

School fostering adult education

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

An optometrist by trade, Pat Weisenreder has kept up on changes and developments in her profession by attending continuing education classes. Yet, she said, most adult Catholics don't spend anywhere near the amount of time learning about their souls as they do learning about their careers.

"Why not do more of that in my personal life?" she asked rhetorically.

Weisenreder, a volunteer first-grade catechist at St. Paul's Parish in Webster, answered her own question by attending an adult-formation session at her church the evening of Nov. 21. The session was part of an ongoing adult-education series presented at both St. Rita's and St. Paul's parishes in Webster, and included a number of presentations organized by St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry in Rochester.

The St. Bernard's presentations, which have taken place at several parishes around the Diocese of Rochester, are part of the "Schola" series, which began earlier this fall. Schola is Latin for school, and the series itself is a retooled version of St. Bernard's On the Road program, which took place at parishes during the 1990s. For 2002-03, the Schola series is focusing on the basics of Catholicism. Each 90-minute session focuses on topics related to

"Being Catholic," "Living Catholic" and "Celebrating Catholic."

The Nov. 21 session focused on "How Can I Be a Good Catholic in this Complicated World?" and was presented by Mission Helper of the Sacred Heart Sister Barbara Baker, pastoral associate at St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Greece. Sister Baker engaged the 18 attendees in a dialogue about how Catholics make moral decisions.



Sister Baker noted that today's Catholics are bombarded by the values of a materialistic society, so they need to root their morality in a relationship with Christ in order to form their consciences. Catholics need to spend as much time thinking about their moral choices as they do making their shopping choices, said Sister Baker, whose emphasis on developing divine ties rang true with Weisenreder.

"It reminded me that, bottom line, what matters is our relationship with God," she said. "We really need to measure our success on that, not what society says is success."

Weisenreder's hunger to educate herself about her faith is an appetite St. Bernard's aims to satisfy through such programs as Schola, according to Deacon Thomas J. Driscoll, the school's director of community education. The deacon's office, which also oversees continuing professional development of



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Pat Weisenreder responds to a question asked by Sister Barbara Baker, MSHS, during an adult-formation session at St. Paul Church in Webster Nov. 21.

parish ministers in the diocese, is funded through the Thanks Giving Appeal, the largest source of revenue in the diocese's annual operating budget.

The 1993 Synod, which made lifelong faith formation a primary goal for the diocese, led to a birth in both diocesan and parish adult-education programs throughout the diocese, Deacon Driscoll noted.

"I think there's a genuine hunger among the people to learn and to look at deeper spiritual issues," he said. Catholics want answers to such questions as "Who am I?" "Where am I?" and "What does God really do?" he added.

With the Schola series, Deacon Driscoll said, parishes can decide what topics they want discussed and when the sessions will be scheduled. So far, a dozen parishes and/or parish clusters have requested Schola sessions, he said, noting that he began promoting the series in fall of 2001.

St. Bernard's has recruited more than 30 instructors, he said, and is using the proceeds from the fees it charges to parishes to fund extension of the program into correctional facilities.

"Some of these prisons have larger Catholic populations than our parishes," he said.

Deacon Driscoll added that in the future St. Bernard's also wants to be able to offer the series to Spanish-speaking migrant workers and to the Catholic deaf community.

In addition to the Schola series,

Deacon Driscoll's office also promotes adult education by collaborating with various diocesan departments on learning projects. For example, he said, his office collaborated with diocesan Catholic Charities, the diocesan Office of Liturgy and the diocesan department of Evangelization and Catechesis to produce Advent materials regarding the U.S. response to terrorism (see related story on page 2). The community education office also assists multi-parish planning groups and individual parishes that are setting up adult-education programs, and collaborates with ecumenical leaders on programs.

Driscoll added that Catholics seeking answers to specific questions about the faith and related issues can send an e-mail to St. Bernard's via its "Ask St. Bernard's" page on the Internet at www.stbernards.edu/askstb.htm.

St. Bernard's will attempt to respond within 48 hours to any query, he said, adding that online questions about fundamentalism led to the creation of a class he's planning to teach in January on that very subject.

In a spiritually restless age, Deacon Driscoll said, the official church needs to keep developing its efforts to educate adults, especially given that many had a "hit or miss" catechetical formation when they were growing up.

"If we're not supplying answers to them, then they'll look elsewhere," he said.

