

# Father Steger Continued from Page 1

His initial reaction to the missing money had been one of responsibility to the parish — accountability for its funds. "St. Jude's is out \$10,000," he said last Friday, drawing an analogy he believed would clarify his reaction. He asked: What if someone had driven to the church, absentmindedly leaving the keys in his unlocked car, and Burke, who needed a car, assumed that it was the answer to her prayers?

On Monday, however, Father Steger said his decision to go to the police may have been a mistake. "I think for whatever reason, while I tried to act in good conscience, because of the media or whatever, it was misinterpreted ... It was blown out of proportion, and it has had somewhat of an adverse reaction to people's faith and trust and devotion to St. Jude, and I don't think any monetary loss would offset that harm. I would be the last person to want any personal hurt to come to her (Burke)." He said Monday that he decided to drop the charges "for the sake of faith and the good of the Church and devotion and trust in St. Jude."

"There isn't any other direction we can take for the sake of honor and devotion to St. Jude," Father Steger continued. Nonetheless, he believes that the initial filing of charges may have a positive result. "Looking back, if I hadn't chosen this course, we would have never gotten the publicity for St. Jude," he said. "Maybe it came off not as flattering as we would have liked, or maybe our motives were questioned, but there certainly was a great deal of notoriety given to our patron," he said, adding that the case may have been part of God's plan to draw greater attention to the devotion to St. Jude.

He declined to speculate on whether it is already too late to offset any damage the case may bring to the diocese, the Church or devotion to the saints. He recognized that the case may have added to claims made by critics of the Catholic Church.

For many years, such critics have claimed that Catholics worship "graven images" — praying to the statues of saints rather than merely praying before the statues — and that we are superstitious, believing that miracles can come from such ritual prayers as novenas. Father Steger acknowledged that superstition does sometimes occur in cases of extreme devotion to saints, and that it could play a part in this case. "Apart from Catholic theology, I think many people in their own minds do this. They don't separate the devotion to the saint from the statue," he said.

"Some people definitely have their own brand of faith," he continued, noting that Burke may be among them. "I think we have to always be alert to the possibility of borderline idolatry," he said.

Despite his belief that some of the devotion to St. Jude may be fanaticism or superstition, Father Steger said he has never talked to worshippers about the line between valid devotion and superstition. "I've never done it publicly," he said. When asked if he regretted having passed up the opportunity to clarify the question, he said "If I had, she (Burke) wouldn't have heard it anyhow," noting that she, like many others who come to visit the shrine, is a not a member of the parish.

Father Steger said he has not yet spoken to Burke, but might be interested in doing so after the case is resolved. He said he has no plan to ask her to pay the money back to the parish or to work it off. "If down the road, she feels restitution should be made, we'll leave it to her own conscience," he said. "I don't think charity is something we should look upon as something to be retrieved."

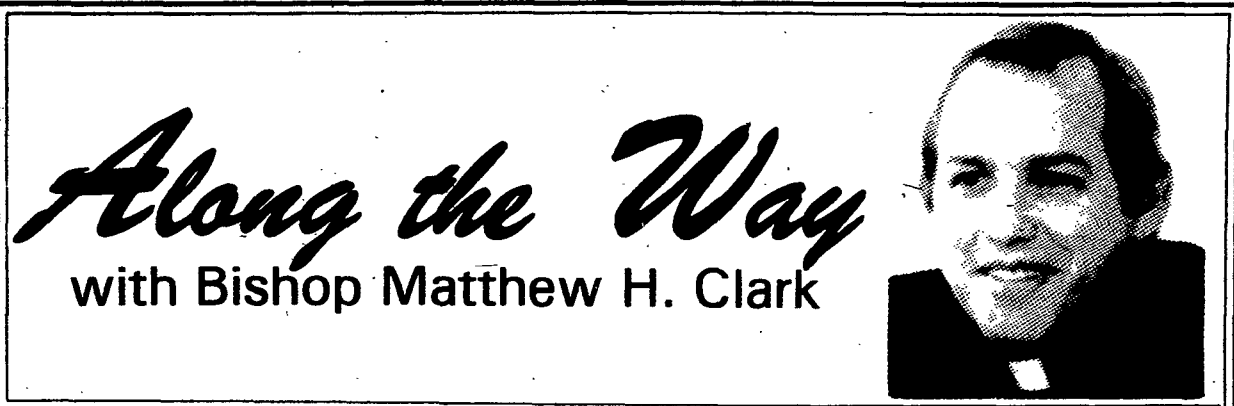
Previously he had said that he would have been very happy to have helped Mrs. Burke had she presented her problem to him, along with the money she found. He said that the parish has sponsored several families of Asian refugees and underwritten mortgages for those in need. "We have done these kinds of things. We're not looking for that kind of fanfare. These things are known to the Lord, and we want to keep it that way," he said, adding, "Maybe that's the reason the Lord let it be revealed" that Burke took the money.

