

Synodal decrees enabled church to address challenges

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Hey, Father: Shave that hair off your face!

Keep your hat on!
Don't answer the door looking like some golfer!

And while you're at it, make sure no one in your parish holds a public procession carrying statues of the Madonna. People will talk, you know!

These are just a few of the directives Rochester priests and pastors received from their bishops through previous diocesan synods. Indeed, a sampling of synodal decrees reveals interesting examples of how each of the six prior synods coped with challenges to the diocesan church.

The diocese's first synod took place in 1875 under the leadership of Bishop Bernard McQuaid. Subsequent synods occurred in 1887 under Bishop McQuaid; 1914 and 1924 under Archbishop Thomas F. Hickey; 1934 under Cardinal Edward Mooney; and 1954 under Bishop James E. Kearney.

Unlike the current synod, the prior six consisted almost exclusively of diocesan authorities laying down the law to priests and religious. Some synods, such as the first, did allow for suggestions and input from those affected by their decrees; others, like the one convened by Archbishop Hickey in 1914, consisted of little more than a reading of predetermined decrees.

Synodal decrees varied greatly in content and significance. Some were quite serious, addressing such weighty issues as heresy. Synodal decrees of 1914, for example, stressed diocesan compliance with papal condemnations of the intellectual movements of Modernism and Americanism.

Others statutes were less substantive, such as a decree from the very same synod that electric lights were not to be used to replace wax candles in liturgical spaces. Father Robert F. McNamara, diocesan archivist, explained that the decree was drawn from the idea that the burning of candles symbolized sacrifice — the candle wax "dies" so that its light may continue to shine.

Lay participation in prior synods was minimal, at best, or non-existent, and many of the articles approved by the bishops concentrated on how parish authorities should carry out their duties among the laity.

The public appearance of a priest seemed to preoccupy diocesan authorities in 1875, who put forth a decree warning priests not to "cultivate" hair or beard, or to follow hair styles popular among lay men.

Even the 1954 Synod was concerned with clerical appearance. Article II of the 1954 Synodal decrees stated:

"Since all priests have the obligation of being properly dressed in clerical clothes whenever they appear in public, We condemn the practice of going to the door or to the parish office in sport shirts and the like. We direct that on such occasions Our priests wear either their cassock or their coat and collar."

Another decree from the same synod gave the following instruction: "Our priests will wear hats when traveling on the streets."

Such instructions reflected the spirit of the era in which they were promulgated, Father McNamara said.

"This is the first time one of our synods had referred to hats in its clerical legislation, although it was taken for granted in an era when all men wore hats on the street," he remarked. "Going hatless, I think, was another post-World War II development which spread slowly into clerical practice."

The advent of the automobile was



um omnes et singuli sacerdotes Nostri semper debeant suetum habitum ecclesasticum tum in viis publicis cum in domo parochiali deferre, prohibemus quominus ad domus parochialis officinam vel portam adeant sine veste talari vel saltem indumento decenti nigri coloris ac collari clericali.

(1954 Synodal decree: Since all priests have the obligation of being properly dressed in clerical clothes whenever they appear in public, We condemn the practice of going to the door or to the parish office in sports shirts and the like. We direct that on such occasions Our priests wear either their cassock or their coat and collar.)

another modern development that presented challenges to the diocese. At the 1924 synod, the diocese prohibited priest-assistants in parishes to own cars, or to drive cars owned by someone else "except in the case of attending the sick or the performance of a duty which is strictly parochial."

"Automobiles were not that much in use," Father McNamara explained. "The idea of young clergy having cars of their own was repellent to (Archbishop Thomas F.) Hickey. It showed a lack of a sense of poverty."

Like the 1924 decree regarding automobile ownership, many synodal decrees apparently were designed to prevent the occurrence or the mere appearance of clerical scandal and abuse.

"Let pastors be careful to select as house servants only women whose advanced years and good reputation makes them beyond any suspicion," stated Article 192 from the 1875 synod.

And how many modern clerics would heed a bishop who told them, as Archbishop Hickey did in 1924, that "it is strictly forbidden to priests and clerics of this Diocese to attend theatrical performances in public theaters, which includes the moving picture theater, and whether in the Diocese or out of the Diocese."

Just as the diocese was concerned with how priests appeared, some decrees showed concern over how the church projected its own image.

The ban on processions during which the faithful carried statues or sacred relics through neighborhood streets — items sometimes adorned with gifts of money from onlookers — reflected concerns over anti-Catholic reactions, Father McNamara noted. Such practices were seen as too exotic for a Protestant-dominated country like the United States, he emphasized.

"This policy had been adopted in many dioceses where Italian immigrants had tended to bring with them ... the street processions of a religious nature that had been customary in the homeland," he said.

Even such fellow Catholics as the Irish and the Germans could find such processions offensive, because they were used to worshipping away from the public eye, he added.

Ironically in recent years, Father McNamara noted, the U.S. church has returned to encouraging ethnically based religious displays. He pointed out that such parishes as Rochester's St. Anthony of Padua hold such processions on certain feast days.

While U.S. bishops disdained ethnically oriented processions, at least such rites were of a Catholic origin. Not so the practice of cremation, which Bishop McQuaid banned due to its "pagan connotations."

"Let burial be in the ground according to custom, as of bodies that will be raised once more from the dust in the Resurrection," he proclaimed in an 1887 synodal statute.

How priests should relate to the faithful also concerned diocesan authorities.

Many a sinner would be pleased to know that Rochester's first bishop was concerned about the shame penitents might feel in confessing.

"(Confessors) are to abstain from groaning, loud speech or any other noise when hearing a confession, lest the penitent suffer any embarrassment or any revelation, even a hint of it, be given to bystanders," Bishop McQuaid instructed in the 1875 synod. He added that confessors should act in a completely patient and fatherly manner toward penitents.

The bishop also encouraged priests to urge baptism as soon as possible for all newborns within their pastoral charge. Father McNamara noted that then, as now, parents were inclined to defer baptism for such reasons as "Aunt Suzie can't come."

Synod after synod emphasized that the poor should not be charged for funerals. Father McNamara pointed out that in every era, some priests of an avaricious or uncompassionate nature

had practiced otherwise.

Even worse than a cleric who charged the poor for a funeral would be the pastor or assistant who denounced one of his flock from the pulpit. In 1934, preachers were admonished "to avoid speaking of any person by name or by implication either in disparagement or in adulation."

Despite the interesting nature of the more prohibitive decrees, the synods primarily set forth positive instructions.

In the 1875 synod, Bishop McQuaid, probably one of the nation's greatest advocates of Catholic education in his time, instructed pastors to set up schools as soon as possible.

And the diocesan archivist described Archbishop Hickey as "inclined to be persnickety and scrupulous," characteristics that inspired him to approve a total of 500 synodal decrees. Yet he was also known for his promotion of such devotions as those to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Holy Ghost and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. These practices also were encouraged in his decrees.

Undoubtedly, though, the greatest and most useful synodal decree ever put forth — at least from the viewpoint of diocesan journalists and archivists — was one first proclaimed by Bishop McQuaid in 1875 and subsequently reiterated by his successors.

"Each parish is to have a 'Parish History,' in which the origins of the parish are recorded and notable events thereafter." (Article 52.3).

That mandate comes in especially handy 118 years later, as the *Catholic Courier* embarks on a semi-monthly "Parish Profile" series, which debuts in this edition.

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