

# Controversy draws curious crowd to hear Father Curran firsthand

By Teresa A. Parsons

Catherine Clark came to hear Father Charles E. Curran talk about "Being Catholic and Being American" Monday evening, October 27, because she was "curious."

After reading so much, and yet so little about his views, the Rochester resident wanted to hear what he had to say and judge for herself.

"The thing of it is that even with all the reporting that's going on, you only get little smidgions of things," she said.

Hundreds of other people, both curious and furious, turned out to hear the controversial Rochester native and diocesan priest. Father Curran, who is currently appealing a Vatican decision to strip him of his right to teach moral theology at Catholic University, was the featured speaker at the University of Rochester's annual John Henry Newman Lecture, which focuses on the themes of faith and reason. More than 600 people crowded the university's Interfaith Chapel and another 100-200 watched via video screen from the building's lower level.

As he began his address, Father Curran observed that the last time he came to the university, far fewer people turned out. "I hope by the next time, things get back to normal," he joked.

Judging by the applause and their comments afterward, Father Curran's supporters comprised the majority of the audience. Many were unhappy with both the form and the substance of the Vatican's action against him.

"I don't think theologians should be stopped from thinking," said Catherine Clark. "The Church is so afraid of losing people ... but you can't stifle thought."

"We are not kids anymore — we are an educated populace," she added. "You can't treat us like children."

Rochester residents Helen and Charles Wyvill were likewise distressed by the Vatican's announcement last August 18 that Father Curran was neither suitable nor eligible to teach Catholic theology.

"I don't particularly like the inflexible demands made by the pope," Charles Wyvill said.

"I really appreciate Bishop (Matthew H.) Clark's support of him," Helen Wyvill said. "I wish Dennis O'Brien (University of Rochester president) would invite him to teach here."

Mary Collins and Genevieve Solazzo were surprised by the number of young people who attended the lecture. "There were more of them here tonight than there ever are in Church," Collins said.

She came all the way from Avon because she already "liked Father Curran a lot."

"I think that the problem with people who are against him is that they don't understand theology," she said. "He's not a revolutionary — he's an evolutionary."

"Tonight he took great pains to show how he arrived at his conclusions," Solazzo added. "I think he's a very holy man and I don't think he'll cause anyone to lose their soul."

One of Father Curran's younger listeners was University of Rochester student Elizabeth Witt, who said she too wanted to hear Father Curran firsthand. "I am, on the whole, in complete accord with his views," she said. "His policies tend to be supported by a lot of younger Catholics."

A few feet away stood another UR student, Joe DeSimone, who cannot accept

Father Curran's challenge to Church authority. "I don't like the idea that he's going against the pope," he said. "I don't think he has any right to contradict him."

Aliece Franklin of Penfield believes Catholics need to be challenged by people like Father Curran.

"If more Catholics would just listen," she said. "You can't grow in your faith by saying 'that's what Rome told me to do.'"

Despite the challenging nature of what Father Curran teaches, compassionate was a word many of his supporters used to

characterize his overall approach to people.

Penfield resident Arthur Maurer also observed a certain unity and consistency to his ideas.

"I really feel that Father Curran has his perception of Catholicism very well thought out," he said. "The problem with the magisterium is that in trying to protect what's thought of as traditional Catholic teaching, they're ignoring the pain of many who are dealing with problems in the Church day-to-day. That's not reflective of the compassion Jesus showed to people."

"From a psychological perspective, there has been a great change in Catholic self-identity in the United States. Catholics are not in the mainstream of American life and society in terms of education, income and leadership in many aspects of contemporary life ... Both psychologically and theologically, the Catholic Church in the United States after Vatican II is much more open to a dialogue with the American culture."

The Church is also quite often in open disagreement with Rome, he said. As examples, he cited the Vatican investigations of U.S. seminaries and religious women, his own censure by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Vatican order stripping Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of a large portion of his power.

"Here it seems that the Vatican is actually changing the very basic understanding of the role and function of bishop in the church," he said in reference to the Hunthausen case. "One prominent United States archbishop (Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee) has publicly warned that these recent disciplinary actions by the Vatican against Roman Catholic leaders in the United States are alienating ordinary Catholics from ..."

