

|| A parish is stable in that it is there to be available. It is not there one Sunday and disappears the next. Parish abides. It has an abiding structure of openness and availability. ||

— Paulist Father Frank DeSiano

## SECOND OF TWO PARTS

# Keynoter shares four aspects of parish with priests' gathering

By Lou Jaquet

Paulist Father Frank DeSiano was speaking directly to the priests of the Diocese of Youngstown when he addressed them about "Evangelization, Discipleship, Parish" at the Sept. 6-9 Priests Convocation at the Lodge at Sawmill Creek here.

But the thoughts of the nationally known speaker concerning what constitutes a parish, and what the challenges of making one vital and viable happen to be, would have provided plenty of food for thought for the laity who comprise the congregations in those parishes as well.

Father DeSiano concentrated on four elements that he said make up a parish. It is:

- stable
- a community
- grounded in Eucharist
- has a structure to it

In these characteristics a parish differs from a chapel or a shrine, he said, explaining that difference in some detail.

"A parish is stable in that it is there to be available," he explained. "It is not there one Sunday and disappears the next. Parish abides. It has an abiding structure of openness and availability."

He said a shrine, in contrast, is a "holy place where people go to receive the charism of a particular saint or a particular devotion that is espoused there."

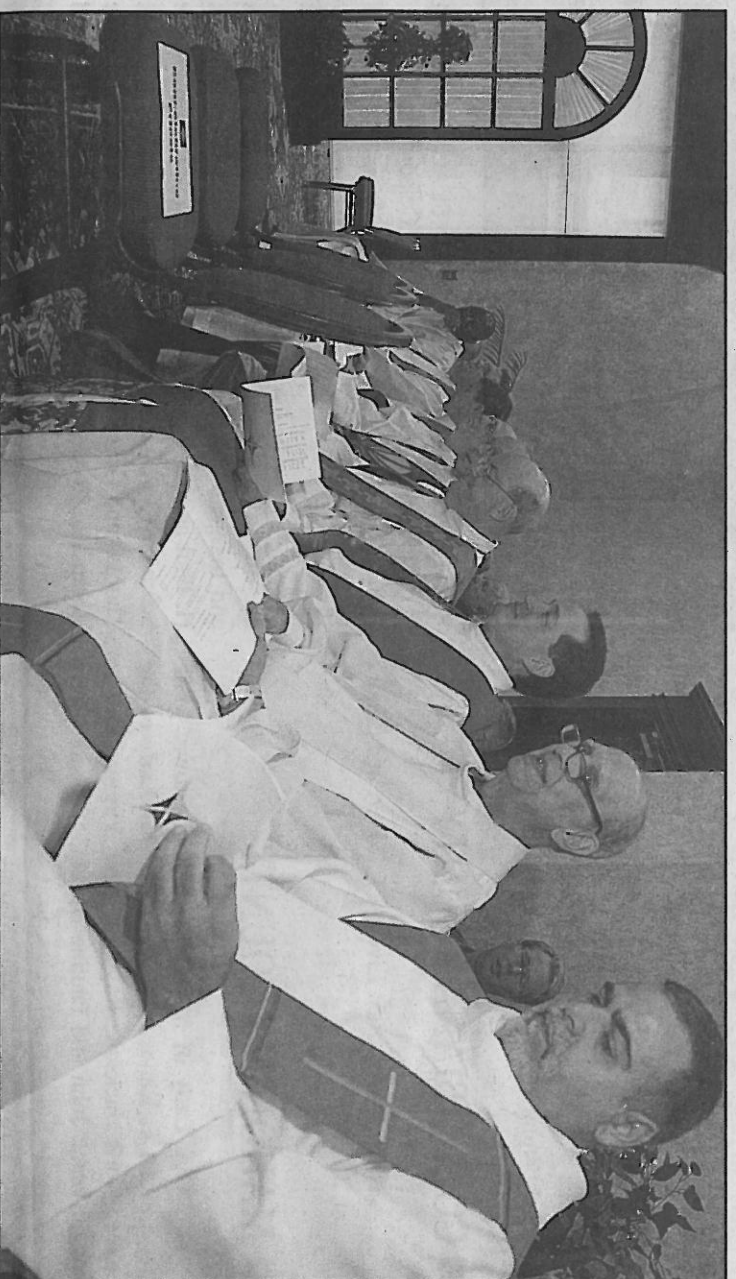
"The theory of a shrine is that it is a holy place where people come and go. It has some of the functions of a parish, but there is no abiding sense of a community at a shrine." He used the example of busloads of pilgrims coming to the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., where they light candles, say prayers, perhaps stay for a Mass and lunch, then get back on their bus to other states.

