

Tributes to Father Atwell

By Msgr. Patrick Flynn

Henry was a very hard worker, very knowledgeable. He certainly was a pioneer in promoting the liturgy, and especially was a champion of the liturgy in the vernacular.

I remember meeting him in Rome after the Second Vatican Council had approved the liturgy in the vernacular, and I congratulated him on what he had achieved.

He certainly will be missed by both priests and people.

(Msgr. Flynn managed the Courier-Journal during the time of Father Atwell's editorship.)

By Rabbi Judea Miller

This year there will be an empty seat at our Passover Seder. Father Henry Atwell was an honored guest at the Jewish family ritual that has become the basis for the Christian Mass. Father Atwell was comfortable participating in the annual ritual meal that celebrated the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. It is for Jews today also a joyous family celebration. My wife and children felt that Father Atwell was like a member of our family. He will be missed.

There are others who will write about Father Atwell's accomplishments as priest and pastor and editor and community leader. He was all of these things and did them superbly. But I remember most the dear friend who shared the concerns and grief and joy that I often felt.

For long hours we would talk together about the Nazi Holocaust. The direct victims were six million Jews, some members of my own family. He would listen and share my grief over their loss and my joy at the rebirth of modern Israel. He felt that the Holocaust was a threat to all sense of moral values and human compassion. He said he was concerned that religious people were not asking the moral questions that the atrocity raised. That's why he said he feared it might happen again and again, if not to Jews, then to other vulnerable minorities.

Maybe that was why Father Atwell volunteered to speak at the meeting of the Jewish community to protest the march of Nazis in Skokie, Ill. He attended as a mourner the memorial services held each year to remember the six million Jews martyred by the Nazis, and the memorial service for the Israeli children murdered by terrorists at Maalot. Whenever there was bigotry expressed against groups of any race or religion, gentle Father Atwell would feel and express outrage.

There is an old legend told generations ago by Jewish mystics. They said that the world is able to survive because in each generation, no matter how corrupt and violent it may be, there are at least 36 righteous people. It is for the sake of their goodness that the world is able to endure yet another generation. But the tragedy is that though they may suffer, these 36 never realize that it is they who justify the survival of humanity. We never know who these 36 are. But those of us who knew and loved Father Henry Atwell may

have a suspicion of who one of them may have been.

(Rabbi Miller leads the congregation of Temple B'rith Kodesh.)

By Father Paul Cuddy

A mutual regard and friendship with Father Henry Atwell began with an ecclesial collision. We continued to collide with varying degrees of intensity through more than a dozen years. By nature he was calmly brash, quick to experiment, and enjoyed the image of a maverick. By nature I am cautious, heeding Alexander Pope's counsel: "Be not the first by whom the new is tried nor yet the last to lay the old aside."

Our first collisions began after Vatican II. Misinterpretation of the council documents brought division in the Church, ideologically and pastorally, and none more sharp than in the document on Ecumenism, which few ecumenists seem to have regarded.

His editorial policy was, in my opinion, outrageously geared to the theological left.

It is a measure of the man that after both private and public debate, he wrote this invitation to me: "There are people who think as you do. Why don't you write a column for the Courier?" It was he who gave the title, "On the Right Side."

Shortly after, Father Atwell was assigned pastor of Avon, but he continued to write a column for the Courier, espousing liberal causes intertwined with traditional Catholic Faith, all with a certain unpredictability. But I think that neither he nor I were really understood by many. Few understood that we both stood for the Church of Christ.

He had an intelligent devotion to Our Blessed Mother. One afternoon, I dropped in to visit him. He was preparing for the Altar and Rosary Society annual banquet, and smiling, he handed me a booklet on the rosary, saying: "I am giving one to each member." "Why, Father Henry?" I replied, "I am surprised to find you promoting the rosary." He answered, "Why should you? I say the rosary every day, and teach it on the third lesson for converts. It ties in perfectly with the Incarnation of Our Lord."

He studied Sacred Scripture, history and theology, and interpreted the Signs of the Times with faith and intelligence. Just two weeks before his death, he sent me a post card written with a weakened hand. "You often recommend books in your column. Why not recommend some good Catholic Magazines, like the Catholic Digest, St. Anthony's Messenger, or even Commonweal?" The last was a sly pulling of my leg.

He celebrated the liturgy with devotion and grace, and with an irritating disregard for rubrics. But within it all he expressed with utter conviction, his reverence for God, his faith in the Church and the Communion of Saints, and a profound sense of fellowship with all people, which is the heart of genuine ecumenism.

He was a friend whom I shall greatly miss. May his soul rest in God!

(Father Cuddy, a priest of the Diocese of Rochester, was a long-time verbal sparring partner of Father Atwell.)

By Merwyn M. Kroll
And Henry M. Rosenbaum

The Jewish community of Rochester has lost a good friend. Father Henry A. Atwell was admired for his warmth, intellect and concern for all humanity. Those of us who had the privilege to work with him knew of his deep love for Israel; his quiet diplomacy, and his ability to love all peoples.

He will long be remembered for his steadfast courage and service by his host of friends in the Jewish community. We who knew him had a genuine love and respect for him. He will be missed.

(Kroll is president and Rosenbaum is executive director of the Jewish Community Federation of Rochester.)

By Stewart D. Moot

The Presbytery of Genesee Valley, representing 75 churches in a five-county area, at its Stated Meeting held on March 25, 1980, unanimously passed the following resolution:

"Be it resolved that the Presbytery of Genesee Valley express to the Diocese of Rochester its sorrow at the death of Father Henry Atwell, and its deep appreciation for his years of leadership and service to ecumenical endeavors in the area.

