

Sessions strengthen faith community

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

One of the joys I have experienced in the past few months has been working with a group of adults, ages 25 to 40. Last fall we invited some of these individuals to come together to share their thinking with us about how best to initiate, strengthen and heal relationships between their peers and our Roman Catholic faith community.

Last Saturday, March 25, we came to a significant new milestone in the work when we gathered some 70 men and women at St. Mary's, downtown Rochester, to share their thinking on some questions developed by our leadership team:

- 1.) Are you involved in church activity today? Why or why not?
- 2.) What experience have you had that has strengthened or nurtured your involvement in church or community activities?
- 3.) What experiences have you had that dissuaded or discouraged your involvement?
- 4.) If you could change one thing about the Catholic Church, what would it be? Why?

As I circulated around the discussion tables that morning I was much encouraged by the liveliness of the interchange that was taking place. I had the impression that the men and women there were being quite open with one another. It also seemed obvious to this observer that, when any person spoke, the others listened with great respect and attentiveness.

I have not yet seen the written evaluations filled out by those people who attended but I have a strong sense that the session will be rated very highly. I make that judgment based on my experience of sitting in with several groups on Saturday and on comments made to me by participants I have met since then.

Even more important will be the leads we re-



A LONG THE WAY

ceive about how best to continue this effort in ways that will be rewarding for all concerned. I suspect that the basic directions identified in our work's earlier stages will be ratified by the comments of those who participated on Saturday. Earlier input points us towards opportunities for spiritual growth, learning more about the faith, direct service to others and fundraising in support of our commitment to a consistent ethic of life.

But even before we begin to sort all of that out I have a sense from these sessions that there are some things that are very important to all of the participants. Among them are:

- 1.) A welcoming, hospitable environment in our parish communities.
- 2.) A liturgy of the word which truly nourishes the soul and helps people to live the Christian life.
- 3.) Opportunities to speak to others and to hear from them about things that really matter in their lives.

4.) Good instruction about our faith tradition: Why do we believe what we believe? Why we do what we do? Are there some beliefs more important than others? And why? Are there some practices more important than the rest? And why?

5.) A desire to be respected as thinking, accomplished, curious, contributing adults who are not attracted to and are unlikely to relate personally to, an institution which treats them like children.

In the course of these conversations over the months I have been very much aware that I am old enough to be father to all of the participants. Their life experience is much different from my own and, therefore, the way they perceive and process reality is different from mine. It's not just the number of years that accounts for the difference. It's much more. It's the result of changes in our culture which took place in the seam between their generation and mine. It's the impact of Vatican Council II, an event which dramatically changed the self understanding of the church in which I grew up but which they hardly remember.

In the end, while I find such generational differences to be quite challenging, I believe that God gives us rich blessings in such people as those who gathered at St. Mary's last Saturday morning. They seek truth and deeper life as do we all. And, most importantly, they have a lively sense of the importance of the community to that quest.

Please pray for the continued success of this initiative and for those who have so generously worked to develop it. If you have any suggestions for us or would like to participate yourself, please let me know. I will be happy to pass along your contribution to our core team. Peace to all.

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JESUS, PRIEST AND VICTIM

St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus ("The Little Flower"), in order to arouse the zeal of her novices, daily recited with them a prayer for the members of the Catholic clergy. It is one of the rare formulas which she learned by heart, and which she recited with the utmost fervour.

"O Jesus, may your priests be the faithful guardians of your Church as was St. John who received your Mother into his own home. Instructed by this tender Mother, who was so afflicted on Calvary, may they have for your children the care and loving watchfulness of a mother. May they teach souls to be united with you through Mary, who, being the Gate of Heaven, is also the treasure-house of your divine Heart. Oh! give us priests all burning with zeal! True children of Mary! Priests who will give Jesus to souls with the same tenderness and care which Mary carried the Infant Jesus of Bethlehem! Mother of sorrow, and of love, through pity for your beloved Son, pour into our hearts floods of tenderness to console Jesus; grant us a generation of priests formed at your school, in the tenderness of your virginal love."

Or whatever the Lord inspires you to offer Him on behalf of His Priests.

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DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, NY

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