

Experimental Community Suffers Growing Pains

The Community of John XXIII in Oklahoma City, an experimental parish, was featured in last week's NBC-TV program "The New American Catholic." Reprinted here, with permission of THE NATIONAL OBSERVER, is a full account of the origin and development of this unique parish group.

By **TERENCE SHEA**

Oklahoma City—The "Community of John XXIII" is smarting a little from the pains of growth. The nucleus of 20 laymen who formed a parish within two years ago knew even then that their experimental community would have to endure some hard self-examination if it wanted to lead a passionate revolution in American Catholic parish life. John XXIII, named after the pope who died in 1963, is now entering that introspective stage.

The John XXIII community pioneered in the formation of experimental parishes, at least 10 of which have sprung up across the United States in the past 18 months.

Now the community here is becoming one of the first to demonstrate how and why such plans, born of imaginative religious enthusiasm, sometimes become altered and slowed by realities that range from simple human indifference to the high cost of living.

Petitioning the Bishop

In August, 1966, a group of laymen led by Paul Sprehe, now a 37-year-old president of a consulting-engineering company, petitioned their bishop, the Most Rev. Victor Reel, for permission to start an experimental parish. They had grown weary of traditional parish structures and had been moved to the experience of Masses offered in informal surroundings among small groups of their friends.

They told Bishop Reel that they would like to form a city-wide group of families and individuals who would rent a room big enough for Mass on Sunday mornings, would pay their priest's expenses, and would avoid incurring building debts so that their funds and energies would remain free for social-action programs.

The detail of who the priest might be, like every other detail, had been carefully considered, decided, and rehearsed. Their choice was the Rev. William Nerin, now 42. As an assistant pastor of a suburban parish north of here, Father Nerin had conducted discussion

groups for married couples, including the Sprehes.

Bishop Reel gave the Community of John XXIII a two-year trial period. He told Catholics in his diocese that they could resign from their parishes and join the new group while keeping their children in parochial schools if they wished.

John XXIII's first problems were not in attracting members but in soothing pastors, says Mr. Sprehe. Parish officials throughout the area feared that the experiment would drain them of lay leadership and financial support. John XXIII caused neither hardship.

Parishioners' Promises

Its membership swiftly rose to about 120 adults. Each applicant had to promise two years of participation in parish and secular aid projects and had to make some financial commitment. "Every member is required to put down a figure," says Mr. Sprehe, "even if it's zero."

The community's \$16,000 yearly income falls far below its goals. "People just do not part with their money unless they get a bill," says Mr. Sprehe, "hinting of new fundraising techniques to come. John XXIII is not in debt, but it

has had to cut back on some contributions it had hoped to make to local aid programs.

Father Nerin estimates the average family income in the community at about \$8,000.

His own income is the same, and out of it he pays his expenses and rent for his small apartment. The parish is thinking of moving his office from the carpeted second floor of a refurbished shopping-center building near downtown to a corner of a lumber company's office, where the space is larger and the rent lower.

As a member of John XXIII, Father Nerin directs without salary a Government-sponsored preschool project for about 80 poverty-level children. His services there, requiring about one-third of his time, represent a parish contribution to the secular community "equal to about \$3,000 a year."

The community's main activities now are two study groups. One started as an examination of the Vietnam War and propelled many of its members into active campaigning for Sen. Eugene McCarthy. The other group is investigating the quality of the state's public education and looking for ways to improve it.

In another program led by individual John XXIII members, about 30 white families from all over the city are moving into an attractive northeastern suburb to prevent it from becoming an all-Negro neighborhood.

The community's members also provide free baby-sitting service for parents enrolled in beginning and remedial education courses, and John XXIII's businessmen members are finding jobs for unemployed young Negroes.

Faltering Fish

Another activity, FISH, now is faltering. The fish was a symbol of Christianity in its earliest centuries. In Oklahoma City it is a service linking volunteers with the needs of the city's poor through a well-advertised telephone exchange. When it provided hot soup for the hungry or strong legs for the crippled or transportation to hospitals and doctors' offices for the poor and elderly, FISH attracted volunteers.

But when people began to use it merely as a provider of free handyman and taxi service, the volunteers lost interest, says Mrs. Sprehe.

Mr. Sprehe believes that the decline of FISH is symptomatic

of internal dangers that John XXIII and all its projects face. The community has too few structures, he says, "and it's very clumsy as a result." He believes that the group suffers from a "leadership gap," jokingly asserting that he prefers "a responsible dictatorship." But it should be a leadership by all the laity, he says.

"I am not the leader of John XXIII," Father Nerin insisted. The community and its elected board of governors make the major decisions; Father Nerin views his role more as a professional theologian involved in the lives of people who have asked him to be their celebrant in worship.

