



"What do you mean,
You don't want to get involved?"

The Church: 1970

Catholic Mags Failing

By Fr. Andrew Greeley



It is no secret that Catholic magazines are in deep trouble. "The Extension" has vanished from the scene; the "Ave Maria" died to be reborn as "A.D. '70" only to expire almost at once. "U.S. Catholic" and "The Sign" continue to provide high quality articles, but one hears all sorts of rumors of circulation problems and, at this writing, there are reports that the "National Catholic Reporter" (having cut itself down to tabloid size) is in trouble and "Commonweal" is thinking of becoming an every other week publication.

Only the brisk, irreverent "Critic" seems to be prospering and that journal's brisk irreverent editor, Joel Wells, is the first to confess that he's not sure how long that will last (as long as the "Critic" is able to laugh at everything including itself I suspect it will prosper indefinitely).

The journalists who find themselves backed into a corner by their falling circulation have an explanation: "People are no longer interested in the Church." One wonders. The Dutch catechism sells almost 200,000 copies, the "Jerusalem Bible" is a fantastic success for Doubleday, the secular media continue to be fascinated with Catholic problems. It is not so much the Church that readership is no longer interested in, one suspects, as it is the view of the Church served up by many of the Catholic journals.

Many of us much prefer to get our liberal left party line directly from the "New Republic" or the "New York Review of Books" instead of absorbing its pale and tardy reflection from the "Commonweal" and the feature stories from the "National Catholic Reporter." We also have a good deal more respect for the intellectual competence of those who write for the secular journals than we do for the intellectual midgets who have replaced the greats of former years on the "Commonweal."

The second problem of such journals, it seems to me, is that they are quite correct when they say that readers have lost interest in the institutional Church. The institutional Church has lost its credibility, at least in part because of the very effective attacks made on it by the liberal Catholic journals. But the point is that nobody is much interested anymore in a continuation of the attacks. Raving at the failures of ecclesiastical administrators, however necessary, has also become old hat. If they become more secular, then they have to be evaluated against what now must be called their secular competitors. On the other hand, if they persist in purely

Catholic interests, the readership becomes restless and bored.

The third problem they face is their total incapacity for wit, humor and laughter. There are some readers, of course, who delight in a diet of unrelieved grimness but, once again, the Catholic journals cannot hope to compete with their secular counterparts in being grim in a literate and intellectual sort of way.

Many of their readers of the past assumed that there was a specifically Catholic version of liberalism which was somewhat more hopeful and somewhat more cheerful than that to be found in "The New Republic" or "The Nation." But the party line now requires that there is nothing that is specifically Catholic and surely no vision of the Good Society and the Good Life to which a Catholic viewpoint could make an important contribution.

The Catholic journals, then, could follow any one of a number of courses:

1. They could go out of business for all concerned.
2. They could forget their obsession with the institutional Church and deal with religion. As Professor Harvey Cox put it, anyone who doesn't see a revival of interest in religion at the present time is blind.
3. The journals could rediscover a specifically Catholic viewpoint on society however much this might require them to break with their current line.
4. They could follow the path blazed by the "Circle" and stress wit that is not based on completely "in" jokes, criticism that does not sound like one is working out conflicts with one's parents, and hope that is rooted in something more than the romantic rehash of Marxism.

None of the last three events are likely to happen. Catholic liberal journalists — like all members of the intellectual ethnic group — live in a world of their own, a world in which what they and their friends think constitutes the whole of reality, a world in which everybody on the outside can be dismissed as either ambitious ecclesiastics or hard hats.

An editor of "The Commonweal" recently observed that part of the reason for their problem was that so many people were leaving the Church. Yes, indeed, blame everything on the Church. There couldn't possibly be another explanation. It is simply unthinkable that his journal has become insufferably dull, indeed one of the best cures invented for insomnia since sheep.

On The Right Side

Airport: Morality Play

By Father Paul J. Cuddy



In August I saw the movie, Airport, and loved it. Since we should promote good, I advertised the movie to our hospital personnel. A young matron said: "Father, I'm surprised at you, recommending a bad picture." Had I missed the point? I wondered, so I went to Airport again, and came to this conclusion: it is a modern morality play. Sin is presented as sin. Virtue is seen as laudable. Helen Hayes is a delightful fantasy. Here is a quick analysis.

1. Bert Lancaster (Mel Bak-ersfield) is the harried executive and husband, whose marriage is disintegrating. From what? Overwork, and a selfish wife. The harm to their children from the neglect of home life, from the marital wrangling, and the pending divorce is clearly implied.

2. Dean Martin (Vernon Dem-erest), through his handsome body, exudes sin from the opening scene, with an occasional touch of goodness. His philandering gives the audience a sympathy for his wife whose brief appearance shows a good wife, patient, understanding, hopeful.

3. Martin's dialogue with stewardess Bisset (Gwen Meighen) gives a moving reverence-for-life and anti-abortion message, as she rejects his suggestion to abort their child.

4. The conversation between Martin and co-pilot Nelson (An-son) is better than 1000 books on "How to Succeed in Marriage." It is a conversation between Depravity and Integrity. Martin is conscious of his infidelity which doesn't seem to bother him; and of the pregnancy of the stewardess carrying his unborn child, which does bother him, but more as a dilemma than as a result of sin. Nelson is clear wholesomeness and goodness.

