

'Hot Potato' Items Occupy Priests Council

By JOHN DASH

The Priests Council last week placed two last-minute and "urgent" proposals on its agenda, failed to take action on one and passed a resolution at variance with the other.

At the outset of the meeting the priests were asked to consider whether a question on the diocesan personnel guidelines and a question on the proposed merger of St. Anthony's and St. Patrick's parishes were urgent enough to merit immediate attention and whether the council was the proper forum to raise the issues.

The council was asked by Father Bernard Dollen, speaking for a number of clergymen involved in the Priest Intern Program, to reaffirm its approval of the Diocesan Personnel Guidelines, especially in regard to priest interns. Those guidelines he

reminded them were devised by a committee of the Priests Council approved and recommended to the Bishop's attention in 1971.

Father Dollen pleaded the case was urgent in light of a controversy over rectory living involving a priest intern and his supervisor which recently was brought to the public's attention through the media.

In the debate on whether to place the item on the agenda, the councilmen agreed that the individual case was not a subject for their forum, but that a broader review of the guidelines (as proposed by Father Kevin Murphy) was within their competence. A motion was made on Father Dollen's proposal, but died for lack of a second.

The other proposal loosed a floodgate of heated protest from a party in the gallery.

(Priests Council meetings are open to the public and the press. They are generally held on the first Tuesday of each month, at Becket Hall, starting at 10:30 a.m. A special section of chairs is reserved for spectators.)

The proposal was brought to the council by Father John Dillon, on behalf of the Spanish Apostolate. The proposal read: "That the Priests Council recommend to Bishop Hogan that: 1.) The recommendation to merge St. Patrick's with St. Anthony's made on Sept. 22, 1975, by the Joint Parish Council of St. Anthony's and St. Patrick's be rejected by the bishop; 2.) St. Patrick's be re-established as a parish with administrative, canonical and parochial independence."

Father Dillon argued that the issue was urgent in that the treasury of St. Patrick's would be depleted within two months and that the question was within the scope of Priests Council deliberations by the fiat of Pope Paul in his motu proprio, Ecclesiae Sanctae.

That document reads, "The bishop of the diocese has power by his own authority to erect, suppress or change parishes in anyway whatever after he has heard the views of the council of priests."

The Spanish Apostolate made the proposal, claiming that the merger recommendation was made without proper consultation with the (Northwest) Region and the Priests Council.

A diocesan spokesman said the merger actually has been in the works since 1971, at the time Father Charles Bennett who was pastor of St. Anthony's was named administrator of St. Patrick's. The spokesman said Father Bennett's letter of appointment contained instructions to get the merger started.

When the present St. Anthony's administration was named, in 1974, completion of the merger was part of the contract, the spokesman said.

A study of the situation was initiated and a committee from both parishes made the formal recommendation last September to merge the parishes.

Father Richard Masciangelo, CPPS, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua, whose administrative mission is St. Patrick's, said he was

"personally sick and tired" of the dispute between the Spanish Apostolate and the Joint Parish Council.

He noted, and Bishop Dennis Hickey affirmed, that the contract his order (Precious Blood Fathers) had made with the diocese stipulated the merger of the parishes.

Father Masciangelo further claimed a break in communications between the parishes and Bishop Joseph L. Hogan, which, he said, was made by the bishop, himself.

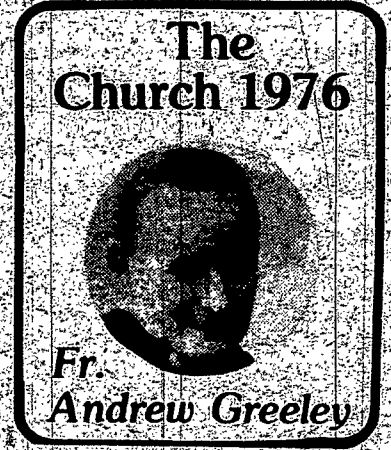
Father Masciangelo stated, "I am vehemently against placement on the agenda."

The council nevertheless moved to recommend the bishop appoint someone to bring the sides together, air the issues, and to determine how the conflict could be resolved.

At this point, two members of St. Anthony's parish who had been observing the procedure, Father Albert DePascale, associate at St. Anthony's, and Sam Donofrio, a member of the Joint Parish Council, left the hall and voiced their displeasure with the council action.

