

Through the Eyes of a Parish Priest St. Bridget's: 20 Years of Change

By PAT PETRASKE

The man stood at the rectory door without a shirt shaking from the chilly Fall air and from alcohol. His request to Father Francis Vogt was simple: he needed a coat. A social worker who recounts the incident had stopped at St. Bridget's for a visit and offered to obtain a coat within the hour. But Father Vogt, who tries to answer "immediate needs immediately," handed out his own new jacket.

Father Vogt, who celebrated his 35th year as a priest Sunday, is used to such requests. For twenty years he has served at St. Bridget's seeing it change from a parish in what was once described as the "Dublin section" of Rochester to a parish in the heart of the inner city.

The 7th Ward parish was a typical one back in 1953 when Father Vogt arrived after serving at various other diocesan parishes. By 1964 it had evolved into the "Church helping the poor."

"Twenty years ago we had an attendance of 1200 at five

Masses. We now have three Masses, one of which is in Spanish, with only 120 attending. But how can people be concerned about religion when they're worried about having enough to eat?" Father Vogt questioned.

The parish's main concern is to help people "make a go of it." Father Vogt, assisted by Father David Heinsler and Father Octavio Esquivel who works with the Spanish-speaking people of the city, is focusing his attempts toward a "one-on-one" situation in dealing with the neighborhood's problems.

His belief is the major drawback in many of the city's social organizations is that there is little follow-through after the basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter have been answered.

"Right now we too are very crisis-oriented. A family's house may burn down and we try to get them a place to live, some food and clothing. But the problems that they faced before the fire — unemployment, financial difficulties, family problems — are still there," he said.

St. Bridget in the Hand-Gorman area between St. Paul, St. and North Clinton, is in the midst of urban renewal. The majority of the houses surrounding the Church are vacant or have been torn down to be replaced by apartment buildings to alleviate overcrowding. Two dwellings once housed 12 families with 61 children.

Urban renewal has hit St. Bridget's itself and Father Vogt hopes it hits hard enough to tear down the church and half of a building owned by the Church.

The enormous brick edifice with a seating capacity of 750 is too large for the parish's needs. In 1968 the nave of the church was cut in half and offices for counseling and small gatherings were built in the half touching the vestibule.

"We are no longer what you would define as a 'real' parish. We have few weddings or confirmations although we do check on the spiritual needs of our people. We hope to build a 'mini-parish' with a small chapel and answer the real needs of the people with a social and recreation center," Father Vogt said.

Plans are being discussed for a new school joined with a pool and gym which would also be open after school hours. St. Bridget's at the present is slated to join next year with four other Catholic schools to form an independent unit called the Catholic Inner City Parochial School system. The staff will be hired by the system.

The school is now staffed by five Sisters of St. Joseph and two lay teachers. Its student body of 130, which is approximately 60 per cent black and 40 per cent Puerto Rican with one white student, is non-graded.

"The children are arranged in homerooms according to age but each approaches the various subjects on his own level. We try to meet their individual needs, fitting the program to the child, not the child to the program," explained Sister Kathleen McCusker, principal at St. Bridget's.

Three day care centers, one of which will be housed at St. Bridget's, are in the planning stage.

The renewal will change the basic approach of the Church

from one of momentary reaction to emergencies to a planned program of education, consumer planning and counseling for a family's long range needs.

Meanwhile many programs have been attempted; some have met with success, others fizzled when the money ran out. Father Vogt tries to see the results of their efforts. "It is not enough to give a child a campership but we try to see that he has the necessary equipment, gets the physical and arrives at the camp itself," he explained.

At one time between 80-100 camperships were offered to neighborhood children. The parish also has an "Urban to Suburban Youth Program" similar to the Fresh Air Program in New York City. Children were matched with families in the outskirts of Rochester and visited them on weekends.

"Last year about 70 children were involved in the project. We stress a continuing relationship with the families and some children have been seeing the same family for five or six years," Father Vogt said.

A teen employment program was in operation for several years before the money ran out. Neighborhood teenagers were employed around the parish getting training as gardeners or housekeepers. Other programs include a clothing and furniture depot, the Catholic Family Center and coordination with the Jail Ministry.

The pastor finds time to devote to his hobby of raising tropical fish. He is a member of the Rochester Aquarian Society and has won several blue ribbons at their exhibitions.

Forty tanks hold a lot of fish so Father Vogt gives them out to the

area children complete with their own tank. He keeps a neat log of where his fish have gone and the types that have been given out.

Discovering that your parish has changed completely is not an easy adjustment to make. Father Vogt believes it takes an adaptable person to cope with the whole cultural pattern change which comes with the territory. From heroin addiction to robbing the food money to pay for heat, the gamut of problems is large. But the focus is on the future and toward a spirit of community in diversity. Work is being done on both ends to improve the future of the area and to make the day-to-day life more bearable.

Federal Court Voids Missouri Abortion Law

Jefferson City, Mo. [RMS] — Missouri's 137-year-old anti-abortion law was voided by a three-judge Federal District Court, paving the way for abortions and counter protests in several parts of the state.

The Missouri law, which allowed abortion only to save the life of the mother, was struck down by the Federal District Court of Western Missouri as being "unconstitutional under the teachings of the two Supreme Court decisions we were mandated to consider."

The federal panel was ruling on a case involving a group of women, doctors and clergymen who wanted the Missouri statute invalidated. Speaking for the state was Attorney General John C. Danforth, who held that

medical evidence concerning human life in the womb should have made the procedure unconstitutional.

The federal panel, which met in Kansas City, ruled that "we need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins. Whether life begins at conception, at quickening, at viability or at birth — the alternatives discussed in the opinion — (the Supreme) Court held that resolution of this question would not affect the decision."

The federal judges also ordered Danforth not to move to bar abortions. Because of the state official's past opposition to abortion, such a specific injunction was necessary, the judges said. "to guarantee the constitutional rights of pregnant women and their consulting doctors as decided by the Supreme Court."

Danforth said he would appeal the federal court decision to the Supreme Court.

KEEPING TABS

St. Thomas the Apostle parish will hold its 40th annual picnic Monday evening, June 18, at the St. Paul Exempt Firemen's Home on Thomas Avenue. Festivities will begin at 6 p.m. with a ball game. The women of the parish will serve dinner at 7. Norm Robinson is chairman.

The summer festival at Holy Family Church will be Friday, June 15, 6-11 p.m., and Saturday, 4-11. A parade around the neighborhood is scheduled for 3 p.m. Saturday.

Court Our Lady of the Cenacle, CDA, will install Mrs. Dorothy Taille as regent at the regular meeting at 8 p.m. June 19 in St. Philip Neri School hall. New vice regents are Mrs. Genevieve Insalaco and Mrs. Rose Wolf.

Holy Apostles Mothers' Club will have a turkey supper at 6 p.m. Monday, June 18. Reservations should be made with Linda Pastore, 458-8494, or Diane Rossó, 254-1476.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish has scheduled a family picnic for Sunday afternoon, June 24, in Seneca Park. Free bus transportation is offered, with buses leaving the parish parking area at 1:30 p.m. and Seneca Towers at 1:45 and returning from the park at 6.

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