

NOW HEAR THIS . . . The Real Tragedy of Steuben Holocaust

By Father Richard Torrey

The sickening new story of a fire which killed seven children and their father in a small home about a mile from Cohocton in Steuben County shocked our whole diocese last Friday. Pity and horror and sympathy were expressed everywhere.

The whole tragedy of the fire does not end in the charred bodies: lack of decent, low-income housing in Steuben, Gates and Wayne counties is a scandal in this affluent state.

No one saw or heard the blaze which roared through the tiny, isolated frame-house trapping the eight victims. Only smoldering ruins and dead bodies in the ashes were left when the first passerby came along the lonely country road next morning.

The mother of the family, in a Bath hospital preparing for surgery that very day, and 5-year-old twins staying with friends survived the catastrophe.

Complimentary statements were made by many neighbors about the character and industry of the father, the good manners of the children, the patient courage of the mother who kept the small house "always very clean."

But there were others who came to look at the fire-blackened ruins of that 20 by 40 foot shack who said: "Will somebody do something about this? Families shouldn't have to live in terrible housing like this."

A friend who visited the fire-scene with a sad heart, for he had known this Negro family and had tried to help them a bit, told me: "It was frightening to watch the people who came to look at the remains of the fire."

"Many of them, very poor and ill-housed, went back home to the very same situations of overcrowding and fire-danger, having no hopes of anything better. They saw the charred remains of three beds for nine people in this shack. Their own houses have no better conditions for health and happiness. They would go up in smoke just as fast."

Priests of our diocesan Secular Mission, now based in six of the poorest and most rural counties, say that lack of housing for the poor and administrative strangulation of funds for building are the most depressing condition of their daily apostolate.

"Housing for the helpless people of this area is the most frustrating worry of my job," Father John Hempel, director of the Secular Mission, said. "This tragedy has shaken the core of the issue. Why can't the Federal government and the State do more? We think the Church too must find funds to get into this field more deeply."

Another Secular Mission priest, Father Timothy Weider, zealous for the poor in Steuben County, wrote this week to clergymen of his area: "The tragedy was a terrible defeat for those who are charged with housing for the homeless. . . . May God forgive us for our past ignorance and inactivity."

On the very morning of the fire, after long negotiations, he provided money from the Secular Mission to rehouse a family, which had once lived in an overcrowded house with the dead Burnett family. He has made downpayments for improved housing for many migrant and non-migrant families and VISTA workers associated with him are constantly searching for houses which would offer some degree of improved safety and comfort for the underprivileged in Steuben county.

In Wayne County, with some 15,000 officially labeled "poverty people," 20 per cent of all housing is called "substandard" which includes categories of "deteriorated" and "dilapidated."

A publication of the Wayne County Action Program says that farm or tenant houses used by the poor there are characterized by "damp, dirt bottom cellars, inadequate plumbing, heating and wiring, drafty interiors." The shanty types, more often

occupied by the black poor are described as "far too small for the needs of the family, primitive, unsanitary, degenerating and generally deplorable."

That county's problems of poverty and housing recently became the responsibility of Father Thomas O'Brien, another Secular Mission priest of the diocese, who has just been named Regional Director of the Wayne County Action Program, funded by the federal Office of Economic Opportunity. (His early weeks in this unique role for a priest will be described here soon.)

A recent, excellent, 3-part survey of Wayne's poverty problems by the Rochester Times-Union titled "The Rural Slums", stated that general community apathy about the "shacks and the poor" was a deterrent to action. A social worker was quoted: "The local citizenry who can't even see the housing problems here need the help. They need help more than the people living in the shacks."

Father O'Brien has a job cut out for him. But it is not the indifference or selfishness of one county or one community which should concern Christians. Pleading for all the poor and homeless Christ said: "Whatever you do for these, the least of my brothers, you do for Me."



Brother Juniper, famed cartoon character, gives his support to the theme of the National Conference of Christians and Jews' 1969 Brotherhood Week, Feb. 16-23. (RNS)

COMMENTARY

Courier-Journal — Friday, Feb. 14, 1969 19

CHURCH AND THE CITY

Time Bomb in South America

By Father P. David Finks

Father Anthony Mullaney said, "When it comes to the individual Christian or the church seeking justice for the downtrodden it is impossible to be a reconciler unless you first become a protagonist."

