

The Newman Chaplain... And His Complex Job

Father Ronald Gaesser, chaplain to Catholic students at Auburn Community College and Eisenhower College, Seneca Falls, was recently the subject of an article by Mrs. Martha McMahon of Auburn in the Sacred Heart parish bulletin. As an insight into a sensitive priest, the interview reveals the troubled feelings of many young collegians.

By MARTHA MCMAHON

Father Ronald Gaesser, Newman Chaplain, was my first experience at interviewing so I laughed when he admitted that it was his first experience at being interviewed. Speaking quietly and thoughtfully, he seemed much more conservative than I had anticipated.

However, whether he wears love beads and a beard is apparently insignificant. The activities of the Newman Club at ACC, where Father Gaesser is most active, are very impressive. Together with the students, he is considering some real problems.

In addition to his liturgical role at the colleges, Father Gaesser spends much time in student counseling. His qualifications include a masters degree in counseling from Syracuse University and a sincere interest in and concern for the students.

He finds the dilemma of the Viet Nam war creating one of the most difficult of student problems — to file or not to file as a conscientious objector.

The students find themselves torn between participation in a war they consider immoral and complete rejection of the traditional values of their parents.

Father expressed concern that under this pressure a student might compromise his ideals to the extent that he would become totally frustrated and eventually too bitter to make a positive contribution to society. He agreed that the problems of the c.o. are much more common than most people realize.

The greatest problem that most students face, however, is still mutual understanding at home. One boy told him of his delight with his father for beginning to "talk" to him, or as the boy put it: "My father is



FATHER GAESSER

finally opening up and listening."

Father Gaesser feels that a majority of the students want very much to have a good relationship with their parents. Some of them try repeatedly to approach their parents in a more adult manner only to be put back into their former place as little children.

It is difficult for adolescents to learn to be adults, but it is equally difficult for parents to learn to accept their maturing children into adulthood, he said. By the time a son or daughter reaches college age, the parental role is no longer one of teaching and rearing.

The parent must learn to accept his child as an emerging independent adult who needs the love and support of his parents but who will no longer agree with an opinion merely because it belongs to his parent.

I asked Father Gaesser what an upset parent could do when he finds his college-age offspring involved with drugs or demonstrations against the war.

He advised parents to distinguish between the child whom they love and his actions which they find unacceptable, to be more tolerant of him even if they can't tolerate what he does.

It was easy to see why Fa-

ther Gaesser asked for his new job. He obviously enjoys and respects the students.

He said that he found the kids challenging because they refused to accept an answer without a sound reason. This keeps him honest. However, he admitted that they will accept a reasonable answer.

He finds that they have a deep sense of religion and God, which means to them involvement with people more than with organized religion. He has discovered that they have sound instincts and emotions and that they worry about using their lives to make a significant contribution to society.

"They have difficulty in translating their ideals into action because, despite realistic goals, they are impatient with society's reluctance to change."

He spoke of colleges being a world apart from the rest of society like a monastery or a retreat, providing the necessary atmosphere for students to develop ideals and reach conclusions which they will bring to the "9-5 business world."

One note of pessimism entered the conversation almost like a warning when Father Gaesser said: "Some people project that kids may become very materialistic and selfish" in the future because of the frustration of their own idealistic hopes. They do not see society offering them reasons not to be selfish.

He was asking students to persevere. He was asking adults to lead.

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