

Where Are the Priests for 2001?

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do, without incessant distractions, what he has been trained to do: serve the servants of God. A pastor's primary function should be to move the hearts and minds of his people. It is his purpose to show them who they are: sons and daughters of God, missioned as apostles of the liberating message of Christ. There is no help to be hoped for in the Church's mission from the faint-hearted or the half-hearted, and if such there be, it is the priest's job to minister to their ills, to strengthen their trust in themselves, in their brothers and sisters, and in the Father who sustains us all. It is his job to be wise in the ways of the Lord, articulate in embodying that message for our time and place, and forthright in challenging us to be what we claim to be. Most important, it is his job to gather our weekly individual aspostolates into one corporate effort each Sunday, and offer it to our Father, embodied in his Son.

The Holy Spirit knows what he is doing when he sends us a vocation crisis.

However, I doubt the God who gave us wits intends us to sit back and watch while the number of priests dwindles to one per parish, then see parishes forced to merge (with even larger and even more impersonal liturgies), and finally return to the frontier days where we wait for the circuit-riding priest to come around once a month, at best, to join our resident deacon and offer Mass for us.

That picture may not be as much an apocalyptic caricature as it might at first appear. The number of men willing even to try to qualify for service as priests to the American Church has plummeted by two thirds in less than a dozen years. Remember, too, that the number 13,226 is not the number of seminarians who will be ordained in a single year, but is spread over a training period of from seven to ten to twelve years: roughly, 1,300 a year. (That figure also includes men who will serve in missions outside the U.S., in cloistered monasteries, and in training future-priests.)

Nor is the 1,300-per-year a stable figure. Even if the vocation crisis has finally "bottomed out" in recent years (and some doubt it has), departures from the seminary are both ordinary and expectable, in some cases desirable. If roughly half of the present crop of seminarians survives and is ordained to serve the general church in the U.S., that will be — very roughly — about 500 new priests a year for just about 50 million Catholics — their parishes, schools

and universities, magazines, retreat houses, soup kitchens, nursing homes, prisons, army bases, what have you.

It gets worse. Besides losing the new blood and ideas and enthusiasm which each generation of the church needs to keep growing, we are losing priests at the other end. Even though the number of men leaving the priesthood has lessened, that 58,000 priests we have includes men who are retired or inevitably approaching it. Those of us who entered when the vocation tide was at the flood — when the church was emboldened to build and branch out and subdivide — did not come with lifetime guarantees. We're getting creaky, cranky, and, if not shy, retiring. To be sure, lay people can and should take away much of the burden of what we always wrongly thought was "the priest's job." Moreover, such innovations as the permanent diaconate can take away even some of the burdens which till recently the Church declared were exclusively the priest's job. But at least for the present, no one else can offer Mass and absolution except one of the alarmingly dwindling brotherhood of ordained priests.

What can we do about it? Well, the first step, "sine qua non," is to realize that the problem does indeed exist, that it is a monumental one, and that it is not likely to melt away before even a hurricane of prayers. The next step is to analyze, as best we can, the factors which contribute to this dramatic disinterest in the priesthood, and then to determine which of these factors over which we might be able to exercise some influence.

There are, I believe, two major obstacles to priestly vocations today: the tone, values, and persuasiveness of the "world," and — with tragic irony — the Church itself.

THE WORLD

When the Sower casts out the seeds of vocation today, he finds a far thornier and stonier field than he found 25 years ago. Although the overwhelming majority of Americans profess at least a lip-Christianity, many observers have begun to talk of our present times as the beginning of the post-Christian era. It is very possible that they are right. In this century, worldwide, the number of professed atheists has grown from 2 to 28 percent.

It is not oversimple, I believe, to say that the attractiveness of the priesthood is in direct proportion to the attractiveness of the Church itself — its ideas, its challenges, its priests, its people. In simpler days, especially in the days of the immigrant church and in the aftermath of two world wars, the Church was a rock of refuge and stability. There was a very real and attractive challenge to being a priest — or even a lay Catholic. The obligations were stiffer and, though perhaps often external to reasoned belief, they still identified us as "us" and not "them." We knew who the antagonists were, and we were the good guys, missioned to oppose and conquer and baptize "them." Since Vatican-II, however, we have very wisely and justly made peace with many of our former antagonists — who, we realized, were not opponents at all but fellow "good guys" fighting the same battle on a different flank. But since World War II, Catholics have also made broad concessions to many former enemies who, I think, are still very real and powerful adversaries, no matter what the advantages of detente with them: secularism,

materialism, and logical positivism. World War II brought a boom economy, a far more widely educated and sophisticated laity, and television. All those were great and very real advantages for the American Church, but of necessity they swept away the simplicities that had preceded them: the simple fire-tested peasant faith, the consolingly infallible pastor, and the circumscribed set of parochial interests. And as the Catholic's attention was drawn from the ghetto parish outward into the worlds of politics, business and international affairs, his allegiances also began to change — perhaps even his most basic allegiances. Oh, one still professed loyalty to God, Mass and the pope, but in concrete decisions they might have to "give" a little.

