

FEATURE

'What happened to the church of my youth?'

By Mike Latona
Staff Writer

As we travel from one city to another, we find the congregation standing at times when we kneel, or kneeling when we would be standing. What happened to the Mass being the same anywhere we travel?

Does anyone fast anymore?

What happened to the holy days of obligation?

Why don't we have Benediction more often?

Why do people talk in church; isn't anything "holy" anymore?

So go the questions in a promotional flyer for an upcoming St. Bernard's Institute program "What Happened to the Church of My Youth?" It may not be a compelling question for most Catholics under the age of 50, but for older generations the profound changes wrought by the council are still painful 35 years later, said Father Robert Kennedy, a professor at SBI.

"I think the way you're schooled, your heart is formed also," Father Kennedy commented. "It's not just where your head is at. You've formed an attachment. Of course you're going to struggle."

Father Kennedy is giving several presentations this year as part of the St. Bernard's on the Road series. He was due to address "What Happened to the Church of My Youth?" on Tuesday, March 21 at Rochester's St. Boniface Church and on Wednesday, March 22 at Auburn's Holy Family Church. He will also speak on a related subject, "What Happened to the Sacraments of My Youth?" on Tuesday, May 16 at Caledonia's St. Columba Church and on Wednesday, May 17 at Irondequoit's St. Margaret Mary Church.

Father Kennedy said that when he previously has lectured on this theme, many in attendance have been of retirement age and expressed concern about changes in the church. A typical complaint, he said, is that we've lost a sense of reverence, and that priests and their staffs don't seem interested in traditional devotions. He described the mind-set as: "I remember this. I was taught the sacraments this way. We celebrated them. Now I see something different. What happened?"

Mary McNamara, 70, a St. Boniface parishioner, agreed that the pre-Vatican II era was decidedly different.

"It was more regimented; you did what everyone else did. There was a certain understanding that you knew what was going to happen next. And when you're unfamiliar with the new ideas, it's difficult to adjust," said McNamara, who added that she planned to attend Father Kennedy's March 21 talk at her parish.

Even people who consciously have tried to adjust still may be attached to their childhood traditions, Father Kennedy observed.

"They remember that the pastor was in charge of the parish, and he made all the decisions," said Father Kennedy, as he feigned slamming his fist down. And they still imagine it this way, even though it may not be so.

Father Kennedy said that his lectures address such questions as: "What duties properly belong to priests and deacons? What can be done by other folks? What should be done by other folks?"

The lectures are important, according to Father James Burke, because further change lies ahead for the parishes in his region. Father Burke, pastor of Auburn's Holy Family Church, noted that the SBI program on March 22 was planned jointly by the Auburn parishes in response to initiatives of Pastoral Planning for the New Millennium.

"This hopefully not only serves educational needs, but also, with pastoral planning, people are wondering what their church is going to be like as we make some necessary changes," Father Burke

said.

Father Kennedy said his lectures are fueled not only by current issues, but also by the need to continue addressing changes that were called for in the 1960s.

"With Vatican II, the emphasis was on restoring people to full participation," Father Kennedy said.

The most visible change to come out of Vatican II was institution of the Mass in worshipers' native language, rather than Latin. No longer would the priest face away from the congregation saying a Mass that most people couldn't understand. Father Kennedy said the Mass many older Catholics grew up with had arisen from a gradual process of isolation that began in the Middle Ages — an isolation Vatican II sought to reduce.

Father Kennedy emphasized that he's "not downplaying rosary, Benediction, Stations (of the Cross), or novenas." But he also said that Bible study, charismatic prayer groups and small Christian communities now may be more common activities at numerous parishes.

He added that certain devotions such as the rosary and Stations of the Cross

may take on a new look, such as a youth-driven Living Stations of the Cross or "groups committed to social justice who move from site to site" in the spirit of the Stations.

"Devotional life happens according to what people need. The church has a wonderful storehouse of devotions," Father Kennedy said, pointing out that this era is not the first time in church history that some devotions have faded in popularity while others have risen.

Yet this ebb and flow should not extend to the sacraments themselves, he said. Unfortunately, confession lines are practically nonexistent and the sacrament of penance has tailed off as well, he noted.

"We have not found a way to renew the celebration of the sacrament of penance," he said. "We've done it with the Eucharist and the anointing of the sick. We're still trying to find a balance."

Meanwhile, McNamara is disappointed by the apparent declining interest in "some of the prayers we used to say, like the rosary. I think a lot of young people don't know about that."

Father Kennedy said such devotions are still available, but might not be offered at one's home parish. "You do have to look for them, that's for sure," he remarked.

