

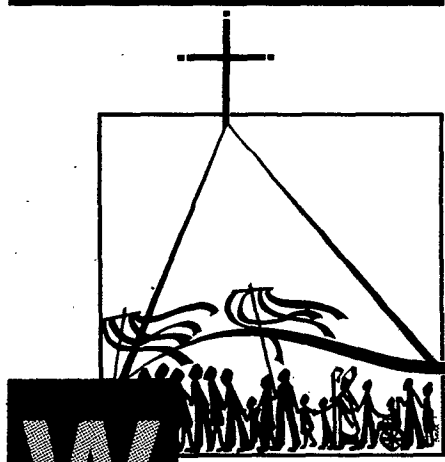
# Pray that God's power touches all

By Deacon Claude J. Curtin  
Guest contributor

Yesterday afternoon I visited an ill parishioner — a young husband and father of two children, ages 6 and 8. As I was leaving, we were standing in front of his beautiful home in the warm afternoon sun. Noting that I had not been on his street before, I said it must be a pleasant place to live: large old trees, nice big houses, not much traffic, kids coming and going.

With some animation, my friend responded with a rather pointed "Yes, but ..." He then went on to list all sorts of problems that seem to be making their way into those nice houses and under those large old trees. The unemployed man with four children across the street is an alcoholic. The couple in a nearby house fight all the time, yelling and screaming for all to hear. Down the block are a number of apartments filled with single-parent families who are struggling to keep their households together.

The neighborhood children who play together bring all of these human situations out into the street. My friend wonders who looks after them. They seem to be on their own from morning til night without anyone concerned about their meals or their whereabouts. He does not see much discipline, training or tender



loving care in their lives and he wonders what kind of adults they will be when they grow up. Several kids from one family watch pornographic films with their parents and then these kids share their sexual discoveries with their friends.

And so the conversation went. I thought of several things as I drove away. One was how appearances can be deceiving. And I was reminded of what I forget every day. I was reminded of all the suffering, struggles and "social problems" living along our city streets and down the quiet roads of our country towns. I thought also of Christians' many responses over the ages and through-

out the world to these same kinds of ordinary sufferings and struggles. And I thought finally of the Rochester diocese's General Synod, which is but a little more than a week away.

I was a member of the committee charged with writing the original Synod discussion document for "Question Three." All 11 of us struggled with that question grappling with several of the pressing social problems of our times: violence, addiction, unwanted pregnancy and terminal illness.

But our theme was not the only one to confront the problems of our time. American life's ordinary, daily social challenges were central to four of the six Synod themes. Other documents explored the questions of marriage and family, youths and the elderly, racism, sexism, poverty, unemployment and the lack of affordable housing and health care. But just exploring these questions in not enough.

The gospel passage proclaimed at Mass recently was Luke 4:38-44. The reading describes Jesus in his work of healing the sick, liberating them from the demons tormenting their hearts. The crowds knew they had a good thing in Jesus and "tried to keep him from leaving them." But he insisted that he had to move on to "announce the good news of the reign of God." Though the reign that he announced was to come at the end of time, it was not unrelated to his earthly work of

healing and freeing.

Some would like to drive a wedge between preaching the Gospel and caring for those in need. The Second Vatican Council was clear that "Christ did not bequeath to the Church a mission in the political, economic or social order: the purpose he assigned was a religious one ... but the Church is able, indeed it is obliged, if times and circumstances require it, to initiate action for the benefit of all, especially of those in need, like the works of mercy and similar undertakings." (GS 42)

What our local church has been trying to do through the Synod process is to discover the best ways of fulfilling our mission to preach the Gospel, while at the same time seeking to carry on Jesus' work of healing and freeing.

I have a deep faith that Jesus' Spirit moving now in our own time and place and so active in our local church will bring something of the healing and freeing of God's reign to us with our own sickness and our own demons. I have a firm hope that the Spirit's stirrings in our local church throughout the Synod process will help us all bring something of value to the suffering and the problems of our cities and towns, to that neighborhood street I visited yesterday.

Deacon Curtin serves at St. Mary Church in Penn Yan.

