

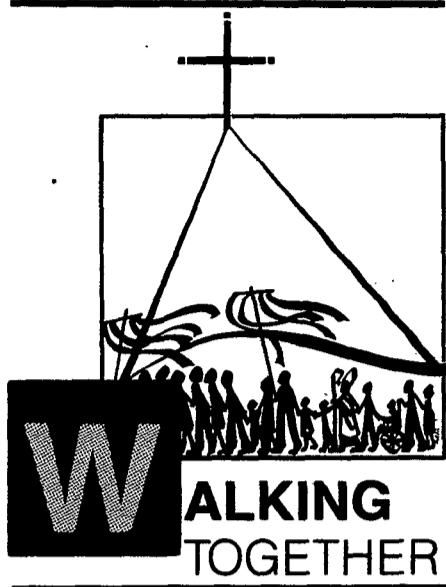
Small communities are a priority

By Msgr. William H. Shannon
Guest contributor

When Jesus said farewell to his disciples before going to his death, he did so at a meal held in the home of one of his friends. When Jesus' early disciples gathered to remember the Risen One, as he had commanded, they "broke bread" (a term used to describe the Eucharist) in their homes and possessed everything in common.

A wonderful sense of bonding occurs within a small community. One of the houses where they gathered belonged to Mary, the mother of John Mark. We read in Acts 12 that, when Peter was miraculously freed from prison, he went to Mary's house, where he knew the community would be gathered in prayer. He knocked on the door and the maid, Rhoda, was so overjoyed to see him that she ran to tell the others, forgetting to unlatch the door. Poor Peter kept knocking at the door and finally they recovered from their astonishment and let him into the house.

This pattern of the house church was not peculiar to Jerusalem. Some of the churches set up by Paul were also house-churches. It is fairly clear from the evidence we have that the house-church was the original unit of Christianity. The words "parish" and "diocese" came into existence later. In fact, they were borrowed from the



structure of the Roman Empire. But it is worth noting that the Greek word for "house is *oikos*. The word "parish" (derived from the Greek word *paroikia*) is a combination of *oikos* and the preposition "para," which means "beyond." *Par oikos*, therefore, means literally "beyond the house." Christians, with the increase in numbers, had to go "beyond" the house-church to form a "parish." Even the word "diocese" comes from *oikos*, with the preposition "dia" added, which means "across." *Dia oikos*, therefore, means reaches across the houses.

Thus, one could make a strong case, just from etymology, that both parish and diocese presumed the existence of small communities of Christian people.

A recent story in *The New York Times* told of the millions of Catholics in Brazil (once nearly 100 percent Catholic), who have joined various evangelical groups. One of the reasons for this is that the experience of community in these smaller groups is much more attractive than the anonymity of big churches.

The church in Brazil is most successful in areas where small communities or "base communities," as they are called, are organized. At Medellin (1968) and in Puebla (1979) the Latin American Bishops affirmed the base communities as "the initial cell of the ecclesial structure, and the focus of evangelization." Pope Paul VI in his exhortation on evangelization spoke of these communities as springing from "the need to live the Church's life more intensely" and as embodying a "quest for a more human dimension" than larger ecclesial communities are able to offer.

An issue that has been prominent in many Synod discussions focuses on the questions: "How can we restructure our parishes so that people know one another, care for one another and share with one another?" "How can we simultaneously be a small church

and a large church?" "How can we create ecclesial units, linked with the parish, but under lay leadership, where there can be more dialogue, more sharing of peoples' gifts, more reflection as a group on scripture, more celebration of important events in peoples' lives?"

Such basic communities can begin with as few as a dozen people wishing to become a community. This takes time to build. But people who meet every other week to share, to pray to reflect, to celebrate their lives and work, begin to bond with one another as they move from the individual "I" to the community "we." It can be done. It has been done in many places. One can only hope that Synod delegates will see the building of such ecclesial units as a high priority in building up the community of Rochester's local church.

