, it is hard to break out from a culture, to be counterculture.

We try to break through the footpath when we accept Jesus' way of life as the true way. The personalist says, "My way is the right way." The culturist says, "Society's way is the right way." The Christian says, "Jesus is the way."

The second obstacle to the word is rocky ground. Preaching a sermon is like throwing gravel on a turtle's back. Few words stick. No roots, because we don't think about a sermon.

About \$75 billion is spent every year on advertising in the U.S. It must pay. Yet advertisers think it good, if from a hundred letters sent, they get one response. Their rule of thumb is to "keep at it:" tell your story, then tell it again, then tell what you've told them, then tell them that you've told them. Be happy if you get one response out of a hundred tellings.

The church is not so stupid when it commands weekly Mass and homily. The word must be sown in and out of

season — so says Madison Avenue. Our Lord said it would produce a harvest.

The third obstacle to the word is thorns — busyness! If we reason we're doing all right without God, we will have no time for Him. But reason is in the head; generally the real reasons for not having time for God are moral — in the heart. When the heart is not right within God, then worshipping in a Christian community whose ideals are with God becomes an irritant. Eventually, one leaves the church.

The best way to uproot the thorns is by mortification. At Medjugorje, Our Lady repeatedly asked for fasting. To deny the thorns water will soon cause them to wilt and wither.

Now the parable was not meant to stress the obstacles to God's word. Rather, the parable's point was really this: Despite all the obstacles, God's word will produce an abundant harvest. As the rain and the snow make the earth fertile and fruitful, so my word shall not return to me void (R1).

Our Lord was countering any tendency toward discouragement in the sowing of the word.

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