

Change is challenging, priests say

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

GENEVA — When change occurs in a parish, fear and other strong emotions are not only possible — they're to be expected, according to Father David Baldwin of Chicago.

"I've found every change process I've been involved with to be messy, because human beings are involved," Father Baldwin remarked March 2 to 200-plus participants at the third-annual diocesan Planning Group Leadership Day.

Father Baldwin was director of the Chicago Archdiocese's Office of Research and Planning from 1991 to 1999, and has served as pastor of St. Benedict the African (East) Parish since 1989. That parish is lo-

cated in an urban area of six square miles that comprised 10 Catholic parishes and 20 priests when he began serving there 18 years ago. Today there are only three parishes with three priests.

"More than once, people have picketed in front of my office and my house ... (but) I'm still standing," Father Baldwin said. After a pause, the 50-year-old priest drew laughter by adding, "I didn't have any gray hair when I started, but I'm still standing."

Father Robert Ring, the day's other keynote speaker, likewise can relate to the subject of change. The diocesan priest, whose talk centered on parish identity, is a first-year pastor at Our Lady of the Lakes Parish, a six-church cluster formed in the Finger Lakes region in 2000. Father Ring previously was pastor at St. Margaret Mary,

Apalachin, one of six parishes in the Tioga Planning Group, which currently is working toward becoming a single canonical parish.

"I am sure you can imagine that I've heard the issue of parish identity at more tables than you can count," Father Ring remarked.

Noting that "we all need a place to feel safe — at home, secure, comfortable," Father Ring explained that seemingly small changes — such as a new Mass schedule or finding someone occupying your regular pew spot — can touch off strong emotions. So when discussions about reconfiguring with neighboring parishes begin, Father Ring said, "Things can get a little scary. I feel I'll lose that warm and friendly place."

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Father Doug DellaPietra poses a question to the guest speakers during Planning Group Leadership Day.

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State shadows the church

A day may be coming when the U.S. Catholic Church is forced by law to pay for abortions, according to church leaders throughout the United States.

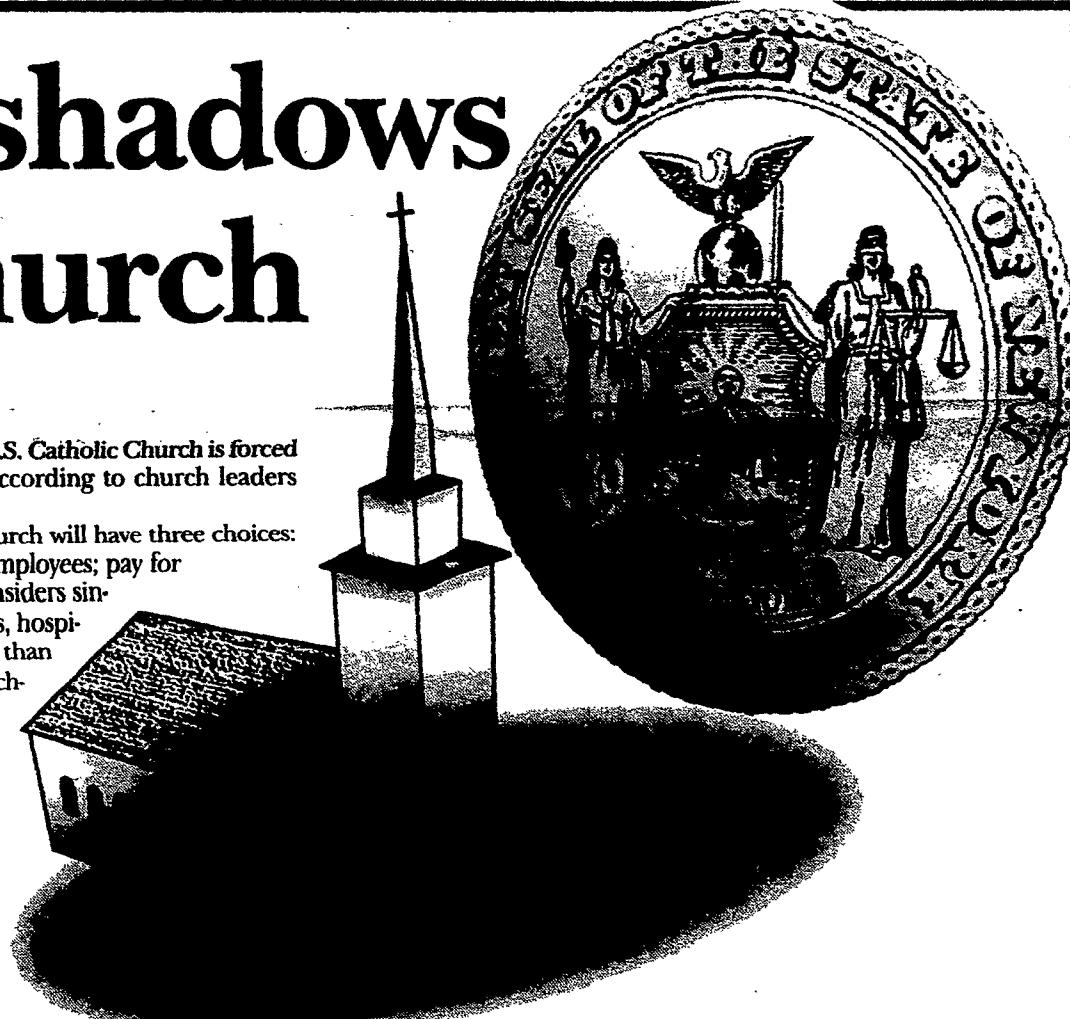
If and when that day arrives, the church will have three choices: stop offering health insurance to its employees; pay for "reproductive services" the church considers sinful; or close such institutions as schools, hospitals and social-service agencies rather than operate them in violation of church teaching.

