



Fr. Nelson J. Ruppert, OFM Cap., listens to a discussion on marriage and family life on Oct. 1.



Members recite the Synod Prayer at the conclusion of their meeting at the Synod Oct. 2.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Lively discussions helped forge five priorities

By Lee Strong
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ROCHESTER — The final five priorities produced by the Diocese of Rochester's Seventh Synod are the ones to which the diocese has committed its energies in the coming years.

The approximately 1,300 delegates who gathered at Rochester's Riverside Convention Center Oct. 1-3 already put considerable energy into producing those five recommendations: lifelong religious education in parishes; a consistent ethic of life; education on moral issues and conscience formation; fuller use of women in the church; and the formation of small Christian communities.

The General Synod culminated a three-year process that included parish- and community-level meetings; regional meetings; and various committees gathering to oversee the process, plan the General Synod, and collate and polish recommendations.

At the General Synod, the delegates spent three days meeting in small groups to discuss the 48 recommendations that resulted from the parish and regional meetings, and to propose additional recommendations that might have been overlooked.

These small groups narrowed the 48 recommendations to 18 — three for each of the six themes — and one additional recommendation resulting from the 24 produced during small-group discussions on Saturday night.

The small-group meetings were interspersed throughout the three-day event with large-group meetings, prayer services, meals and the culminating Mass at the Community War Memorial Oct. 3.

Although the schedule might have been exhausting, the small groups were sometimes marked by lively discussions.

During a small group session on Theme Five — "How can we improve our efforts in faith development and in inviting others to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ?" — Father Melvin Walczak, pastor of Rochester's St. Anthony of Padua Parish, raised the issue of the financial burden placed on parishes by the Catholic school system.

Monica Bradley, a senior at Bishop Kearney High School, took up the priest's challenge and defended Catholic education.

"As one who switched from public school to Catholic school from eighth grade to ninth grade, it really did make a difference in my life," declared

Bradley, who attends St. Mary of the Lake Church in Ontario. "I took (religious education classes) from first to eighth grade, and I don't remember anything about it. I didn't learn anything really relevant to my life in any of my classes.

"(In Bishop Kearney)" Bradley continued, "I've been learning things that are going to have some impact on my life."

And during discussion of added recommendations, a proposal by Father James Callan, pastor of Rochester's Corpus Christi Church, about non-violence prompted discussion about whether this principle would preclude defense of oneself.

John Geis of St. Joachim Parish in Canisteo agreed with Father Callan's proposal — and after hearing it, even withdrew one he previously had made concerning service programs for young people.

"Violence is so pervasive in our society that we have to take a stand," Geis declared, noting that he believed so much in non-violence that he had even refused to defend himself in a life-threatening situation.

But several people in the group voiced problems with such a stance, and Ken Reasoner of St. Patrick Church in Victor commented during a discussion of Jesus' non-violence, "We don't know everything Jesus did. Look at Christ in the Temple. He got teed off that day."

Ultimately, the group proposed a recommendation on non-violence, but the large-group assembly Sunday morning did not select it as the one additional recommendation to move forward into the final balloting.

Meanwhile, the recommendation about Catholic schools that had prompted discussion at the Theme Five small-group session likewise did not make it among the top three recommendations for each theme selected by the small groups.

One of the recommendations from this theme — lifelong religious education — was selected as one of the five priorities to which the diocese will commit itself, however.

Christopher Vogt, religious-education coordinator at Church of the Epiphany in Sodus, had selected this recommendation as his top priority in Theme Five.

"I chose (lifelong religious education) because as a religious-education coordinator I find that the current system of classroom-based catechesis is not cutting the mustard,"

Vogt said. "I find if parents are involved it's more effective. I think the more we can get adults to become involved in faith development, the better it will be for the church."

Another recommendation that made it through the small-group process to become one of the five final priorities concerned women's role in the church.

This recommendation was among those discussed at the small-group sessions on Theme Six Sunday morning.

Frederick Wuenschel of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Elmira pushed for this recommendation during his small-group session.

"What I see in this country is that business and industry and government have taken the moral high ground (on this issue)," Wuenschel observed.

Sister Rita Jongen, who was serving as a delegate to the Sisters of St. Joseph, pointed out that some parishes actually have a good record when it comes to opening roles to women. But, she added, a great deal depends on the pastor.

"I work in the central administration (of the Sisters of St. Joseph), and I have sisters who come in and say they have to leave parish work," Sister Jongen reported. "It is because when a new pastor comes in, their positions are terminated."

Several members of the group pointed out that even if the new pastor does not "fire" the woman, he may place restrictions on preaching and other functions, ultimately leading the woman to seek another place to work.

Although she acknowledged that the recommendation on the women's roles was close to her heart, Sister Jongen said she actually was promoting the recommendation concerning consciousness raising. "The under-all thing for me is that there needs to be consciousness raising in all the areas," she explained.

This recommendation did make it into the 19 recommendations from which the five priorities were ultimately selected.

Another recommendation selected as one of the five diocesan priorities was ongoing moral education, one of the recommendations discussed during Friday evening's small-group session on Theme One, "How can we as Church help strengthen Christian marriage and family life in all its forms?"

Georgia Crissy, director of admissions for St. Bernard's Institute, served as a small-group facilitator for the Friday evening sessions.

"There's a real need for moral edu-

cation for the whole family," Crissy commented. "The family has to be singing the same tune."

Some recommendations that were important to individuals, however, did not make it beyond the small groups.

During discussion of what recommendations had been left out, Janette Masetta of Rochester's St. Andrew Parish pushed for a recommendation about doing more in the church for the handicapped.

Masetta pointed to the example of her daughter-in-law, who had begun the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, but stopped at one point because inadequate accommodations were made for her as a deaf person.

All too often, Masetta commented, the handicapped are shut out because churches are not accessible or are only partially accessible. She pointed out that her daughter-in-law — who reads lips — grows frustrated at even such unintentional slights as, for example, when people are told to bow their heads to pray.

"You've got to address the handicapped," Masetta said. "You're shutting them out of meetings. You're shutting them out of church."

When Masetta's group instead voted to promote an additional recommendation on non-violence, she was philosophical.

"Just mention that we talked about it," Masetta asked. "Let people know."

And, according to Father Joseph Hart, director of the Synod, a recommendation that did not become one of the five diocesan priorities may still have an impact.

"Some of them can be worked into a strategy to carry out the basic recommendations," Father Hart said. Pastoral Center staff will also look at the recommendations not selected for the five priorities to see if there are some that might be implemented anyway.

Further, Father Hart speculated, because all the diocese's pastors took part in the Synod and heard small-group discussions of the recommendations — and of the 24 additional recommendations discussed at a large-group session Sunday morning — they will be aware of the issues raised.

Ultimately, however, the Synod can only go so far, Father Hart said.

"That's what the whole process says," Father Hart stated. "You don't have unlimited resources. You have to make choices. You can't do everything."

Contains reporting by Mike Latona.