

Church Historian Urges New Guides for Sermons

In recent months several Catholic writers have deplored the quality and content of the Sunday sermon. Father Andrew Greeley, nationally known columnist, remarked earlier this year "The laity think our sermons are terrible. Indeed, bad sermons seem to be one of the principal causes of the decline in Mass attendance."

It's Father Robert McNamara's conviction that "our 1975 preaching predicament in this country demonstrates the real need of a modified type of syllabus."

Father McNamara, nationally recognized Church historian, has put together a monograph on the history of American Church

legislation and practice regarding sermons in which he calls for several nation-wide "master-plans" for preaching to be mandated or at least proposed in individual dioceses.

The essay, "Catholic Sunday Preaching: the American Guidelines, 1791-1975," published last month by the Word of God Institute, traces the kinds and styles of the Sunday sermon from colonial times to the present, and ends with an exhortation to the American bishops to provide new guides for preaching.

Father McNamara, who also is professor of Church History at St. Bernard's Seminary, notes in the book that the recent emphasis on preaching as an explication of

Catholic life pretend that they don't exist.

Furthermore, Tracy, O'Brien and Crosby were at least men. One knew from seeing them in other movies that there was no doubt about their masculinity, and even as priests they did not act like homosexuals. The current crop of TV priests are weak, flabby, listless ciphers with no strength of character or clearly formed personalities. They smile nicely, but that's about all.

The TV people would have been horrified if American Catholicism had been as well organized as blacks or Jews to fight stereotyping and defamation. It never occurred to them that the current crop of TV ethnics are minstrel-show Catholics with the clergy minstrel-show endmen.

The intentions of TV are benign — after all, are not Catholics some 30 percent of the viewing public? Who would want to offend them? Indeed, it seemed like a good idea to put some Catholic shows on TV just precisely to attract Catholic viewers. So how come Catholics are angry?


You mean that Italians are not really like the Montefuscos? And there were no rich Irish on Beacon Hill? And short-haired young jabs like the McShanes no longer exist? And priests don't play poker to get people back to confession? How come no one told us? What are Catholics really like?

The TV stereotypes are the benign side of the hard-hat, chauvinist, hawkish, racist, blue-collar ethnic image (all of which, by the by, are false to empirical data). There are good Catholics and bad Catholics. This year we have the good ones.

I guess we have only ourselves to blame. We are quite incapable of mounting effective protest against anti-Catholic stereotypes. We do no research on ourselves; name me one Catholic university with a program in social research on American ethnic diversity. When it comes to the bicentennial we look for a theory not to our own experience but to the Latin American experience.

Our own TV efforts are badly funded or are concentrated on closed-circuit things which for all their cost aren't watched by anyone. And our intelligentsia — such "intellectuals" as Sheed, Wills, Campion and the like — and our "serious" journals ("America" and "Commonweal" for example) are busy confirming the image that the national elites have about us and dismissing ethnic diversity as second rate.

The Church 1974



Fr. Andrew Greeley

It has been a rough, rough autumn for Catholics. The Catholic ethnics, once the scapegoats for everything wrong with Middle America, now find themselves the heroes of a whole gaggle of TV programs.

I think we were better off as scapegoats.

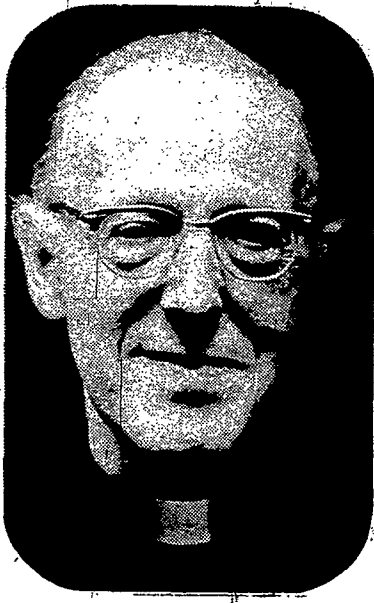
If Italians had a choice between the Mafia and "The Montefuscos" (in which a group of Italian-looking people run around talking like Jews) — I think they would take the Mafia. And every time I see the soppy, sticky, phony "Beacon Hill" thing I feel like joining the IRA. The Poles had better arm themselves; heaven only knows what is going to be done to them.

Then we have Kate McShane and her pool-playing Jesuit brother and stage-Irish father, "Joe and Sons," in which a kid is pressured into going to church; and Doc losing a poker game to a priest and ending up in the confessional. And, oh, yes, Mary Tyler Moore falls in love "kind of" (everything in that drippy bit of unreality is "kind of") with a priest and is overjoyed to discover that he is not leaving the priesthood because of her.

The season abounds with priests. In addition to the Jesuit McShane (apparently the writers didn't read Gary Wills on what has happened to the Jesuits), there is the Montefusco priest (making jokes like a rabbi), the returned Lasiter missionary, the befuddled MASH cleric, and a wide variety of other Bing Crosby-like characters. Even the priest with whom Ms. Moore contemplates a fling seems to have stepped out of "Going My Way."

The Vatican Council, I guess, never happened. Or maybe the TV types never heard of it.

Personally I liked the Spencer Tracy, Pat O'Brien, Bing Crosby type of priest. They were nice people and not unlike some real clerics of their era. But since then there has been James Kavanagh (I'm a married Catholic priest and I want a divorce), Philip Berrigan (I can have a wife without a legal marriage), Daniel Berrigan (I'm not interested in practicality), John McLaughlin (Nixon is an honest man), Robert Drinan (hang the president!), and Daniel Lyons (celibacy ought never to be optional). Granted that these characters are not necessarily typical, neither can an honest presentation of American



FATHER McNAMARA

Scripture may in this country have overshadowed the equally important function of preaching on the doctrines and disciplines of the Church.

Up until the close of the Second Vatican Council, the sermon was preached largely in a catechetical tradition. It is Father McNamara's hope, by writing the booklet, to help restore some of that tradition.

Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, in a foreword to the book, cites several of the features of the work, including "the canonical record concerning preaching," "the varied response that this obligation called forth," and "the distinction between the formal sermon and the simpler catechetical instruction."

"If it occasions a fresh start on the part of some, it will have rendered a real service, to say nothing of its adding another item to the literature on Catholicism in this country, in this case an item on a largely neglected topic," Msgr. Ellis writes.

SPECIAL MASS

Dryden — Holy Cross Church was the scene of a special Mass on Sunday, Dec. 7, at 10 a.m. The music readings and liturgy were planned and presented by students of the elementary CCD program. Parishioners shared in the offering by placing toys, clothing, food and money on the altar for distribution in the Christmas baskets for those less fortunate. The baskets will be distributed prior to the Christmas holiday.

THANKSGIVING

Trumansburg — A Thanksgiving service was held at St. James the Apostle, Wednesday, Nov. 26.

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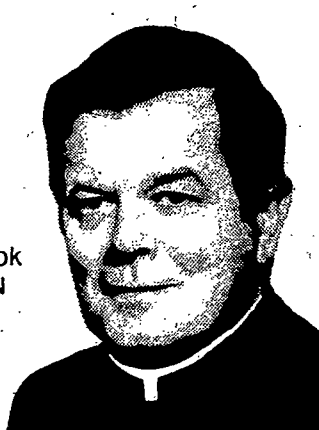
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