

Columnists

Recalling the boys from Waterloo

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

In 1950, after a year at Assumption College, Windsor, Canada, with the Basilians, Bishop Kearney sent me to be an assistant to Monsignor Naughton at St. Anne's Parish in Rochester. In 1951, the bishop assigned me to the faculty of St. Andrew's Seminary. That decision was made under the influence of Mother Angela Murphy, then superior of the Cenacle Retreat House, who had invited me often to give retreats and other spiritual exercises.

In November, 1951, a fat packet came to the seminary for me. It was my orders from the Air Force, recalling me to report January 6 to chaplains' school, and from there to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, which was swelling with "basics" — i.e. new recruits — and with men and women for several other schools.

Because we were so short of chaplains, I had several jobs, which over the course of my three years there included chaplain to male and female basics, and Catholic chaplain to Officer Candidate School, which put 600 young men in their early twenties through a six-month course that would break many people. After three years, I was transferred to Casablanca, Morocco, for two more years, then finally to Biggs Air Field, a Strategic Air Command Base with heavy bombers in El Paso, Texas.

During my induction at Lackland, a brilliant Jesuit, Father John Long, who had come from Holy Cross College and was in practical command over the chaplains' section, assigned me to the basic trainees. Most were youngsters just out of high school.

At St. Bernard's Seminary, Monsignor Francis Burns taught us: "Know all you can about your people. The more you know, the more you can help them." Because these basics were with us for only three or four months, I devised a quick census: name, address, parish, Mass attendance, confession practice, prayer life, parents, education. This census was made out by the groups and sent over by their squadron commanders. I then interviewed each one individually to let them know that the Church was vitally interested in them, and to encourage them.

On the whole, the practice of religion and a genuine attachment to the faith was far

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stronger than it is today. It was also the days of Thomas Merton's "Seven Storey Mountain," and a time of great interest in religion generally.

One group has always stood out in my memory. There were about 30 youngsters from Waterloo, Iowa, all 18 or 19, wonderfully wholesome, virile and cheerful. As I interviewed each one, I was amazed at the consistent positive answers: regular at Mass and the sacraments, regular in their daily prayers. Most were from Catholic high schools. All were just heartwarming young men.

After interviewing a dozen of them and finding this consistent evidence of virtue and religious practice, I said to the 13th: "I am greatly impressed by your group from Waterloo. You must have fine priests and sisters!" He smiled and rejoined: "Father, we have fine parents and grandparents."

Touche! Today, they are in their fifties, and I pray their children are worthy successors of their fathers.

I often speculate wonderingly about today's developments. During World War II, homosexuality was practically unknown. When I was recalled 10 years later, it was still only a slight ripple. I lived intimately with our men, and knew them well. I wonder if the present agitation about homosexuality is the result of a hysteria which has blown this out of proportion.

In WWII and ten years later, there was a pride in the faith, and a loyalty even among those who didn't practice it very much. It seems to me that our Catholic schools filtered a devotion, along with good parents and stronger family stability, which gave strength to the souls of our people. Whatever the causes, the example of the youngsters from Waterloo should give fathers and mothers and grandfathers and grandmothers a sense of their importance in the formation of souls.

The bishops and Mother Angelica

By Father Richard P. McBrien

When the history of this period in U.S. Catholicism is written 100 years from now, one of the standards by which current Church leaders may be measured will be their response to the challenge and opportunities presented by the communications revolution, and particularly television — a medium heretofore dominated by Protestant pentecostals and fundamentalists.

To correct this imbalance, an ecumenical network, VISN, is about to be launched with a projected audience of more than 50 million cable subscribers. Catholics have been invited to participate.

At their recent meeting in Collegeville, Minn., however, our bishops, by a vote of 118-51, defeated a proposal recommended by their own committee on communications to join this new venture.

They then voted 122-93 to enter instead into a two-year contract with Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), which has an audience of some 10 million.

One archbishop called it the worst decision made by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 20 years. Others simply shook their heads in disbelief.

The outcome was attributed to several factors: a weak presentation on behalf of VISN by the chairman of the communications committee; an emotional plea on behalf of Mother Angelica by a bishop-member of her board; and the growing conservatism of the conference as a whole.

Even at that, the deal almost fell through because of Mother Angelica's initial insistence on the right of prior censorship. She wanted the bishops to accede to her current policy of excluding from her cable network anyone who does not meet her own personal standards of orthodoxy. The bishops balked at that.

A compromise was reached. The bishops would appoint three of five members to a review board that would have the final say on the airing of any conference-sponsored program Mother Angelica might consider objectionable.

For those who aren't familiar with her, Mother Angelica, the head of a Benedictine

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monastery in Alabama, founded her own cable television network in 1981. She has appeared occasionally on programs hosted by the Protestant televangelists, and was the subject a few years ago of a "60 Minutes" profile on CBS.

A folksy, self-assured woman, Mother Angelica has been described as an old-fashioned, pre-Vatican II nun with the personality of an old-fashioned, pre-Vatican II rectory housekeeper.

She appears benign and jovial, but many — including not a few of the bishops who voted against joining her network — sense underneath a strong-mindedness fortified by piety and theology largely untouched by the Biblical, liturgical, and socio-ethical developments of the past several decades.

Archbishop Quinn of San Francisco seems to have expressed the concern of these bishops when he asked "to what degree the conference might be subsumed under the power" of a single personality.

Mother Angelica's board of directors includes the Florida bishop who led the fight on her behalf at Collegeville. Known for his own close affiliation with Opus Dei, he has shown himself, like Mother Angelica, at ease with the ways of censorship.

Not one of her "theological" consultants has a theological doctorate, and all three belong to a camp that tends to brand Catholic scholars with whom they disagree as disloyal to the Church, if not heretical.

Perhaps the most important question of all is whether the 122-93 vote is indicative of a drift to the right on the part of the conference as a whole. Given the pattern of episcopal appointments in the post-Jadot years, no should be surprised if that is the case.

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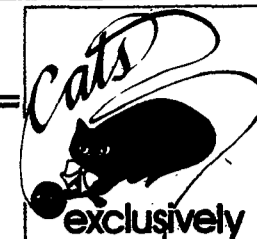
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