For instance, the Rochester Diocese has sanctioned a Latin Mass — but only at one parish, once per week. It is celebrated on Sundays at 1:30 p.m. at Rochester's St. Stanislaus Church.

Although change hasn't been easy, Father Kennedy said that Catholics — including most who are of retirement age — have generally embraced Vatican II initiatives.

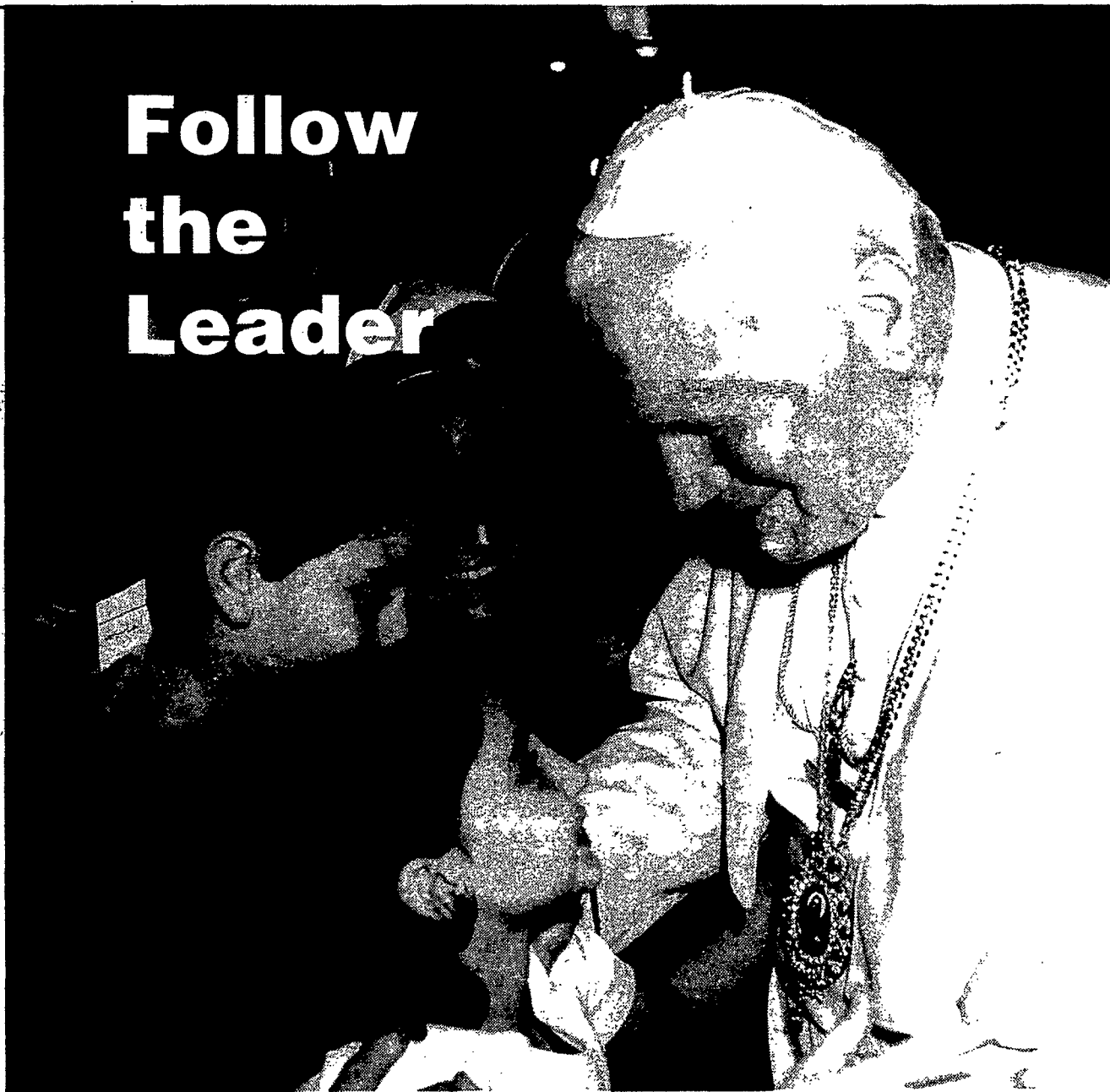
"There's been a wide acceptance, even by the older generation," he said.

McNamara said she has gone along with most of the changes. "The church is a living thing, and living things are not static," she remarked.

But the ideal of an evolving, united Catholic Church is far from being achieved, Father Kennedy said.

"The Rochester Diocese has made a consistent effort to implement Vatican II," he said. "Do I think it's been done well by every parish? It's a little uneven."

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