

THE CHURCH 1974

Father Andrew Greeley

It is not very often that Cardinal Krol and I find ourselves on the same side of the argument. So I figure that when the two of us agree about something, we almost have to be right. His words on the religious quest of young people, spoken during the opening days of the Synod, were not only right on target, they were absolutely right.

The young, he told his fellow synodists, "are groping for the elusive, the mysterious, the transcendent." It is, he added, a mistake to categorize youth as "rebellious, irreligious, or as strangers to Christ and prayer. There is genuine receptivity to Christ and the Gospel which we cannot ignore."

Such receptivity to Christ and the Gospel was totally ignored by the presynodal document which purported to describe — in the name of the American Bishops — the state of religion in the United States. Whether deliberately or not, the Cardinal's intervention at the Synod was a turning away from the "malaise" theory of American Catholicism.

So I clap twice as loud.

Not all young people are interested in the mysterious, the transcendent; but many are, perhaps more than ever before (as such things as Transcendental Meditation show). Nor do the young have any monopoly on the quest for religious experience as our research on mystical experiences — and the mail which that research has produced — makes clear. Anyone who thinks that in the United States religion has become obsolete hasn't ventured down from the skyscrapers of midtown Manhattan for a long time — or hasn't noticed the ads for Rev. Sun Myung Moon on almost every building in New York.

But, the question might be asked of both Cardinal Krol and me (an odd couple, surely) whether the search for the mysterious and transcendent is not totally irrelevant, no matter how many people engage in it. With famine threatening many parts of the world is not such "mysticism" immoral? Should not the Church be much more concerned about taking stands on vital social issues? Is not the mysterious and the elusive a luxury that a world caught in a massive shortage of resources cannot afford? Is it not sinful for the Church to do anything but become socially active?

A TV commentator who knows Rome well suggested the other night that there were two parties at the Synod; the first — representing the Third World — was demanding more active intervention by the Church; the other was in favor of drawing back and retreating within the old boundaries of the Church to protect the faith in a time hostile to religion.

I have no way of knowing whether those are the alternatives as they are seen by the Synod delegates. I hope not, though one can never be sure. But those are certainly the alternatives presented to us by a lot of enthusiastic, if, uninformed and incompetent, "activists." If such are the only choices left to us, we should pack our tents, head for the hills, and hope like hell that the Lord Jesus comes back for us soon.

What can the Church say about the complex economic and social problems facing the world community? Can it force the Arabs to lower the price of oil — the biggest single cause of fertilizer shortage and probable famine in South Asia? Can it

constrain India to change its culture and social structure so as to effect the internal reforms, without which foreign aid will be little more than a palliative? Can it force Latin American governments — left, right, and center — to invest more money in improving the quality and quantity of agricultural production so that the United States is not the only major country in the world exporting food? Does it have a cure for inflation? Is there a single world problem, the solution to which can be deduced from the New Testament?

Would not any governmental leader be a madman if he looked to a group of ecclesiastics assembled in Rome for technical answers? Encouragement to generosity, trust, cooperation? Sure, and those are qualities which are not in large supply in the world community just now. But beyond such encouragement what concrete answers can the Church possibly have?

There was a time when economic processes were simple enough that the Church could make a pronouncement on usury and no one would doubt either the wisdom or the competence of such a decision. But what does the Synod know about the factors determining the prime rate? Not very much, one hopes, or the bishops have been spending too much time reading the "Wall Street Journal."

What then is left to us? Are we to settle down, each one of us in our own shanty (as Bishop Spaulding once wrote) and search for the transcendent? Is there no alternative between cowardly withdrawal from the world and arrogant pontification about technical matters on which we are incompetent?

There is an alternative, to which I will return in a future column, and it involves redefining the nature of the search for the transcendent and the impact of that search on human behavior. Christ did not tell us what to do; he told us who to be. And in that there is everything.



Big Day

Father William J. Schifferli, center, pastor of Christ the King parish, joins in the celebration as the parish held its first annual Oktoberfest last Sunday at the parish hall. A big success, the affair drew an overflow crowd.



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