



Photos by Bruce Genit

The new altar and pew position at St. John the Evangelist Church

## Church Look Altered

### Co-Pastors Seek Parishioners' Reaction

By MOLLY JUDGE

Since the six weeks of Lent is a time when people usually have a greater awareness of God and Mass, Fathers James Boyle and John Mulligan, co-pastors of St. John the Evangelist parish on Humboldt Street in Rochester, decided it would be an appropriate time to experiment with the floor plan of their church.

In an attempt to emphasize togetherness and sharing, the altar was moved from the front of the church to the middle against the right side. The pews were rearranged with the help of 50 parishioners to face the altar in a semi-circle.

"It's more rewarding to have the altar closer to the congregation. It helps us live theology in sharing and participating in Mass. The people are more a part of the Mass and they can live the Mass instead of just seeing it," said Father Boyle.

The entire experiment was financed for under \$1,000. This figure included an orange carpeted platform for the altar to set upon, green aisle carpets and lowering the church lights. Also parishioner Ron Jakubowski

donated his talent and adjusted the loud-speakers to conform with the altar position.

According to Father Mulligan, the farthest pew was 72 feet or 24 pews from the old altar position at the front of the church. Now, 49 feet or 8 pews is the greatest distance a parishioner would sit from the altar.

If the parishioners approve of the new altar arrangement, which will be determined by a poll at Lent's conclusion, the pastors have a variety of redecorating improvements in mind. "The altar position is just the beginning of a master plan. But we have to see if we're going to maintain the altar in the middle of the church before we can go ahead with additional plans," said Father Boyle.

When the modified Gothic church was constructed in 1926, the sanctuary was not completed since the parish ran into financial problems. Father Boyle mentioned that future plans for the church would entail the completion of the sanctuary. The area would be set aside from the church by a curtain. "By having a sanctuary, the Eucharist would have a place by itself and people

would have a private place to worship at the tabernacle," said Father Boyle.

Besides the sanctuary, future plans include painting the pale yellow church wall a bright color and painting the stations of the cross.

To help develop decorating ideas, a church refurbishing committee was formed. They were aided by the liturgy, finance and maintenance committees. Further opinion on financial considerations was given by the Rambusch decoration firm from New York City and a local architect who wants to remain anonymous. Father Richard Vasco, head of the Liturgical Commission of the Albany Diocese, also offered advice.

"The general goal of the altar position was to unite the people and I think it has," said Father Boyle. "I can feel a greater sense of participation and togetherness between the congregation and me."

Father Mulligan added, "I like it. Many detail problems have come up, such as the role of ushers. With the altar in the center, the ushers have a lot more responsibility since every door is a back door. We usually need four men and now we may have to have five or six."

"But it has many advantages. The people are beginning to realize how others in the church can help them worship. They are starting to view the other people as witnesses in the Mass. Families also have an advantage. The kids can get closer to the altar and see the priest say Mass."

A big benefit of having a central altar is the emphasis it places on the stained glass windows which were designed by Herman J. Butler of Aeolian Hall in New York City. The north window depicting the story of the Annunciation, won an award in the 1930s. "I really like the new altar since I can admire the beauty of the windows. It helps Mass be more meaningful," said Jeanne Appleby, a parishioner.

Not everyone approves of the change.

"I personally don't care for it," said Judith Costello. "It's distracting to me simply because it just doesn't look right in the building."

Nevertheless, a life long parishioner, Charles Hauser says, "It's OK. I'm not sure about the togetherness aspect of it but the altar looks fine to me."

## The Church 1975



Fr. Andrew Greeley

The priesthood, I fear, is no longer a thoroughly respectable profession. Like Willy Loman, priests are liked but not well-liked. The laity, a new NORC study suggests, like the parish priests but don't respect their professional competence. It used to be that if one were a priest one was accorded instant respect. Then it came to be that a priest had to earn respect. Now he is assumed to be unworthy of it until he proves the contrary.

Some of this collapse of respect is doubtless due to the massive and well-publicized resignation of so many unhappy and dissatisfied priests. But the laity are quite tolerant toward such resignations. The real problem seems to be the low level of professional performance—as judged by the laity—of those who have remained in the priesthood.

As the article by the NORC team in the January "Critic" reports, 20 years ago, three fifths of the laity said sermons were excellent. Ten years ago, the proportion had dropped to two fifths, and now it is down to one fifth (one sixth among teenagers). Nor is this to be explained by the higher educational achievement of Catholics. Respect for sermons has fallen at all educational levels.

Many priests have been angry at me for the things I have written in this column about sermons. The data gathered in the NORC study simply confirm what anyone who talks to a lay person knows: the laity think our sermons are terrible. Indeed, bad sermons seem to be one of the principal causes of the decline in Mass attendance (and the resulting decline of Sunday contributions). There is a 33 relationship (plenty respectable in social research) between not liking sermons and not going to Mass. We easily blamed the new

liturgy (which most of the laity like) and never thought of blame our own preaching (which most of the laity can't stand).

There have been similar precipitous declines in the proportion thinking that priests are good at responding to personal problems and working with teenagers. Only about one fifth of the Catholic population is willing to give us high marks on either of these professional activities. Only half would be "very pleased" if their son wanted to be a priest (down 15 percentage points in a decade), while almost three fourths would be very pleased if their son became a college professor.

When the college professor has more respect in the minds of the Catholic laity than does the priest we are in serious trouble. We are not disliked. No one is violently against us. Anticlericalism is still very small. On the whole, the laity is willing to say we are trying.

No, priests are not bad; they're just slobs.

It will be interesting to see the reaction of the organized clergy groups in the country to the NORC data. My guess is that they will simply ignore it—or respond to it as priests tend to respond to everything: they will attack the personality of the author of the findings rather than deal with the findings themselves.

An immense effort is needed to restore the image of the priest as a professionally competent man, to replace the image of the likable and well-meaning slob who doesn't do anything very well. But the effort won't be made. If the priesthood as it is currently constituted was capable of such effort, its professional skills would never have sunk so low in the first place.

The most likely reaction from the priest groups is a new campaign for a married clergy.

Sex makes you preach better?

Before long, it is to be feared, people are going to start being ashamed of being priests.

And I propose to all of those priests who are preparing to write me a hate letter that they spend the time instead preparing next Sunday's sermon.



Mall at Medaille

Two Nazareth College Alumni Association members, Mrs. James L. Crowley and Mrs. James Mannix, prepare for a "Mall at Medaille," a sale of handcrafted items, plants, books and antiques scheduled Thursday, March 20, at Nazareth. Mrs. Mannix is chairman of the event, and Mrs. Crowley is in charge of the book section.

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