

CATHOLIC COURIER

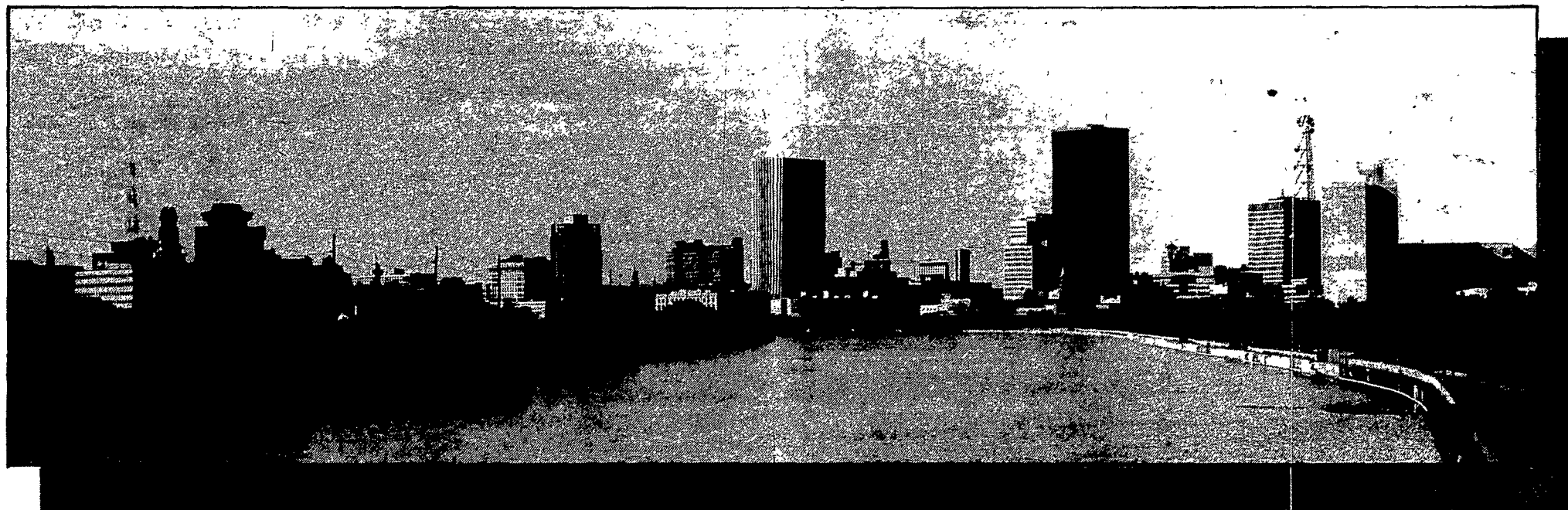
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Does U.S. public life need some fresh air?

'Public life is ... our life among strangers with whom our lot is cast ... whether we like it or not,' says a sociologist who wants Americans to resume the debate of civil concerns in public settings.



Empty benches and sidewalks at Lundsford Circle in Rochester's Corn Hill neighborhood symbolize Palmer's comments on the decline of American public life. Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier



Parker Palmer believes cities, as well as churches, universities and other institutions, should expand the availability of spaces for public discussion.

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Instead of trying to keep up with the Joneses, Americans should get out on the streets and talk with them.

And while they're at it, Americans could try talking to the O'Reillys, the Robinsons, the Kowalskis, and any of a number of other people in their communities.

Such are the sentiments of Dr. Parker Palmer, a sociologist and community organizer currently residing in Madison, Wisconsin. Palmer wrote *The Company of Strangers* which proposed that communities develop a public outlook in their educational, religious, political and business institutions, to name a few.

Palmer has spent a lifetime attempting to revitalize the public life of the United States, a public life he feels is threatened by a general obsession with private pursuits.

According to Palmer, Americans spend too much time watching the news on television, rather than creating the news at

community meetings; they no longer gather at common markets to discuss politics, but only to shop for the latest diversions; and too often they fight such societal ills as crime with private solutions like door locks and handguns.

"In our society, what's happened is privatization," Palmer said. "Places and events where groups can come together in a creative way are disappearing."

Since the advent of post-World War II affluence, Palmer claimed, this nation's citizenry has gradually ceded a dangerous amount of power to fewer and fewer people, not because of any grand conspiracy on the part of the ruling elite, but because Americans tend to overemphasize individualism and private rights to the detriment of community concerns and life.

"We are obsessed with the private life," Palmer said, noting that cities and suburban communities, in particular, often lack places where people can meet to debate and discuss issues.

To combat this trend, Palmer is traveling

the country, promoting the establishment of more public spaces in cities, universities and shopping malls, and encouraging programs that serve the public.

One such program exists at St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester. Since the fall of 1985, St. Mary's has hosted the Downtown Community Forum. Operating from September to June of each year, the forum has brought dozens of speakers to downtown Rochester, attracting anywhere from a half dozen to several hundred listeners. The church has a mailing list of more than 1,200 people who have attended the forum's events.

The forum consists of three components, each featuring speakers ranging from police to politicians: a noontime series of weekly discussions in the church, which usually draws 15-35 listeners; Life After Five seminars, once a month on Wednesdays from 5:30-6:30 p.m., which draw an average of 25-100 people; and a luncheon series, co-sponsored by the Rochester Area

Continued on page 17



St. Mary's Church, which has worked to develop public discussion in Rochester, looks out at the public area of Washington Square Park.