

Christ the King Church, site of the mission, waits its parishioners on a week night.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY LAURENCE E. KEEFE

For an hour or two each night, it was like the church of old.

The crowds kneeling at the altar rail, the priest from New York City preaching homey sermons, the papal blessing with a plenary indulgence, and the hushed church afterward as the lines stretched to the confessional in suspenseful silence — it was the memories of childhood given new life.

The mission, which used to be held each year in every parish, and which used to support hundreds of traveling priests, now seems a thing of the past . . . in most places. But the crowds that showed up the other week at Christ the King Church were hungry for some of that good, old-fashioned spirituality:

Father Joseph Bernier, the Blessed Sacrament father from New York who gave the mission, even fit the role to perfection. A burly man with the expressive face of Lyndon Johnson, Father Bernier has the bonhomie and authority of Spencer Tracy in a Boys' Town movie.

Father Bernier doesn't think missions are dead.

"No, I think they'll be coming back," he says, with firm assurance putting his arm

around your shoulder, as though to tell you, "Don't worry, the Church never changes."

"People today don't have the time a mission takes. There's junior executive meetings, and men have to be on the road. Sunday night, one man said to me, 'Father, some guys have all the luck. They'll get to be here all four days of the mission, and I've got to go to Detroit tomorrow morning.' And then there's TV, of course.

"It was a lot different when people didn't have anything to do. We used to fill the churches."

Later, though, he conceded, "You know, lack of time — that's just an excuse."

Father Bernier is no stranger to Rochester. He estimates he visits the city to give missions "about 10 times a year." And he finds a lot of difference between parishes. "In the small towns, the faith is strong," he says in measured words. "The parishes in the cities are a different thing. The people are more . . . interpretive. In the smaller towns, they wouldn't miss Mass for all the money in the world."

But Father Bernier is not really conservative in the retrogressive sense of the word.

The changes since Vatican II are "a blessing. We were getting in a rut. Vatican II woke us up."

Relaxing in the study of the rectory, his small cigar being constantly and carefully relit, Father Bernier is a different man than the preacher, more complex and penetrating.

His sermons, filled with anecdotes about waking sleepers in the pews and exhortations on the good humor of Jesus, appeal to the broadest possible range of people.

He now is spending nine months a year on the road, says Father Bernier, but his order has asked him to take up a parish, and he is not accepting any more missions for next year.

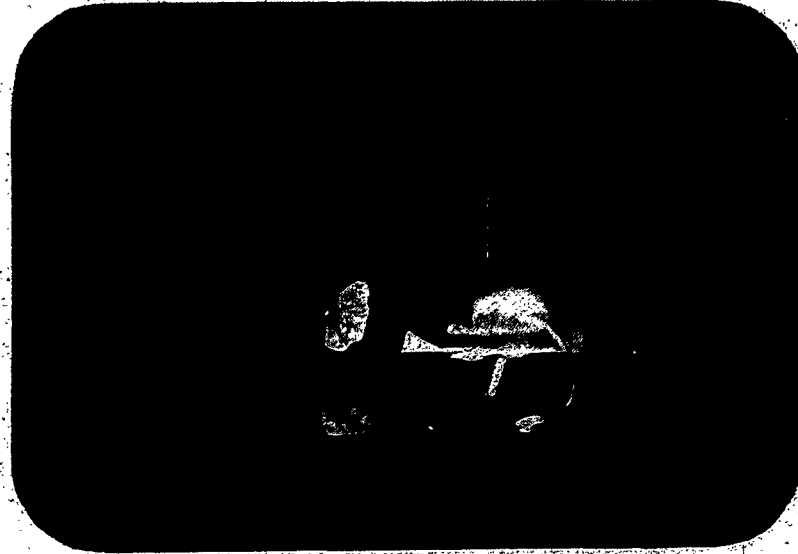
Born in Canada and raised in Maine, Father Bernier was ordained in 1940. Since that time, in addition to parish work and heading a novitiate, he has spent 25 years at his order's major seminary.

Through it all, he considered his major work giving high school retreats and days of recollection. "About six or seven years ago, they stopped giving retreats, or they wanted different kinds of retreats, so I moved over into giving missions."

How do you judge the success of a mission?

"By attendance and . . . well, make that, protracted attendance, and by confessions and consultations. At one mission I gave in Albuquerque, I couldn't leave the house because of people coming to see me.

"This was a pretty successful mission."



After Mass, parishioners cluster around Father Bernier to ask his advice and to invite him to their homes, left. Above, Mrs. Mary Ann Rodenstock provides the organ music. Each night of the mission ends, right, with lines outside the confessional.