



Photos by Susan McKinney



'You must have faith without any doubts in His . . . willingness to heal.'

Bergen Revivalists Hear Famed Pentecostal Priest

By PAT PETRASKE

He could have been called "the great white hope." Tall with a majestic appearance and clad in the traditional white habit of the Dominican order, Father Francis McNutt, OP, again and again laid his hands upon those with a gamut of afflictions. And again and again they pleaded, "Father, would you pray with me?"

The opening scene was like a movie associated with the South. Tiny electric lights gave everything a mellowed glow. More than 1,000 people of all shapes and sizes sat expectantly under the tent on wooden chairs, waiting for the revitalizing that all revivals are supposed to bring. The week of renewal, now being held for its fourth year and sponsored by the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches of the country town of Bergen, seemed to disappoint no one.

Songs by the "Renewal Choir" filled the air and hands lifted skyward amidst a characteristic murmuring of "Praise God." But the standing ovation that greeted Father McNutt, the first Roman Catholic priest to become involved in the Charismatic Renewal, revealed that this was the moment long awaited. Opening with a warning about the "horde of mosquitoes that would invade at 9:30," Father McNutt plunged into an explanation of the healing ministry.

His calm, direct approach had none of the "fire and brimstone" technique associated with camp meeting evangelism. There were smiles and bursts of laughter but very little wailing and gnashing of teeth.

"A lilting song he sang during the service was taken by many to be a Hebrew chant," Father McNutt was actually speaking in tongues. "I try to emphasize it because it sometimes shocks people who are not used to it," he said.

People he knew in the Speech Association of America, through which he was teaching in 1966, drew Father McNutt to the charismatic movement, because "they talked about such rare things that I thought only happened in the lives of the saints." These "rare things" included a more redemptive view of God and the idea of the healing ministry itself.

"People who suffer from great depressions and have suicidal ideas are often told that God has sent them a 'cross to bear,'" he explained in a later interview. This is a "pagan view of God" also held by many Catholics.

The traditional view of sickness has it stemming from original sin and as a punishment sent by God. Father McNutt believes "sickness is a part of the evil in the world" and "there is no evidence that it

is God's will for His people."

Suffering, on the other hand, falls into two categories. The first, he said, is an "interior disillusionment where people fall apart from within." Because they feel God does not love them, it is always destructive. The other suffering, such as an accident, is part of "God's promise."

His face lit up by a huge grin, Father McNutt quipped, "We've been giving God a bad press. He's really much better than we thought." The conversion that the charismatic approach brings is not a conversion from sin but from "the sneaking suspicion that God really doesn't love us," he exclaimed.

Lack of trust is one of the reasons why some people are not healed at a prayer service. While he believes that everyone can have the power of healing, Father McNutt admits it is not always healthy. "If you see someone get healed, then you have a tendency to say that God will heal everyone."

The idea of healing seems to have a magical appeal to anyone involved in the movement. A failure, however, usually brings the response, "Well he didn't have faith," Father McNutt maintained, "then people think they don't rate."

The secret to healing is "having faith in your faith." "You must have faith without any doubts in His absolute goodness and willingness to heal. Everyone can be healed; it may be inside him and not on the surface," said the speaker, who has been teaching and preaching in the movement since 1967.

Confession itself should be a healing process, Father McNutt proposed. "A lot of things people go to confession about such as mental depression, drugs, alcohol and homosexuality can't be handled by the will. A priest just can't tell a person to shape up. They need healing, that is asking the Lord for a cure, as well."

Cures are being reported left and right. Father McNutt told of young people who find the "30 second" cure and can come off drugs "cold turkey" without any withdrawal effects. "It happened just like that" describes a "cure" by a woman who had been drinking herself to death. After being baptized by the Holy Spirit, she no longer suffered the physical or psychological scars of a bout with the bottle, he said.

The healing ministry can appeal to a Catholic tradition that has been lost in recent years, Father McNutt said. He explained that liturgical prayers such as "say the word and I shall be healed" once used the words "my soul" instead of "I." The new approach encompasses a healing

of the mind and body, he stressed. Three people were cured of physical ailments while attending an ordinary Sunday Mass, he said.

Controversy continues on the involvement of the mind and body on the question of the causes of illnesses. A lady in a simple house dress approached Father McNutt begging him, "Tell her what to do." After praying, her diabetes had gone away for three months but plagued her once again. He recommended a book on psychosomatics.

"In many cases, the illnesses go deeper where a psychic component is involved. I believe there are certain personality types who have a predisposition towards such things as cancer or ulcers. You must cure the underlying problem as well as the physical," he maintained.

Criticisms have also been launched against the charismatic movement for its leaning towards an anti-establishment image of the Church. Father McNutt feels the movement is going in the opposite direction toward a unity of churches. "We see no alienation on the key issues of doctrine," he said. The movement is also heading toward the more traditional approach taken by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, when the healing process was more highly regarded.

Despite skepticism about his involvement, Father McNutt's activity placed him on the Bishop's Commission which wrote "The Renewal of the American Priesthood." Ten per cent of the Dominican priests in his Midwest province (St. Albert the Great, near St. Louis) use the charismatic method. Regarding comments that the movement has become "too spiritual" (see Courier-Journal, July 11, 1973) Father McNutt feels the Catholic Church as a whole could be criticized for lack of social involvement.

"The bishops, for example, didn't take a stand against the war until really late," he maintained. He has been called a Communist because of his talks on social justice. He believes the Pentecostals have an "average involvement" on social and political issues but have a stronger immediate concern. "There has been a change on home base where people are more loving towards their families and friends," he said.

The interview was interrupted by requests for advice, prayers and the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" by people who were forming a human web around him as he sat on the ground. Two people had cancer, two were in wheelchairs, others suffered anything from hearing problems to inner anxiety. And everyone just wanted to be near him and touch his habit.

Three members of the congregation assembled in the Village Park of Bergen form a private healing prayer group [top]. Under the big tent [center] squeezed more than 1,000 people seeking "growth through Christ" with the charismatic leadership of Father Francis McNutt [bottom]. Late into the night literature, counseling and mosquitoes were available [right].