"To be open to what base communities can accomplish for the Church, we must adopt the humble learning attitude of those who have not yet seen or heard or known," Bishop John J. Fitzpatrick of the Brownsville, Texas diocese wrote in 1990. "The Holy Spirit appears to be leading us to something truly new. We are not being severed from our Tradition, but are entering a new stage of it. The mysterious divine-human nature of the church is not changing, but is unfolding in an unprecedented way."

We are all part 'wheat' and part 'weed'

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 13:24-30. (R1) Wisdom 12:13, 16-19, (R2) Romans 8:26-27.

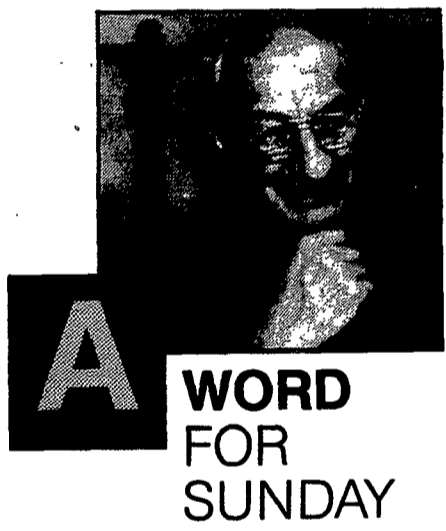
Sunday's parable of the weeds and the wheat was used by the early Church to explain what to do about bad Catholics in the Church.

Jesus said in effect to leave them alone. His parable gives some reasons why.

First, Jesus said you can't tell good people from bad people, any more than a farmer can tell the weeds from the wheat. In the beginning, both look alike.

And then you can't tell a book by its cover. Both goodness and evil reside in the heart of a person. Only God can read the human heart. Therefore, God says, "Judge not that you be not judged. Judgment is mine and I will repay."

Second, we ought never judge anything until it is completed. We cannot judge a painting until it is finished. So our Lord said that we ought to wait till the end, till harvest time to separate the good from the bad. Let good



and bad grow together until then. In the end a separation will be made, for that is what judgment is. Until then, mercy is to be exercised by all.

Third, God's patience has a method in it. While weeds can never become wheat, bad people can become good people — like the good thief on the cross, like Mary Magdalene. So the Lord says, "Wait. Be patient with evil and with evil persons. Don't magnify

evil in the world and don't be too preoccupied with it. Good is stronger than evil, for God is good. Where sin abounded, grace does more abound."

In other words, never write off evil people. Where there is life, there is hope.

Then, too, the wheat will grow despite the weeds. Goodness is capable of growing and becoming bigger and better in this world. All we need do is just let God be.

We ought to have something of the trust of Pope John XXIII of happy memory. After a day of hard work, he would say, "God, this is your Church. Take care of it now; I'm going to bed." Another time he said, "See everything. Overlook a great deal. And change a little."

Fourth, the parable teaches us something about evil in the world. So often we hear people say that if God is so good, where do all the evils in the world come from? The author of Genesis put the blame for the loss of paradise on two people: a bad man and a bad angel. Our Lord in the parable speaks of an enemy and of weeds. The enemy is Satan and the weeds are bad people.

God, however, is patient with evil

and evildoers because in His goodness He hopes to draw good from them. To those who love God all things, even evil, can work together unto good. The Church calls Adam's fall "a happy fault," for it merited so great a Redeemer, the Son of God.

And finally, it is well for all of us to remember that all of us are part weed and part wheat. As someone once said, "There is so much bad in the best of us and so much good in the worst of us that it ill behooves the best of us to speak ill of the worst of us."

In each of us good and evil live side by side, as wheat and weeds. Just as gardens and grass need constant weeding, so we need constant vigilance.

Weeding is tough work; so is going to confession. But we should go. For confession gives grace against particular weaknesses and the wise counsel of a spiritual father.

Wheat is the stuff from which bread is made and bread is the stuff from which the Eucharist is made and the Eucharist is the world's most potent weed-killer, for every Mass gives us the Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness (R2) and Holy Communion to make us strong.

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