Today and tomorrow, the enemy is not some other sect: it is not even militant atheism. The new enemy is faceless, amorphous, disdainful. The new enemy is indifference. Nowadays, who thinks the Church relevant enough to want to destroy it? More painfully, how many of us think the Church important enough to join in the effort to help it change and flourish?

Secularism is securely in the saddle, and barring a thermonuclear simplification, it is quite likely to stay there for generations. Secularism, and its more palpable look-alike, materialism, and their academic triplet, logical positivism, were all born from the same conviction: that human knowledge is limited to what can be proved conclusively by the methods of science. Anything else is too rarefied to compute and therefore probably non-existent or at least negligible.

One of the many midwives of these triplets was Rene Descartes, who stated that one could accept as plausible only what he knew so clearly and distinctly that he could have no occasion to doubt it. The data of faith, therefore, since they are not provable beyond doubt and are in fact too elusive for scientific method, must be judged as beyond human comprehension — and therefore beyond human concern.

There is nothing beyond explanation. All mysteries can be ultimately reduced to solvable problems.

There are repercussions in society to this basic assertion, and however much we doomsayers cry out against them, the ordinary man or woman sees the immediate benefits of secularism so palpable and the arguments against it so abstruse, that most are content with the ice cream on their plates. As W.H. Auden put it, "He has everything necessary to the Modern Man: a phonograph, a radio, a car, and a

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frigidaire." God, if He exists at all, turned His back on the whole thing long ago, or at least can be dealt with ... later.

In a world where one is conditioned since birth to immediate satisfaction or a money-back guarantee, faith becomes the height of naivete. God? Who needs him? "I'll get by with a little help from my friends": booze, pot, pills, TV, and all the other anesthetics science can provide. Any talk of an intimate personal relationship between a believer and Christ is really a childish attempt to escape the confusions of life, clinging to the foot of an invisible six-foot rabbit.

Without a God who knows man's purpose for living, it must then be the man or woman who decides his or her own personal purpose and the means to achieve it. Good and evil become meaningful only insofar as they relate to that personally chosen goal. If I judge that slaughtering Jews is good, so be it. If you disagree, you'd better be tougher than I am. If I judge that covering up government injustice is good, so be it. It may be illegal, but it is not immoral. Whether it is political "misjudgments" or cheating on a test or sleeping with my girl, the only sin left is getting caught.

Remember, too, that the secularist establishment has at least one little box in every American home quietly hypnotizing, brainwashing, 16 minutes out of every hour: "The more things you have, the happier you'll be ... the more things you have the hap- ...". And for a couple of years, Debbie Boone, a fundamentalist Christian, never tired of reminding us that "it can't be wrong 'cause it feels so right."

NEXT WEEK: Father O'Malley continues to discuss the problems created by worldliness and the picture the Church presents of itself in counterpoint.

Irish Children Get Chance To Get Away from It All

A group of 20 Northern Ireland children will be the guests of Rochester area families for six weeks this summer.

The 10 boys and 10 girls, ranging from 8 to 11, are scheduled to arrive in Toronto tomorrow by plane from Belfast. They will travel by bus to Bishop Kearney High School where they will join their area hosts.

The youngsters, 10 of whom are Catholic and 10 Protestant, are described as in need of getting away from the violence in their homeland.

The idea for the journey was born in February when Mr. and Mrs. Lionel Andalo of Ogden were watching a

television newscast of the Belfast fighting. Andalo, a professional equipment designer at Kodak, has vivid boyhood memories of World War II bombings in his native London, England. A short time after, there was an editorial in a Rochester daily informing that an Irish Children Program had been formed to help the needy children. Brendan Pressimone, who had headed the Westchester County Chapter of the program, was transferred to Rochester and now resides in Fairport.

Catherine Andalo contacted Pressimone and after approval of the plan, Premier Travel Service made arrangements and Jackie

Laney, executive vice president of the firm, donated \$400 to bus the children from Toronto to Rochester.

BOOK DISCUSSION

Three books will be reviewed and discussed at the United Cancer Council Make Today County meeting at 7:30 p.m., Monday, June 28, at the Friends Meeting House, 41 Westminster Road.

To be discussed are Anatomy of an Illness by Norman Cousins, When Bad Things Happen to Good People by William Kushner and Cancer and Vitamin C by Linus Pauling. Patients, family members and friends are invited. More information is available from the council, 473-8230.

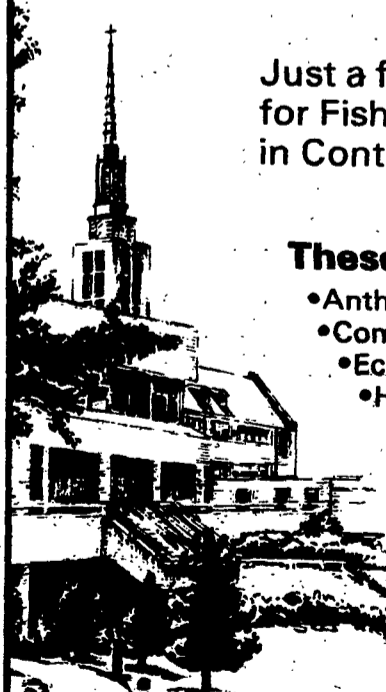
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