## Fr. Curran

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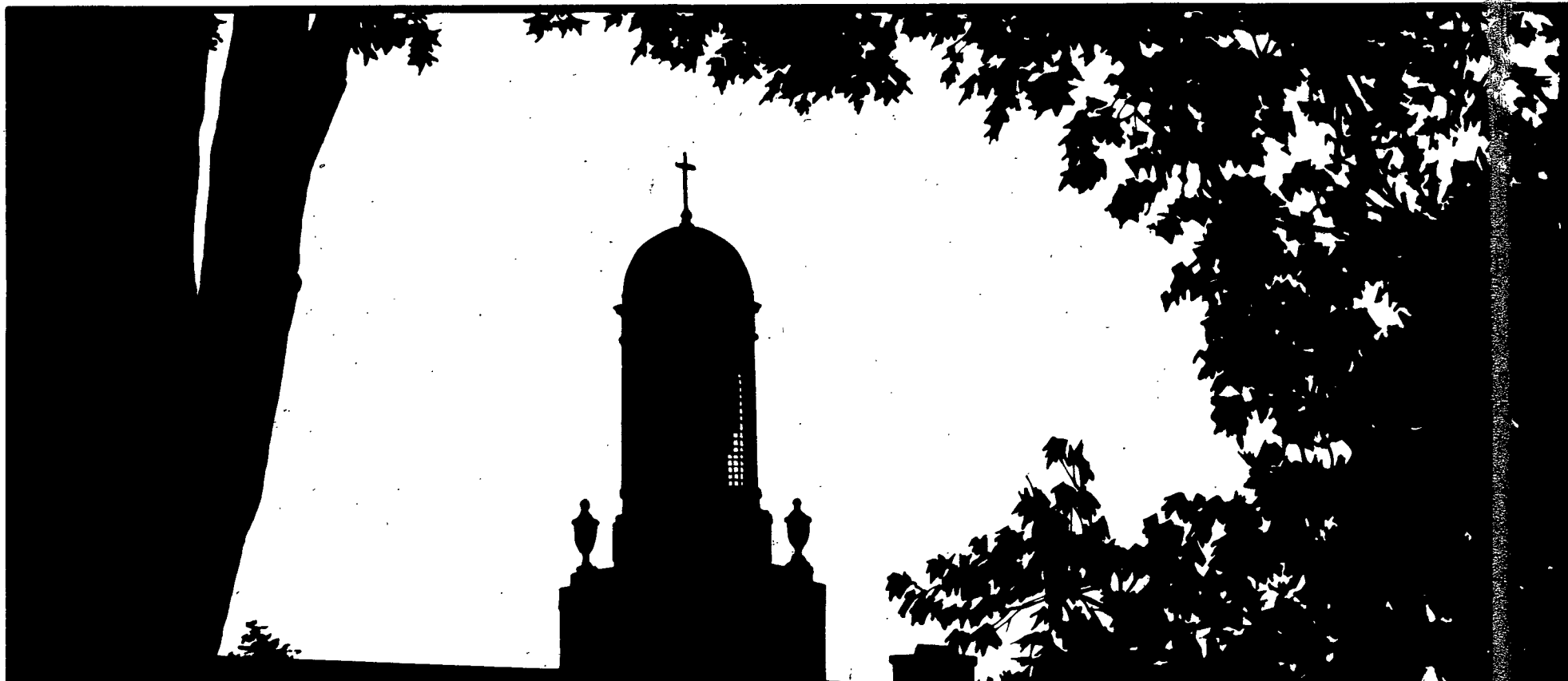
democracy and independence. Above all, the large influx of European clergy brought with them a different understanding of Catholicism."

By the end of the 18th century, a new movement to reassert an American form of Catholicism began. In 1899, Pope Leo XIII condemned the move as a desire to have "a church in America different from that which is in the rest of the world." This condemnation was followed, Father Curran noted, by the condemnation of modernism in 1907.

"These condemnations were often cited as the reason for the failure of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States to develop any strong intellectual life," the theologian stated. "The defensive spirit behind these condemnations took hold in the Catholic Church in the United States in the first half of the 20th century. American Catholicism heavily emphasized its distinctive Roman character."

Yet we see that the question is once again being raised today, Father Curran explained.

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