The Priests also heard from Dr. Evilio Perez, chairman of a committee which proposed the establishment of a diocesan commission for justice and peace. The proposal had been on the council's mind for several sessions. At the close of Dr. Perez's presentation the council moved not to accept the proposal.

In other matters before the council, the priests reported reaction to and asked questions from their respective groups on the proposed marriage preparation guidelines. The council also registered approval of bringing a new process for selecting bishops to the bishops of New York State.



The same week that the new Holy Office document on sex arrived on the world scene, New York magazine published an article by Gail Sheehy called "The Sexual Diamond: Facing the Facts of the Human Sexual Life Cycle" (adapted from her long postponed book "Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life"). Reading the two of them at the same sitting is an instructive experience.

One discounts the frantic mid-town chic of Ms. Sheehy and still recognizes that she has provided a useful popular summary of much of the current social and medical research on sexuality. The sexual problems about which she was writing — the ebb and flow of sexual desire at life's critical turning points — simply do not exist in the world to which the Holy Office pronouncement was aimed. One could easily have honored all the stern commandments of the Holy Office and still be caught up in the uncertainties, the fears, the ambiguities, the hopes, the disappointments of sexual life in the contemporary world.

For the Christian who could say to the Holy Office, "All these things I have done from my youth," there would be absolutely no guidance for his normal and ordinary sexual life. So long as he was a heterosexual, reasonably faithful to his spouse, and enjoying sex only in marriage, the Holy Office wasn't interested in him. For such people caught up in the process of the sexual life cycle, the Church has nothing to say.

For reasons that have to do with logistics and convenience, if nothing else, most sex in the world takes place between a man and woman who are more or less permanently committed to one another. While the Freudian "revolution" has reduced their prudishness about sex somewhat, it has also raised their expectations, so, on balance, it has made sex a more puzzling and more ambiguous matter than it was 75 years ago. Can Catholic Christianity do nothing more than tell them what not to do? Can it give them no illumination, no reinforcement, no encouragement, no insight as they struggle together for greater physical, emotional and human intimacy?

It would appear that as far as the Congregation of the Holy Office is concerned, the answer is no.

And that's why I find the new document so troubling. I don't necessarily disagree with its conclusions, but I am appalled that the Church does not seem to have anything more to say — especially since I am convinced that there is a wealth of material in the Christian heritage which could, in the hands of creative and imaginative theologians, provide powerful illumination for the sexual ambiguities in which contemporary humankind finds itself trapped.

Intimacy is ultimately a religious issue, because the demands of intimacy force one to ask questions about the ultimate meaning of life. Intimacy can work in the long run only if one is ready to risk one's self in a vulnerability and a trust so open that one's heart could be broken by the other person. Such trust requires some sort of confidence that one lives in a cosmos where trust is stronger than hatred, love stronger than death. Sex and religion cannot be separated — and despite the Holy Office, religion is considerably more than a list of "Thou shalt nots."

The Catholic Church has lost its credibility on sex in part because at a time when large numbers of people have discovered that psychology isn't enough to provide guidance for sexual maturation, the Church has been able to do nothing else but repeat prohibition. Its people looked to the Church for positive guidance and illumination and found none.

The document is also troubling because of its intellectual rigidity. It blames "psychology" and "sociology" for the problems of contemporary sexuality, but it does not attempt any dialogue with or a response to these disciplines. Rather, it rejects them out of hand and responds by citing the "tradition" of the Church.

Furthermore, there is rigidity and even blindness about the tradition. Some of the things which the Holy Office would have us believe were always thought to be seriously wrong by the tradition were not in fact always thought to be seriously wrong. You don't have a dialogue with the present and you don't have a dialogue with the past either, it would seem.

Finally, one wonders what ever happened to the bishops of the world. Collegiality and corresponsibility were supposed to mean that they shared in the major decisions of the Church. Yet major and critical documents are prepared in secret without any open discussion among the bishops or even an appearance of consultation. They too can take it or leave it. Was there ever a Vatican Council II?

Beckett Topic In CIM Series

Elmira — Samuel Beckett and his book Endgame will be the next subject in the continuing Christian Institute of Man lecture series. Dr. Robert T. Giuffrida, professor of modern languages at Corning Community College, will be the guest lecturer. Dr. Giuffrida is a graduate of the University of Rochester and received his Ph.D. from George Washington University. He has taught at Corning Community since 1962 and served for 10 years as chairman of Humanities there.

The lecture begins at 8 p.m. on Monday, Feb. 16 at the Park Church in Elmira.

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