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□ Faith Today

Homilies...the view from the pew

By Dolores Leckey
NC News Service

There was a priest who had the habit of going into his church during the week, before his next Sunday homily. He would spend a half hour or so there, sitting first in one place, then in another and yet another.

As he did so he would say to himself: "Here Mrs. Smith sits, here Mr. Jones, here young Adam, here Susan."

The story of that particular Anglican priest is told in a book by Father Norman Pittenger,

"The Theology of All Ministry." The author, also an Anglican priest, writes that as the priest "sat in these places, with these people in mind, he would ask himself what was the concrete situation, what were the deep needs, the urgent desires, the several different problems, which would be present in the minds and hearts of each of those persons. He would ask himself how he could best proclaim God's saving, healing and helping concern to each one of them, and how he could help them grow in faith and in loyal discipleship to the One proclaimed."

Clearly this priest's approach was a challenge both to him and to those who assembled for worship. Perhaps the word "empathy" describes what he wanted. He hoped to understand the

people who would be there on Sunday.

This required his effort. But it also required effort from the people in allowing him to know them, to understand what their lives really are like. Would they do that?

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I asked a number of lay women and men whether preaching is important to them and why. Their willingness to think carefully about these questions highlights the seriousness of the homily in their Christian lives.

There was unanimous agreement among the people I spoke with that if preaching makes the connections between Scripture and the work and family lives of a particular community of believers, then the homily is experienced as God's word spoken to them, personally. They wanted to be addressed personally.

The people I spoke with also were more than willing to ponder something substantive. And if a homilist draws on the world's great storehouses of art or literature to make a truth come alive, these people welcome it.

It seems people want comfort and solace when the word of God is preached. But they also want to be called to deeper, truer Christian life.

This won't displease the priest I've already introduced. For in his desire to speak personally to the people in his congregation, he also pondered what people need in order to grow in faith. He hoped to present God's prophetic word, which is sometimes hard and piercing, even while — mysteriously — it stirs up joy.

A homily I still remember was preached on the gospel story of the rich man who dined on the choicest foods while the poor man Lazarus lingered hungrily at the gate of the wealthy home, waiting for scraps of food. It would have been easy for the middle-class and well-meaning Catholics gathered that day to feel good because they were not like the insensitive rich man. After all, no poor people were hanging about our doorways, either at home or at church.

The homilist, however, drew our attention to the current statistics on hunger in our part of the world, particularly hunger among the very young. He even suggested action on behalf of the hungry children across the river, five miles away.

One felt that some core of inner responsibility had been touched that day.

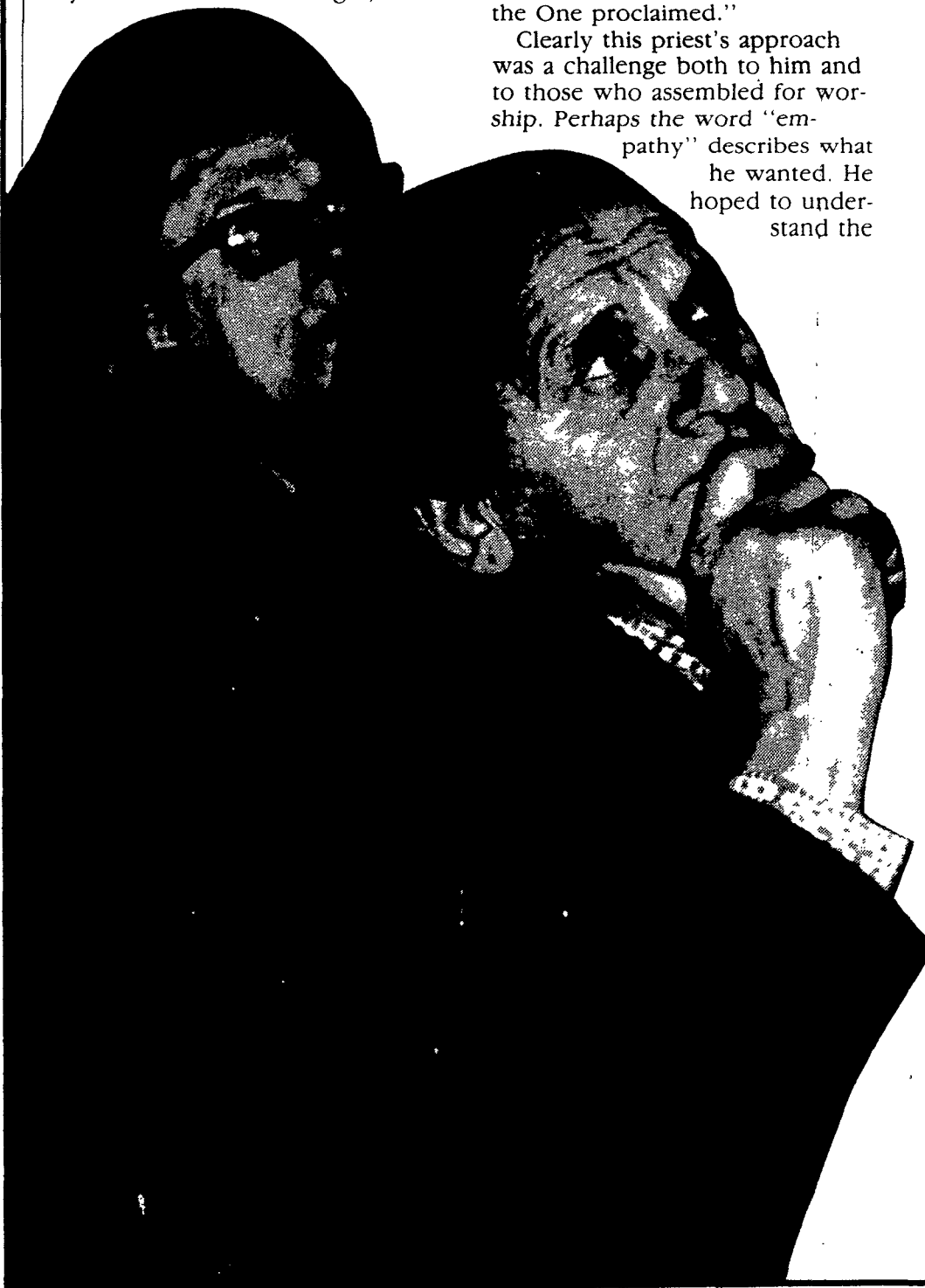
Some people — and I count myself among them — not only need preaching that will make them sensitive to the little ones of the world. We need preaching that helps us to join together — to form into a community — in order to respond better to the poor and those who live on the margins of society.

Together with others we can move beyond our fears and stereotypes and self-interests in order to act on behalf of all the "others" who share our portion of the world.

And some of us not only want a call — an invitation — to this kind of community. We hope to discover "how" to be a community that responds to society's needs.

(Mrs. Leckey is director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Laity.)

Homilies are important, people tend to agree. But what do lay women and men look for in a homily? What do they hope to discover about commitment and the call to community? According to Dolores Leckey, good preaching hits home.



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