

Columnists

Vocations and the lack thereof

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

Forty years ago, I was an Air Corps chaplain. Our young men came from all over the states. We chaplains were impressed by the fidelity and loyalty of these men — and later young women, too. They came to Mass and Holy Communion. They knew how to go to confession, and they went. They were secure in their Catholic faith and practices, confirmed by their homes and parishes.

In the '40s, there was a great interest in religion. One book, *Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton, a Trappist priest, had a great impact on our people. It was responsible for an upsurge of vocations to the priesthood.

But 40 years have brought changes in thought, loyalty and spirit. Vatican II came, with a gigantic misreading of it on the part of many people — including theologians — causing confusion and contestation within the Church. Whereas once many bishops had been too exalted and too authoritative, today many are game for contestation. Whereas many bishops were overly ultramontane, some became contentious toward the Holy See of Peter.

A terrible hurt to vocations to the priesthood came when the sisters withdrew from the schools and dropped the care of the sanctuary. The sisters, spiritual mothers to many, had been a great source of priestly vocations.

Equally devastating have been changes in the secular world. TV and radio have become the teachers — generally not for good, although Archbishop Sheen had a great impact on the country for years and Mother Angelica is the pioneer in Catholic broadcasting today. Idealism fostered by great authors of 40 years ago — Newman, Chesterton, Belloc, Archbishop Sheen, Cannon Sheehan, Benson, Mauriac, Gheon and Sheed — has few proponents among readers today. Who has replaced them? Last year I asked a girl from a Catholic high school, "What do you read for English classes?" She rattled off several authors. Not one was a Catholic.

What we read often gives our direction. I met a six-year-old boy with his mother at our Webster Village library. The child clutched a

little book on space ships. I asked him: "What will you do when you grow up?" The mother smilingly said, "He's going to be a spaceman." The boy promptly contradicted her, "No, I'm not. I'm going to be an engineer." In his biography, "Damien the Leper," John Farrow told of Damien's family gathering after chores and

On the Right Side

supper to read the lives of the saints.

However there are pluses. There are many families sound and firm in the faith. With few exceptions our priests are loyal to Christ's vicar and to our bishop. Mother Teresa continues to give a holy shock to the world. The Trappists and Legionnaires of Christ have many vocations. We have brothers and sisters, priests and lay people who continue in dedication to God through education, health, spirituality. We have Father Callan at Corpus Christi, like a holy octopus, reaching out with many facets to less-chance people.

For what it's worth, I think priestly vocations would come from greater Church involvement. Every year, 30,000 Mormon youths of 18 or 19 leave home for two years to evangelize. Even if they make no converts, they intensify their own devotion to their religion. An active involvement of our youths with the Church — as lecturers, eucharistic ministers, religion teachers, participants in youth programs, men of prayer and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, even as members of parish athletic teams or as janitors around the church property — could stir up the embers of the spirit that the Church is Christ's and theirs, that it needs workers, and that some are called to priesting — the most intimate sharing in evangelization for the glory of God and His Church.

The difficulties of denial strategy

By Father Richard P. McBrien

Last November, in his final presidential address before the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop James Malone acknowledged the existence of "a growing and dangerous disaffection of elements of the Church of the United States from the Holy See."

"Wherever you stand," he declared, "this division presents the Church in the United States with a very serious question: How will we move to address this developing estrangement, to strengthen the cognitive and affective bonds between the Church here and the Holy See?"

Bishop Malone admitted that a problem exists and called upon the bishops to contribute to a solution. There's nothing special about that. Anyone with even a passing awareness of the U.S. Catholic scene knows of the problem, and those with a more extensive grasp of the situation know that the "developing estrangement" is not confined to what some might describe as fringe groups.

Survey after survey has shown that the "disaffection" is broadly based. It includes many so-called average practicing Catholics, as well as an ominously large number of Catholics who actively serve the Church in ministerial positions at the parish and diocesan levels.

This problem goes to the heart of the Catholic way of being church. Unlike other Christian traditions, Catholicism's ecclesiastical structure is collegial. The Body of Christ is present in each local church (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 26), and yet each local church is part of a communion, or college, of local churches which together constitute the universal Church.

The balance between the universal Church and the local churches is not easy to maintain. There is always the risk of emphasizing too much the prerogatives of the local churches and their bishops to the detriment of the universal Church and the pope. This is what concerns many conservative Catholics today, including many bishops.

On the other hand, there is another risk of emphasizing too much the prerogatives of the universal Church and of the pope to the detriment of the local churches and their bishops. This is what concerns many progressive Catholics today, including many bishops.

Conservative Catholics think the bishops have exceeded their authority, especially with reference to their pastoral letters on peace and the economy.

Progressive Catholics think the pope and his Curia have been intervening too much in the pastoral affairs of the Church in America.

Essays in Theology

Bishop Malone and the majority of his fellow bishops recognize that a problem exists and that something has to be done about solving it. Why then, is there still so much denial in high places?

In advance of Pope John Paul II's second pastoral visit to the United States, Archbishop Justin Rigali, a U.S. priest who has spent nearly his entire career in the Vatican, told the New York Times: "The idea that there is tension between Rome and the Church in the United States was prompted by a tiny group of American Catholics, and it has been artificially manipulated and nurtured with a lot of help from the media."

The pope apparently takes the archbishop's opinions seriously. On the flight in from Rome to Miami last month, the pope acknowledged that, while dissent among U.S. Catholics is a serious problem, "the other question is: Is that the dissent of many, many faithful people? Or is that the dissent of some theologians, authors, writers and journalists?"

What, then, of the survey results? Enter New York's Cardinal O'Connor, who told The New York Times that he is "totally unimpressed" with such surveys. "They find the same five people in the U.S. and they cry, 'The sky is falling! I don't see it. I think we have problems and we have to meet them, but they are not of that magnitude.'"

We may disagree about the solution, but we're really in trouble if we can't even agree on the nature and extent of the problem itself.

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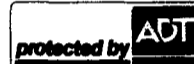
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