Sunday Worship

In worship on Sunday mornings, at the close of an hour or two of discussions, Father Nerin takes on the role that no other person in the community can fulfill. At a round table decorated with perhaps nothing more than a housewife's hand-picked daisies and fitted with altar vessels of the simplest design, he celebrates the Eucharist while the members and guests sing and pray around him.

From time to time a non-essential segment of the Mass may be shifted from one part of the service to another, and usually Father Nerin's homily becomes an exchange of ideas among all the members present. But the liturgy's central elements remain unchanged.

The community's membership, now about 80 adults, is the lowest it has been in many months. Several students have left for the summer, some families have transferred to other cities, and a few members separated from John XXIII to form their own group, called The New Community.

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Ecumenical

WCC Head Urges Fight for Justice

Detroit—(NC)—The general secretary of the World Council of Churches has urged a massive Protestant-Catholic-Orthodox thrust to establish worldwide economic justice and equal opportunity.

Speaking to the fifth National workshop for Christian Unity here, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake said that the combined churches must plunge into the political field if nuclear war is to be avoided and peace established in the world.

He told more than 2,000 ecumenists gathered for the con-

ference that Vatican Council II, papal documents and World Council of Churches' positions reveal complete agreement on the tasks which must be done.

He added that although important ethical, social, economic and political differences exist between Christians, none involve nuclear war or peace.

"It is therefore clear that in the next few years our combined bureaucracies must find the ways to bring the whole weight of Christian goodwill and conviction to bear upon the great social, economic and political issues of our day."

On other matters of ecumenism, Dr. Blake said "there is hardly anything that the World Council of Churches does that could not be better done if the Roman Catholic Church were fully and intimately 'involved in it.'"

Dr. Blake said all ecumenical discussions should be theological, based on the Gospel; that the purpose and function of an institution must always be more important than mere survival, and that while compromise is necessary, the forsaking of convictions is "ill-fortunate and disastrous."

Protestant Orders 'Potentially Valid'

Detroit — (RNS) — A prominent Catholic theologian told an interreligious and international audience here that Protestant ministers potentially have all the sacramental validity of Roman Catholic priests.

Addressing the fifth National Workshop for Christian Unity, Father George H. Tavard said, however, that it is not up to the Catholic Church to determine this priestly significance, but the Protestant Churches themselves.

Father Tavard based his conclusions, not on the form or historical succession of a Protestant minister's ordination, but on his function.

"There are, in the Catholic Church," he said, "two complementary ways of ascertaining that a man has valid orders. The one investigates his ordination; the other examines the way he functions."

"The people—and most usual, too, the bishops—who see a man functioning as a priest, do not normally wonder about the line of succession in which he stands."

He said he would ask a Protestant minister, "In what way do you function? Do you believe yourself to function, and are you recognized by your community to function, as a eucharistic priest?"

"If a given Protestant Church does recognize its ministers as eucharistic hierarchs (even with a totally different vocabulary, with another form of designation or ordination, with another concepts of succession, with another theological frame of reference), I see no reason why the Catholic Church should not take note of this fact and recognize the sacramental dimension of which this community has the experience, thus acknowl-

edging its ministry as the authentic ministry of the Eucharist, without asking historical questions about the forms in which this ministry was transmitted.

"In other words, I would suggest that we extend to all Christian Churches the principles which we apply to ourselves; it is not apostolic succession which makes the church catholic, but the catholicity of the church which guarantees apostolic succession."

'Some Renewal' Criticized

Detroit—(NC)—Roman Catholic renewal has been beset by fickle theology, simplistic thinking, thoughtlessness and frequent compulsion to abandon a rocking ship, a Lutheran historian-theologian told a national interfaith gathering here.

Speaking to the fifth national workshop for Christian Unity, Dr. Martin E. Marty suggested "some Catholic renewal has not been renewal of the Church, but the manic babble on the part of people with personal problems."

The University of Chicago professor gave a "Protestant critique of extremism in Catholic renewal," and said Catholic renewal has to learn more about what he called the "Protestant principle."

This he defined as the tradition which "allows for and insists upon radical criticism of one's own community, one's own forms," but in a spirit of loyalty.

Dr. Marty also charged that some Catholic renewal has been "extreme" in its embrace of the secular world, to the point of pure romanticization of the secular. Other Catholic renewalists, he said, frustrated by political convention, have found it "necessary to link up with revolutionary forces in the world."

Catholic renewal theology, Dr. Marty said, has sometimes been "fickle and nervous," offering experiment as solution and tentative steps as the "last word."

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