In a sense, that day has already arrived for the church in California if one considers intrauterine devices and certain birth-control pills to be abortifacients — forms of birth control that can lead to the destruction of already conceived children. In California, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Sacramento is challenging a 2000 law mandating that employers' group-health plans offer contraception coverage. The California law has a limited "conscience clause" for "religious employers," allowing them to opt out of offering such coverage, but in the state's eyes, Catholic Charities is not a religious employer. Catholic Charities is vigorously challenging that view.

Similar legislation has been passed by legislatures in Massachusetts and here in New York, and some form of mandated contraceptive coverage has been passed or in the works in several other states, according to the Pro-Life Secretariat of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. New York's bills promise to be the focal point of the New York State Catholic Conference's annual Public Policy Forum in Albany March 12. Hundreds of church representatives, including many from the Diocese of Rochester, will participate in the effort to buttonhole legislators on this and other issues of concern to the church.

Curtailing conscience

The bill passed by New York's Democrat-controlled Assembly allows no conscientious objection to contraceptive coverage by employers. The version recently passed by the Republican-controlled Senate does allow for "religious employers" to omit such coverage. But state Catholic leaders say Catholic schools, hospitals and social-service agencies might not fit the bill's narrow definition of what is "religious."



Leaders in the Diocese of Rochester also have condemned the bill's attack on the church's place in the state. On March 1, the Elmira Star-Gazette featured a guest editorial in which Sister of St. Joseph Marie Castagnaro, president and chief executive officer of St. Joseph's Hospital, and Anthony Barbaro, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier, spoke out against the bill.

"(T)he proposed legislation ... establishes an unnecessary conflict between the Senate and the Catholic bishops of New York State," the two executives wrote.

Jack Balinsky, executive director of diocesan Catholic Charities, said that New York state law has recognized the unique situation of Catholic Charities since 1917, when the Legislature passed legislation enabling the agency to serve the wider public in a non-discriminatory manner using government funds, while retaining its Catholic beliefs in its policies and practices.

"To me, what this act of legislation has undone is 75 years of a delicate balance to a constitutionally acceptable approach of providing services to those in need," he said.

The New York bills have not only earned the ire and condemnation of New York's Catholic bishops, they've also been attacked by the Libertarian and Conservative parties and by New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms, a lobbying group that represents 15,000

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