Father Mullaney of the famed Milwaukee 14 used this theme to sketch the scriptural basis for social change in one of several talks he gave in Rochester last weekend.

Douglas Hyde, ex-Marxist, former editor of the London Daily Worker makes much the same point in an excellent book on South America published several years ago. (The Troubled Continent; Pflaum Press, Dayton, Ohio, 1967)

"The first time I went to Latin America," writes Mr. Hyde, "I looked around and said to myself, 'If I were still a Communist, and had been sent here to organize the Communist party, what a wonderful assignment this would be.'"

He lists a litany of ingredients that demand deep structural changes and redistribution of wealth in the South American nations. Unless these changes happen quickly the only alternative the downtrodden masses have is bloody revolution. The bomb is there in centuries of incredible injustice and exploitation of the many by the few. Modern communication is bringing the ingredients together for all to see. It will require only a small spark to set off the bomb.

But people like us do not like to think about revolution. So many of

us who glory in the name Christian want to smooth things over with appeals to brotherly love without undergoing the hard suffering needed to first right the wrongs.

Despite the efforts of the "wooden cross" bishops like Helder Camara, the majority of the hierarchy in South America are accused of preaching social reform but remaining identified with governments and an economic system which dooms the poor to continued exploitation.

It is against the background of this seething cauldron that is South America that the Ivan Illich affair increases our pessimism. Cardinal Franjo Seper, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has prohibited priests, nuns and other religious from taking part in the training and research centers of Latin America conducted by Msgr. Illich (Courier-Journal 2/7/69).

Illich since 1960 has trained most of our priests and nuns going to South America. Cardinal Cushing once described the center at Cuernavaca, Mexico, as "by far the superior of all the training schools we have for Latin America."

Msgr. Illich, long supported by Cardinal Spellman, has often upset members of the hierarchy here and in South America by his outspoken criticism of the church's neo-colonialist mission stance. His Cuernavaca Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) "has been an object of suspicion in conservative religious

and political circles because its courses and publications have been open to persons of all ideological persuasions, including a number of radicals." (Courier-Journal 2/7/69).

So we witness again the "old ecclesiastical shell game." The Church talks social reform and love of the poor, but any effort to promote serious change is quickly squashed. The Church in South America is part of the reigning institutional life with its buildings and programs and these must be protected at all costs.

It is no wonder that there has grown among the proletariat of South America and in much of the world a distrust of the Church hand in hand with a respect for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus after all had "no where to lay His head." His Good News was above all for the poor and the oppressed who were His special friends.

The Church, despite its best intentions in Peru or in the inner city, U.S.A., knows which side its institutional bread is buttered on and sets its real priorities accordingly.

The young, the black, the poor say that there is a judgment coming. Our preaching against revolution and communism will be ignored unless we are ready to sacrifice church property and income in an effort to provide viable alternatives to violence for the "have nots" of our city and for the world. Only a belief in the shattering surprise of the resurrection of Jesus makes me hope that the Church is capable of such a conversion.



VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE

The Family Is the Parish

By Father James McHugh

One of the most significant sections of "Human Life in Our Day" has to do with the structure of the parish and its relationship to the families that comprise it. Since "the Christian family is an image of God and a sign of the Church," it has the capacity for performing many of the functions that we have taken out of the home and delegated to school or parish.

To some degree, we have been affected by the trend toward bigger and more complex organizations, thereby inverting the order of importance. As a result, we have shown more concern about building up parish groups and organizations than we have in helping the family realize its own potentiality.

The pastoral attempts to restore the proper balance in stating that "parishes should make the needs of the family and the benefits which the family brings to the parish controlling norms in the planning of parish organizations and activities — liturgical, educational, charitable and social."

In many ways this brief statement is revolutionary, and if one ponders its implications, it is really calling for a re-evaluation and probable restructuring of many present activities and future plans.

Vatican II's Constitution on the Church emphasizes that Christ continues His prophetic role not only through the hierarchy but also through the laity. Indeed, in a home where Christianity pervades the whole style of living, husband and

wife find their proper vocation in being witnesses to one another and to their children of faith in Christ and love for Him. The Christian family loudly proclaims both the present virtues of the Kingdom of God and the hope of a blessed life to come.