With the stewardess Gwen on his mind, Martin says to the co-pilot: "Oh, that's right. You never ran around after you married." "No. When I got married I promised to be faithful. And that's the way it is." Martin: "How many children do you have? Six?" "No. Seven." And Nelson is obviously pleased about his seven. Martin: "How many did you plan?" Nelson replies with a grin: "Four planned. Three unplanned." "And what about the three unplanned?" "It's a funny thing. They've turned out to be the most exciting of all. Wonderful!" So we chalk up a beautiful lesson; trust in God's Providence.

5. While Van Heflin (Guer-ero) is pitiable and frustrating, his wife (Maureen Staple-ton) is a picture of greatness. We see her, a tired, worn woman grubbing in a third rate restaurant. Heflin sits on a

stool as the wife works behind the counter. An obvious life drop-out yet having a sincere reverence for his wife, he says: "I wonder that you never left me." Her reply is calm and clear. "When I married you, I said 'for better or for worse until death.' I meant it." And she tapped his arm, significant of patience, kindness, integrity. No saccharin. Just nobility.

6. George Kennedy (Patroni) is great. A big hulk of a man, loud, vulgar by socialite standards, magnificent by human standards. We watch him with amusement and affection and admiration. What qualities! Competence, confidence, generosity, loyalty, good nature. Patroni represents the finest Christians in Christ's Body, the Church. Such men have an uproarious enthusiasm for the Green Bay Packers and a simple, awesome reverence for the Mass and for holiness. They study the sports pages rather than the latest theological hypotheses. A deck of cards and a six-pack interest them more than liturgical developments. They love their wives and children. They enjoy their jobs and do them well. They practice charity without cant. They love the Church and they are loyal.

Reports are that the book, Airport, is disappointingly sex loaded. Be that as it may, the movie strikes me as an exciting and edifying morality play.

The Morriss Plan

Worse Than Stones

By Frank Morriss



An unbalanced man who apparently didn't know what he was doing throws stones at the Pope. But some very rational persons who know exactly what they are doing treat the Pope far worse.

The worst of the new anti-papalism isn't the virulent kind of the past, but it is a kind of indifference to what the Pope is and what his opinions may be. I didn't hear the Pope mentioned once at a recent feasibility study for a national pastoral council, nor even hear a discussion of what relationship there would be between such a council and the papacy. The general atmosphere almost suggested that the Church is really what the Protestants have always claimed it to be, an interior thing with each conscience supreme pontiff between the individual and God.

There is a man in Rome, of course, but many of the new Catholics prefer him there rather than in their hearts, where the Vicar of Christ must truly be. They would certainly admit for him some sort of legal status, or historical reality, but certain theological error has so permeated the modern Catholic psychology that it will not admit the obligation that attends a Church governed by Christ's representative.

I suppose part of this is due to the general hostility toward, or at least indifference concerning, institutionalism. For the new Catholics, the Pope is the embodiment of religious institutionalism. As a reminder that religion is not exactly as they wish it to be—that is, interior, personal, and under individual control — the Pope must be ignored into oblivion.

They should be reminded that while the Church is an institution, it is not like any other. The Pope is not some anachronism lingering on from a past age of authoritarianism. He is that man chosen by the Holy Spirit to inherit the authority of Peter, to wear the fisherman's ring, use the keys of the kingdom. In a word, he stands for Christ in this world, and he must be heeded as we would heed Christ were He to walk among us as he walked among His followers 2,000 years ago.

I say the worst kind of treatment that the modern Catholics can deal out to the Pope is indifference. I suggest that is what Father Charles E. Curran of the Catholic University of America was promoting when he told a Christian Family Movement meeting that most Catholic married couples now have made birth control a "dead issue." What Father Curran is reporting, and with approval, is that individual Catholics have decided to veto the Pope's teaching on birth control, to act as if it really did not exist for them. Having been unable to win the argument on the level of authority, Father Curran is pretending that he has won it on the level of practicality.

Of course, Father Curran never proves his contention about most Catholic couples practicing birth control, which is what he means. The reason that he never proves it is that he cannot. The closest thing we have are the public opinion polls, but everyone should now realize that these polls are always in danger of coming a cropper, as they did for example in the recent British elections.

And not even such polls give

Father Curran any certain evidence for his statement. I am sure many Catholic couples do indeed practice birth control, and thus in effect flout the Church's teaching. That they do so in good conscience — that is, that they have concluded the Pope is wrong — is not so certain. Birth control is not a dead issue as long as a sense of guilt stemming from what the Church teaches remains with Catholics.

Of course such thinkers and their less educated followers are busy trying to do just that. In Britain, a progressive group is distributing thousands of pamphlets saying that "contraception" is not against the Roman Catholic faith. It urges couples to make their own decisions and then not worry about it, without bothering to consult anyone. It says the Pope's teaching is causing many Roman Catholics to suffer.

Behind this all is the teaching of certain theologians, who since their defeat by "Humanae Vitae" have done everything they could to undermine that encyclical's authority and acceptance. Instead of reviewing their own thoughts on contraception, these thinkers have simply attempted to bring about a state of indifference to what the Pope has taught. If they succeed, of course, then the same fate of indifference can be brought to anything else any Pope from today until doomsday may teach.

Alongside such treatment, the stones thrown by an unbalanced man were like tokens of love. They may, in fact, have been the Holy Spirit's way of drawing our attention to what Catholics are doing to the Holy Father.