Father DeSiano said a chapel is neither a shrine or a parish. "The theory of a chapel is that it is for a closed community or a particular [religious] community." He added:

"Part of the image confusion that I propose is this: Most Catholics in the United States think of their parishes as shrines, holy places where they go and there isn't a sense of abiding community. The other image confusion that I propose is that all of the priests and nuns in the United States think of their parish as a chapel — kind of an enclosed community where everybody comes and does all of the rites and all of the gestures, just the way we did it in the seminary [or convent]. You know, all of us singing together with monastic-like voices coming out with Morning Prayer. That's what we think should happen on Sunday."

But Mass at most Catholic parishes is far from such an idyllic view, Father DeSiano noted, to nods and laughter from the priests present. "Why are people coming in late? How about that kid who went to the bathroom three times during my homily? How come that baby threw up? And oh, my God, they are reading the bulletin during my sermon. That's it — no more bulletins from now on!" More knowing laughter.

"We keep thinking everybody lives in this enclosed, encapsulated Catholic life and that's all going to



**TOP:** Paulist Father Frank DeSiano shares his thoughts about parishes and the need to make evangelization their primary function during the Priests Convocation held Sept. 6-9 at Sawmill Creek Lodge in Huron, Ohio. **ABOVE:** Priests gathered for one of the Masses during the convocation included, from left, Father Robert Edwards, Father Chris Luoni, Msgr. Frank Carfagna and Father Pal Ferraro. Photos by Rick Walker

be perfectly expressed when they come to church," the priest mused. "It's very hard for us to know the chaos in which people live. It's very hard for us to know the time pressures put on them, the battles that they have gone through trying to get their 14-year-old out of bed, the battles with the 16-year-old who doesn't want to go to church. So when people come to church, they are late."

Parish, then, "has a unique dynamic," Father DeSiano added. "It is an abiding community that draws people together and sends them forth, that calls people into one [body] and then commissions them to go forth in mission and service beyond the Church. It is not a monastery where we are all pulled together and that's where we stay. It is not a shrine, a kind of holy building where we go. Parish has dynamics that arise from its stability."

Parish is also community, Father DeSiano stressed. "Community," he said, "is not club; in a club, people are included or excluded; community is exactly designed to include those who do not belong." One "perennial debate" that the speaker said he has in his mind concerning community as an aspect of parish is whether "a pastor changes a congregation or a congregation changes a pastor."

Noting that the Diocese of Youngstown is going through a reconfiguration process in which parishes have been merged or closed, he asked the priests to consider "what sense do we make of our parish at a time of widespread consolidation? Is clustering/merging almost always impossible? How do past ideas of parish make clustering or consolidation even more difficult?"

For many people, Father DeSiano said, "church is a building and not a community." He said Catholics here and elsewhere will make sense out of the reconfiguration process "only if we begin thinking, articulating and acting on the basis of community, relational connec-

tion and missionary outreach."

Otherwise, he stressed, parishioners will react with "this is my building — we built this building — this our building — who are you to close it?" That view needs to be overcome, he said, so that parishioners understand "we are a community that is basically called to be disciples and to execute the mission of Jesus Christ. That is the heart of what we do."

Regarding Eucharist, the priest said a parish is rooted in the Word of God, "a word that is spoken to us and to the world. That Word is not meant to be kept inside our church. It is not meant to be confined inside our church walls. It is rooted in the sacred meal, a meal that we eat on behalf of all the hungry, a meal that is a sign of the feeding that God would do for all those who hunger physically and spiritually."

Finally, parish is structured in terms of its relationships, Father DeSiano explained. It is structured under a pastor, the delegate of the bishop; "the pastor is the agent of 'communio,'" a Vatican II concept "where we are a circle of people mutually responsible to each other with our different gifts, callings and responsibilities."

Answering questions from those present, Father DeSiano noted that prior to 1960, "Catholicism was to a large extent ethnic and to a large extent either urban-based or small-town based." That changed in the 1960s with the building of suburbs. "We really tore apart the sociological seam that held Catholicism together for the past 70 years" when dioceses began to build churches in the suburbs, he added.

"We are no longer an urban church. We call our dioceses by the names of cities," he pointed out, "but we have become a suburban church." He cited the case of Baltimore, where there are 40 parishes in the center city but only 8,000 Catholics; the vast majority of Catholics in that archdiocese live in the suburbs.