

Educators urged to serve families

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Religious education needs to be tailored to the modern family, rather than designed to make modern families follow catechetical patterns, according to John Roberto, director of the Center for Youth Ministry Development in Naugatuck, Conn.

"Is everything you do family-friendly?" he asked rhetorically. "What would it be like if on a regular basis you used family-life experience as the stuff of your curriculum?"

Roberto made such comments during an afternoon speech at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center on Friday, Oct. 28, before more than 1,000 diocesan school employees, parish staff members and catechetical leaders attending a combined fall ministry and school superintendent's conference day.

Titled "Families: Where Ministries Meet," the day was devoted to workshops promoting a partnership between the church and the family to advance life-long religious education — the number one goal chosen by delegates at the 1993 diocesan Synod.

In his keynote address titled, "Developing a Partnership Between Families and Parishes, Families and Catholic Schools," Roberto repeatedly stressed that modern families no longer have the time to participate in church activities scheduled without consideration for their harried lives.

At the same time, today's Catholic parents want more control over where and how they and their children are educated in the faith, he said. Religious education, whether delivered by a Catholic school or a parish catechetical program, must be flexible enough to encompass the modern family's many needs, and varied enough to appeal to as many people as possible, Roberto said.

Rather than see a decline in attendance at rigidly scheduled parish activities as a negative sign of the faithful's interest in Catholicism, educators should examine the modern family's characteristics and create programming that uses such characteristics to advantage, he emphasized.

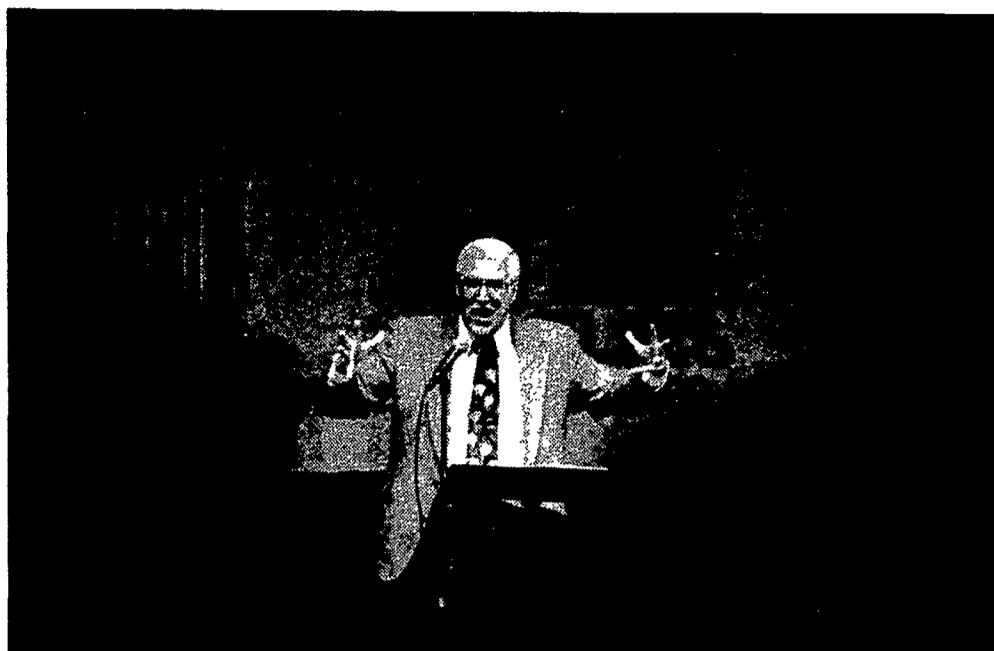
For example, Roberto explained, surveys show that watching television is the most common family activity in the United States. Hence, each parish should persuade families to use some of that time for religious programming. Parishes, therefore, should stock a plentiful supply of high-quality religious videotapes for parishioners to peruse, he said.

Modern parents are also looking for the church to give them something, Roberto said, so the church should strive to meet that desire. He used the practice of palms being distributed to parishioners on Palm Sunday as one traditional example of a practice he would like to see extended to every weekend.

He illustrated the concept by pointing out that on the weekend the Gospel speaks of Jesus turning loaves and fishes into a banquet for thousands, parishes should give small loaves of bread — or rolls — to the faithful. Outside a package containing the bread, the parish could glue a prayer to be said by the entire family where the food is eaten at home.

He added, hair-raisingly, that such "gifts" should always be given to the youngest member of each family, possibly after communion, since it is the youngest family members who tend to insist that the rest follow whatever instructions a teacher or parish authority gives them.

"Don't you think that slowly at home people would start to strengthen family devotions?" he asked rhetorically. Once a parish gives something away



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

John Roberto, director of the Center for Youth Ministry Development in Naugatuck, Conn., Oct. 28 delivers his keynote address to a full house at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center.

that is tied in with a weekend reading, families may even begin to read up on the next weekend's readings in order to anticipate the next "gift," he said.

"Give people a ritual to take home," he remarked. "Every parish ritual has that potential."

As for activities that would take place in the parish, and outside the home, he urged that as many of them as possible boast an attractive theme and involve as many generations as possible.

In particular, programs drawing parents and adolescents together should avoid dry, scholarly topics and focus on what's important to both groups, he said.

"Pick hot topics — sex, morality, media stuff, personal growth," he said, noting that people want to hear the church's

views on such issues.

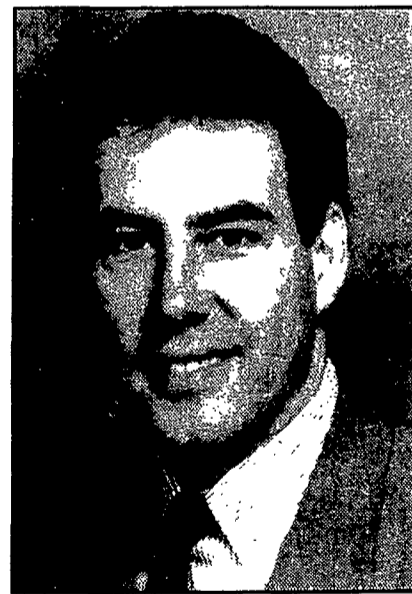
Give families plenty of religious items that can be put on the kitchen refrigerator; keep parents abreast of their children's education through weekly newsletters; and use the home as the focal point for a child's faith development, he stressed. Educators must pull out everything from their bag of catechetical tricks if they want to create the magic of religious learning among today's busy, time-conscious families, he commented.

"Do stupid, crazy, creative things," he said. "At least people will know you're alive, not dead."

The combined ministry-superintendent's conference program was followed by a Catechist Congress at the Riverside Convention Center the following day.

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