"His vision of the wholeness of the Church as a people of God has been an inspiration to all who would be a part of the answer to the Lord's Prayer, that they might all be one.

"Furthermore, be it resolved that this resolution be placed in the hands of those of our Presbytery who will be participating in the service of 'Witness to the Resurrection' for Henry Atwell... that this expression of love and sincere appreciation may be shared with his family, his many friends and his congregation."

(Moot is stated clerk of the Presbytery.)

By Rev. Lawrence E. Witmer

Father Henry Atwell served as executive director of Genesee Ecumenical Ministries from January 1972 until a heart attack led to his leave of absence in June 1974. As GEM's first director, Father Atwell was challenged by the considerable task of forging collaborative relationships among the denominational members.

The Rev. Robert Wainwright, rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church and first president of GEM, remembers him as having a special symbolic significance. As the first Roman Catholic priest to head a metropolitan ecumenical organization, Father Atwell was a significant bridge person in helping involve the Rochester

diocese in a local ecumenical agency for the first time. "Henry was instinctively trusted," Rev. Wainwright has said, "people knew they could count on him." During those first years of GEM, Father Atwell's sensitivity to persons and his deep commitment to ecumenical witness were very significant leadership resources.

GEM's second president, the Rev. Gene Ferguson, recalls the Methodist District Superintendent referring to Father Atwell as, "the most Methodist Catholic" he had ever met. Rev. Ferguson has indicated that Father Atwell endeared himself to scores of Protestant congregations by entering into their lives at various occasions. "He served GEM as a much needed reconciling spirit," Rev. Ferguson said.

As GEM's second and current executive director, I was a member of the board during Father Atwell's tenure. Father Atwell was the embodiment of the ecumenical spirit. His skills in diplomacy and his winning personality equipped him in a unique manner to rally people around an ecumenical vision rooted in the prayer of Jesus, "That they all may be one."

Father Atwell will be missed for his counsel and leadership in the ecumenical community. Let us praise God for the gift he was to each of us and all of us. May his exceptional commitment to the ecumenical reality of the church be an inspiration and guide for those who carry on the mantle of ecumenical leadership.

(Rev. Witmer is executive director of Genesee Ecumenical Ministries.)

By Anthony J. Costello

When I arrived on the scene some 15 years ago, it was in the person of Father Henry A. Atwell that I first made contact with the Catholic Press.

He was a great inspiration to me; and on many occasions, it was he who pulled us through some very complex situations.

For instance, back in 1967, when he masterminded the first and only ecumenical edition of the Courier-Journal, he raised a minor swell of protest from some of his fellow priests. At the last moment of preparing for the edition, the Rochester presses broke down; and it was necessary for me to carry the plates down to Ithaca to be printed, plates for double the ordinary size of the paper and carrying the views of a wide spectrum of Christian and Jewish community leaders.

On that occasion, Father Atwell assured me that, contrary to the claims of his critical colleagues, the press breakdown was not the work of the Holy Spirit.

Father Atwell was a great friend and colleague, and I will miss him dearly.

(Costello is publisher and general manager of the Courier-Journal.)

By Father Louis J. Hohman

Every human person can be eulogized, if by eulogy we mean "to speak well of." There is always good to be said of everyone. There are a

few people who need to be memorialized. Their lives and actions were of such a nature that what they most deeply believed in needs to be perpetuated by those who are left behind. Father Henry Atwell was one such person. How he lived and what he did needs to be perpetuated by all of us.

Henry Atwell was born a frail human being and even at age 6 it was extremely doubtful that he would live. It was as though the Lord said to him, "Henry, I have given you a very frail physical heart, but I will make up for that by giving you my heart."

The story of Henry Atwell's life was the story of reaching out and wanting all people to be brought in. His love encompassed not only everyone with whom he came in contact, but the whole world.

He was like a little boy who was told by his mother that the family is going to have a party. He then goes out into the neighborhood, and down the street and rounds up everyone he can no matter who they are and invites them to the party. In the meantime back home the family is being aggravated because all these "strangers" are being invited to their family party.

Every aspect of Father Atwell's career points to this universalism which wanted to include everyone in God's party. He reached out to our Jewish brothers and sisters and refused to regard them as the old of which we are the new, the incomplete of which we are the complete. He approached them with a deep sense that the covenant and the promise of God are irrevocable and therefore they would always be the beloved chosen people. He reached out to our Protestant brothers and sisters and deplored all the pettiness and all the insignificances which blocked the way to unity. That is why at times he seemed irreverent. He was not irreverent but

rather impatient with the pettiness of human nature.

When Henry Atwell was just barely a teenager, he published a little newspaper which belonged to a fictional kingdom he had established. It had an editorial policy which called for the Mass being said in a language that people could understand; it also called for the inclusion of women as clerics. It was not his intention to be in the avant garde or spectacular but rather to include everyone in God's party, and that policy which began when he was 13 continued to the very day of his death.

There were times when Henry acted as though he were a traditionalist, and people wondered how he could switch from the far left to the far right so easily. It is my conviction that what he was doing was to reach out to those people who felt themselves on the outside, and to bring them in, to let them know that they really mattered, that we really cared about them and that they belonged just as much as those who embraced the new changes joyfully. He reached out to brother priests who had opted to resign from the priesthood and he told them they still mattered, and they still were his dear friends.

There was no human being that I ever knew or that he ever came in contact with who was not accepted in "God's party." It is the measure of this man that he lived in a very special and in a very full way the passionate prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper, "that they may be one, Father, as you and I are one. That they may be one in us."

You and I need to memorialize that kind of life.

(Father Hohman is episcopal advisor to the Courier-Journal and has since boyhood been a friend of Father Atwell.)

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