# Pope's message distorted in Denver

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

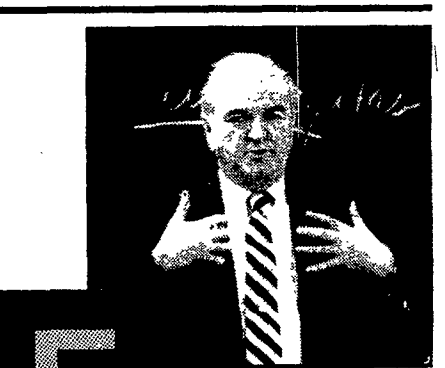
Pope John Paul II's four-day visit to Denver last month evoked from the media many of the well-worn cliches about a church torn by inner conflict and dissent.

It's as if most U.S. Catholics are engaged in a conscious, daily battle with the Vatican over issues such as birth control, homosexuality, abortion, clerical celibacy, and the ordination of women.

To be sure, there is a large measure of disagreement between the majority of U.S. Catholics and the church's official teaching and discipline on matters of this sort. Other, more conservative Catholics may indignantly deny this fact, but they can only offer anecdotal evidence and wishful thinking against the many scientific surveys conducted by the country's most prestigious polling organizations, newspapers, and television networks.

The media's focus has been misleading, however, because of the apparent assumption that Catholicism is actually defined by the issues featured in those polls. This is simply not the case.

Catholicism is not about birth control and obedience to the pope. It is about Jesus Christ and his Gospel of love and forgiveness. It is about love of neighbor, concern for the poor and the powerless, mercy and compassion, justice and reconciliation, the affirmation of human life and hope for eternal life.



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The Catholic community is most visibly itself not when it is locked in argument about clerical celibacy, to take only one example, but rather when it is gathered around a common eucharistic table, listening to the Word of God, giving thanks for divine blessings, and partaking of the body and blood of Christ which make them one in him.

When they are not gathered in there, Catholics are engaged in the sacramental preparation of young and old alike, in the care of the sick, the dying, the elderly, and the hurt, in outreach to the alienated, in assistance to the poor and the needy, in spiritual direction and pastoral counseling, in prayer and the celebration of the sacraments.

Like most families, Catholics occa-

sionally get into heated intramural arguments, and sometimes these arguments cause long-term resentments and divisions. But also as in most families, these arguments do not usually destroy the love that binds the members together nor do they nullify the nurturing and mutual support that characterize their relationships with each other.

The pope is a symbol of the unity of the worldwide family of Catholics. When he visits a place such as Denver, however, it is not in the role of an irritated father, feeling duty-bound to scold his unruly children. Why would so many young Catholics have traveled so many miles and endured so many inconveniences just to hear the pope read them the riot-act?

No, they came — and the many adults with them — because the pope personifies for them what being a Catholic is all about: faith in Jesus Christ and his Gospel, hope in God's promise of salvation, and love for all without limit.

But that message seems too often to have been obscured and even distorted during the pope's days in Denver. When he spoke there about life, many inside and beyond the media heard only "abortion," even though the pope himself included concern for the unemployed, the disabled, immigrants, the dispossessed, and the poor.

And when the pope urged Americans to rededicate themselves to the protection and nurturing of life, many heard only a criticism of the Clinton administration, as if the pope's pur-

pose in coming to the United States had been political rather than spiritual.

To some limited extent, the pope may have unwittingly invited this interpretation. When, for example, he used the expression "culture of death" to describe this country's too-ready access to abortion and, increasingly, to euthanasia as well, careful observers did not miss its significance.

They recognized the expression as not original with the pope or with the Vatican. It had been coined earlier by New York's Cardinal John O'Connor.

That led them to speculate that the crafting of the pope's pro-life messages delivered in Denver had been given over to those less emphatic about the consistent ethic of life, or seamless garment, approach adopted by the U.S. Catholic bishops.

Even so, the pope's own, more comprehensive view shone through in his occasional softening asides and in his dropping of some hard-line passages in the prepared texts.

The pope probably left the U.S. Catholic Church in about the same state in which he found it the day he arrived in Denver. It isn't likely that very many attitudes were changed, one way or the other.

On the other hand, one hopes that there were many, especially among the crowds of young people in Denver, who rededicated themselves to a life of service to others in keeping with the mission Christ gave his church.

If this is the case, the visit achieved its primary pastoral purpose.

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