Father Steger said he did not know what effect dropping the charges would have on his insurance claim, adding that this had no effect on his decision to drop the charges.

When asked last Friday how all the media attention to this case would affect the Church, he said "I think the media can put us in a bad light — and they have — but I'm very optimistic ... I have the best of hope that it (the case) will deepen the devotion — to the saint, not the statue."

Yet he said, "I can't foretell the future. I'd just like to remain optimistically faith-filled. As time unfolds, we'll see the reaction. I hope and pray that good comes of it. Usually from most of the trials and tribulations good does come."

Despite his change of heart, that optimism remains. "Maybe it was the wrong judgment to pursue it this way (pressing charges)," Father Steger reiterated. "We hope it will not be harmful but will enhance faith and devotion to St. Jude."



I am on vacation as this issue of the Courier-Journal appears and so I take the opportunity to tell you something about these days in letter form.

These days at the ocean have been peaceful and happy ones. My activities and those of my companions, Tom Powers and Howie Hubbard, don't vary all that much from day to day.

My own general pattern includes the following, and generally in the order given: breakfast; morning prayer; a more-or-less careful run-through of the many newspapers Howard insists we read each day; a trip to the market; a thirty-to-forty minute run; some hours reading and walking on the beach when the weather permits; a time for cleanup and housekeeping; evening prayer and Mass; supper; a film or some television, or some reading in the evening.

Life is unhurried and there is little pressure to be here or there or to accomplish anything very much.

I am not sure I would like to be responsible for it every day, but I enjoy the chance to do the marketing and to cook and, although I would rather have died than admit it as a kid, I even enjoy doing the dishes. That, I am sure, is because such activities are a notable change from what I do most days of the year. But it's also because meal times and the before and afters are times when the three of us have a lot of fun together.

We had weather for a few days which made me think of the darker side of lake effect, but we awoke this morning to a golden summer day and to a weather forecast which promised at least two or three more days of the same.

It is a delight to go to the beach. I have always enjoyed being near or on water. I find it a relaxing experience and a time when I can enjoy all of the color and sounds and movement of crowds of people enjoying its pleasures. Children playing in the sand, parents handing out sandwiches and cold drinks to their hungry and thirsty charges, young men and women finding ways to meet one another — all of these scenes and many more make hours at the beach so happy for me. Part of the relaxing for me is watching so many others having so much fun.

I mentioned to you that on retreat I read a biography of John XXIII. That book was written over twenty years ago and, although I enjoyed it, it was sketchy and left me wanting to read something more substantial about that great man.

I found it in "Pope John XXIII, Pope of the Council" by Peter Hebblethwaite. It is a fascinating book not only for the insight it offers into the personality of Angelo Roncalli, but for the way it relates his ever-deepening spirituality to events and people and movements of his lifetime.

Father Joe Jankowiak, pastor of Mary Our Mother in Horseheads, read the book during his retreat this year and very kindly gave it to me. I thank him for many happy hours of reading.

You are all in my prayers these days and I count on yours.

Peace to all.

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