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Social

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a nose-dive and I don't think it's ever changed."

Father John T. Reif, pastor of St. Rita's Church in Webster, added that in this era of dual-income families, time crunches are greater — and the church may lose out.

"Prior to Vatican II, if a teen or an adult went over to the church hall for an event, it often was their only social event of the week," Father Reif said. "Now we're living in an age that for mom and dad, *staying home* is a treat rather than going out. They're already up to their elbows with so many other commitments that attending something at 'Saint So-and-So' isn't going to seem as appealing."

This trend of isolation led Bob Zyskowski to pen a July 1995 editorial titled "Bowling Alone" for the *Catholic Bulletin*, diocesan newspaper of the Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn., archdiocese.

In that column, Zyskowski illustrated how modern society has become so individualized that even group activities such as bowling are performed alone with regularity. The editor added that this mindset has also infiltrated Catholic churches in the United States.

"We're very hesitant to make a connection with other people, even in something as close as a faith community," Zyskowski told the *Catholic Courier*. "We're afraid to talk to somebody, to meet somebody we don't know. People want to go to church and go home, and that's all."

"The potential for meeting new friends, opportunities for opening your lives — it's too risky," he added. "People

don't want to give up their freedom and TV shows."

Zyskowski used an irony-laced example, saying, "Rather than make friends, we would rather sit home alone and watch the TV show 'Friends' — which is a show about people being friends."

Yet rather than throw in the towel, parish leaders in the Rochester diocese are making strong — and often successful — efforts at adapting to modern society.

The priority, according to Sister Sobala, is to focus less on large numbers and more on individual needs. This trend, she said, is in accordance with the diocesan Synod's call for the formulation of small Christian communities.

At St. Mary's in Rochester, Sister Sobala directs the Downtown Community Forum. Held in the parish's Dugan Center, these meetings offer parishioners and non-parishioners the chance to dialogue with community leaders such as Rochester Mayor William Johnson.

Sister Sobala added that groups at her parish also target young adults; parents of infants; married couples; and singles.

"The sense of socializing in people who share values continues to be important," Sister Sobala said.

St. Rita's in Webster offers several such opportunities, according to Sister Judy Whalen, SSJ, the parish minister. Many of these groups, she said, list service and prayer — rather than entertainment — as their chief focus. Examples include a ministry for single, separated and divorced adults; support groups for people who have lost loved ones as well as those who serve as care-givers for loved ones; and a St. Joseph's table held in March in the new St. Rita's parish center.

"The word 'ministry' has become very popular in Catholic mouths and on Catholic lips," Father Reif said.

In the Southern Tier, a monthly family movie night was recently begun at the Church of St. Mary Our Mother in Horseheads. Approximately 50 people attended the inaugural gathering held in March.

"Surfing the Net (Internet) is fun, but there's something that makes me feel good about this," said Steve Spaulding, who organized the event along with his wife Terry. "And there were a lot of people in the parish saying they want more of this."

Father Werth said his three-church cluster in Rochester's 19th Ward stages numerous social events, perhaps more so than in other parts of the diocese.

"It appears that the people in the city need a sense of community for survival, and the church becomes a way to fulfill that need. So the social outlets are important," Father Werth said.

Father Werth illustrated his point by citing a picnic he attended last year for St. Michael's Church, an inner-city parish in Rochester. When it started to rain, suburban Rochester residents wanted to go home — but the city-dwellers said, "Nah, let's stay and have a good time," Father Werth recalled.

The 19th Ward pastor added that outreach ministries are also vital parts of his parish's social makeup.

"Today you don't have the numbers, but you've got the depth," Father Werth commented. "What people are doing is much more profound."

Spaulding agreed that big numbers aren't a prerequisite for starting parish social organizations. "Start something small," he said. "The little things can grow, and God can make them great."

For instance, Spaulding noted, the St. Mary Our Mother movie night was attended by many of the same families who

have also begun a Sunday-morning coffee hour at the parish.

Another plus for today's parishes, Father Werth pointed out, is that they're freer to bond with neighboring Catholic and non-Catholic churches. These opportunities, he noted, didn't exist in previous generations when parish boundaries were very clearly observed.

"The parochialism was awful, terrible," Father Werth said.

Though the face of parish social life has changed, Father Reif stressed that the human need for socialization is a constant.

"God forbid that we should get to the point that that isn't present," the Webster pastor said. "We would be missing a lot of the essential dynamics that are meant to energize us as individuals and call us together as Christians. That's still true in this day and age, even though the parish is not the social hub it once was."

Sister Sobala agreed that the natural link between Christianity and socialization will lead people to continue bonding, regardless of the manner in which this occurs.

"Deep down, people want to deepen their faith lives. And they realize their Christianity is not a religion of ones, but a community of people," Sister Sobala said.

To maximize this basic principle, Father Zimmer suggested that Catholics maintain a focus on the present, rather than long for the past.

"I think there's a great opportunity for all kinds of outreaches," Father Zimmer said. "But to wish for the old social aspects of the church would be like wishing for the old Latin Mass."

"We can't go back, and the times regulate that. And that's not a negative statement."

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