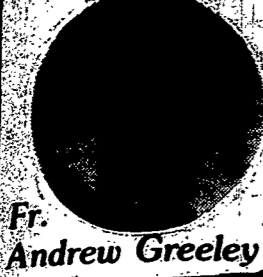


The Church 1977



Fr. Andrew Greeley

With the establishment of an ad hoc committee on evangelization and the controversial "reconciliation" ceremonies in Tennessee, the American Church seems to be turning a new missionary emphasis. With this concern, the question of why people drift away from the Church becomes critical. A recent study done in the archdiocese of New York has brought the question before the public eye again.

(Incidentally, the sociologists who review books for "America" are apparently unable to grasp the distinction, the question of why some people drift away is logically and methodologically different from the question of why the rate of drift may change over time. The New York study is concerned with the former question, The National Opinion Research Center report of a year ago focused on the latter.)

The New York study is a useful contribution to the discussion, though its sampling techniques will cause professional methodologists to cringe in dismay. However, it does not address itself to an aspect of religious drift which previous research has indicated is of great importance: family background. Scholars like David Caplovitz, John Kotre and William McCready have demonstrated that one's relationship with the Church is powerfully influenced by one's relationship with one's parents and one's parents' relationship with the Church.

Professor McCready, for example, in "Faith of Our Fathers," explains more than half of the variance in religious behavior in terms of family background and Professor Kotre points out in "On the Border" that the Church emits many different cues and that which cue a person chooses to focus on is a function of the personality he brings to the interaction with the Church.

Because of the importance of the discussion I am going to anticipate in this column a book on which Professor McCready and I are currently working, using data in this column from the NORC 1974 study.

About a third of American Catholics go to church less than once a month — most of that group going less than once a year. The "drifters" come from very different family backgrounds than the weekly church-goers. One-quarter of them, for example, come from religiously mixed marriages as opposed to 16 per cent of the "regulars"; 49 percent of the drifters came from families where one or both parents did not go to weekly church as opposed to 27 percent of the

"regulars." A third of the "regulars" came from families where there was serious strain with one or both parents, but more than half of the "drifters" came from similarly stressful backgrounds.

More than three times as many "drifters" (40 percent) came from families where neither parent went to church and there was considerable strain, as did the regulars (12 percent). Or to look at it the other way, 65 percent of those who came from families where both parents went to church, and where there were good relationships, go to church every week and only 22 percent of those who come from non-practicing and stressful families go to church every week.

The New York report makes much of the "faith" problem of the drifters: they do not go to church in part because they do not believe. It has even been suggested that the New York study "disproves" the NORC finding about the importance of birth control (as though a study with a 10 percent response rate in one neighborhood could refute a national study with an 80 percent response rate). Undoubtedly "faith" is part of the problem of the drifters. In our data there is a -.26 correlation between a "faith" index and drifting, slightly less than the -.29 correlation between family background and drift and much less than the -.35 between sexual attitudes and drift. Furthermore, when sexual attitudes and "faith" are standardized for each other, the net "faith" correlation declines to -.16, and the net sex attitude correlation remains at -.30. Sexual attitudes and family background are, in other words, more important than

"faith" problems in accounting for drift.

Improvement in sermons, more sophisticated pastoral ministry, more democratic parishes — all are both good in themselves and can make some impression on the ranks of the "drifters." But it would be naive and unwise to think that parochial and ministerial reform by themselves are going to be adequate to deal with problems that are

deeply rooted in the personality and have their often unconscious origins in the childhood family experience of the "drifters." Policies and programs based on a sample model of the complex phenomenon of "falling away" are likely to be inadequate.


As to why the New York team paid no attention to the family background literature, I have no idea. You will have to ask them.

Senior Aid

The Senior Citizens Action Council (SCAC) of Monroe County has announced that the free legal counseling service for Seniors

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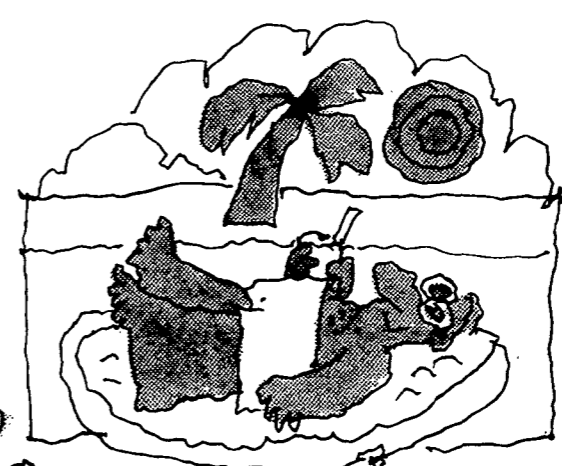
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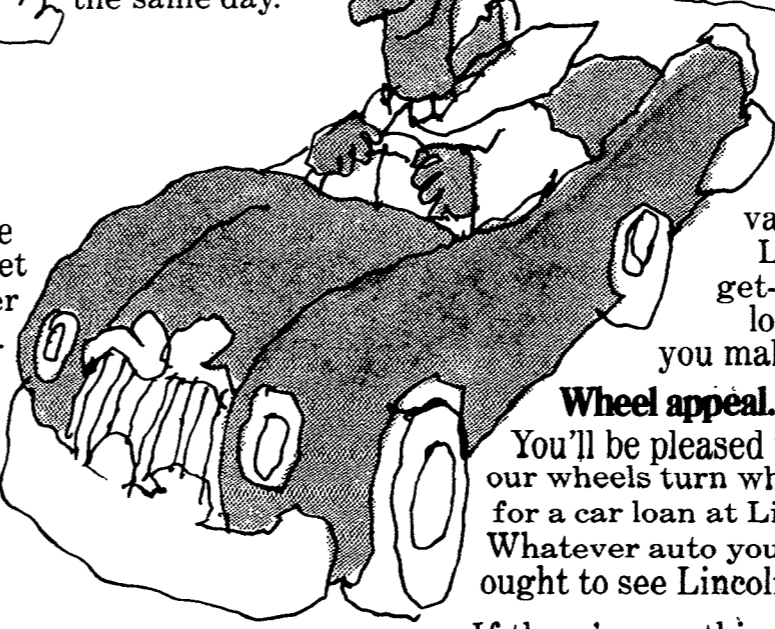
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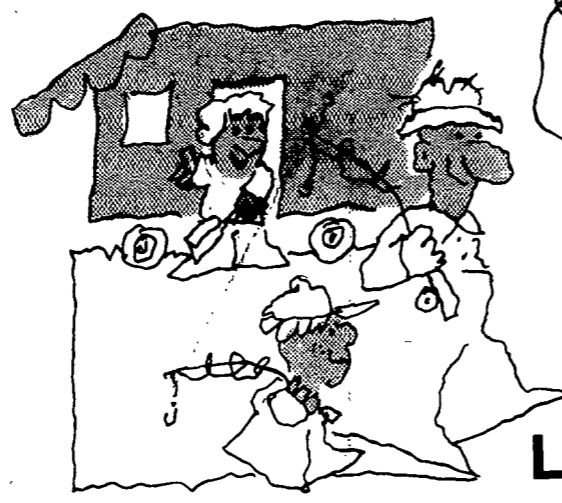
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