On the practical level, the announcing of Christ and the preaching of His message is accomplished quite ordinarily in the day-to-day circumstances of family life. Within the home children "first hear the name of God, first learn to pray, and first express their faith." Indeed, children "pick up" basic Christian attitudes from their parents long before they attend church or school, and these attitudes accompany them through life.

Let us return to the mandate of the Bishops calling for a "parochial agrioramento" that will put the family at the center of the parish's liturgical, educational, charitable and social activities. How can it be accomplished?

First, the parish still possesses the ability to provide a sense of community to the families in its general area. This is not to argue for precise geographical limits — the experience of underground parishes or Knights of Columbus Councils prove that some people are willing to move around the diocese to worship together. However, if a parish is continually aware of its responsibility to the overall community, the convergence of interests will make it something of a center of action for its families.

This means that the parish becomes the base of many locally-oriented social action programs, a training center for specific forms of apostolic work, and a center for continuing Christian education.

It will also call for more parental involvement in preparing the children for First Communion, and later on, for the sacrament of Penance. Most of all, Sunday worship will have to be restored to its rightful place as a proclamation of joy and hope on the part of the people of God.

In this same vein, there is need to re-think all sacramental celebration in terms of family participation. Baptisms might well be performed at any time of day or evening, and we may even think of the child's father performing the rite that introduces the baby to the People of God. The Sacrament of Confirmation, which leads the maturing Christian to a more active apostolic role, should also reflect a link between home and parish, and this may lead to the pastor administering the sacrament more regularly.

The celebration of the marriage sacrament offers limitless possibilities for joyful participation, and families should make specific suggestions to their pastors as to how this will be best accomplished.

In terms of social and charitable functions, parishes, especially those in the inner city, should become the base of operations for anti-poverty programs.

ON THE RIGHT SIDE

A Letter Against Abortion

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

Abortionist propagandists are working — and with some success — to brain-wash decent people into the acceptance of killing the unborn child. They will work hard to make this the law this year.

Governor Rockefeller said a new law is possible "if the public lets legislators know how they feel." Senator Lent, a leader of the Abortionist club, said: "Now the time is ripe for some kind of reform. . . . We want to hear from persons of all faiths and persuasions on this matter."

Most people think: "I'm against the killing of unborn babies, but I don't have the ability to write a letter." Many have the ability, but neither time nor inclination toward letter writing.

If you are one such, will you just use the letter below, which I am sending to my senator and assemblyman. Copy it and mail it to YOUR legislators, and add: "This expresses my sentiments." But be sure to mail it: "The life you save will be some innocent child's."

Dear Sir: This week I notice ads calling out

attention to the MARCH OF DIMES WEEK for the handicapped child, and to prevent physical defects in the unborn. It springs from a compassion that is human and non-denominational.

I should feel silly to claim that this compassion is some exclusively Catholic matter. At the same time I have a feeling that the abortionists are working to squeeze Catholics into a corner, as if they alone are the defenders of the unborn child.

It is a pity that some church leaders and bureaus of some religious denominations have come out officially in favor of abortion. I think they do not represent the thinking of the grass roots religious people who are the foundation of the churches. I do not think it represents either Moses or Christ.

Regrettably this blessing of abortion at the top increases a cleavage between church members and some of their leaders when unity is a special need.

Do people with no church affiliation readily buy the killing of the



unborn child as a "right thing"? It seems to me that is insulting: as if the only people who are concerned about human rights are church-affiliated people. That just isn't so.

The soft sell for abortion is no answer to the hard fact: the child in the womb has a right not to be killed!

Some years ago the Mafia was said to have a special syndicate called "Murder Incorporated." Skilled killers were hired to get rid of an unwanted person. The present thrust for abortion seems a present day "Murder Incorporated."

All the elements of the old are present: 1) payment of money, 2) to kill an unwanted child, 3) to be accomplished by a skilled abortionist. The difference is a peculiar one, viz. some legislators are working to make this new "Murder Incorporated" legal!

I am writing to you to ask you to vote: FOR the defense of the unborn child; AGAINST the proposals to make abortion legal.

Sincerely yours,

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