

Priests

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On the other hand, Father John R. Cavanaugh, CSB, accepted an invitation for a special screening of "Priest" on Monday afternoon, April 17.

"I don't think they should criticize anything until they've seen it," remarked Father Cavanaugh, a retired English professor from St. John Fisher College, 3690 East Ave., Pittsford.

Father Cavanaugh attended the screening — arranged by *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle* staff writer Susan McNamara — with three other diocesan priests: Father Thomas M. Erdle, pastor of St. Mark's Church in Greece; Father John J. Philipps, pastor of St. Bridget/St. Joseph Church in East Bloomfield; and Father Daniel P. Tormey, pastor of St. Mary of the Assumption Church in Scottsville.

According to McNamara, she made approximately 20 telephone invitations. She said many priests expressed interest in attending the screening but had prior commitments, yet only one priest refused to attend due to objections over the subject matter.

Also present on April 17 were Edward Kowalski, who served as a diocesan priest from 1958-69 and is now a parishioner of Greece's Holy Name of Jesus Church; and David Higbee, director of St. Thomas the Apostle Church's Irenaeus Study Center.

After the screening, viewers stated that much of the movie was interesting and realistic — yet they were disappointed at the filmmakers' insistence on playing up the characters' dark sides.

For instance, Kowalski felt that "there's a lot of good teaching about Catholic thought in this film" but Father Philipps said he "would like to have seen one compassionate (priest)." Father Erdle labeled the film "a cheap shot."

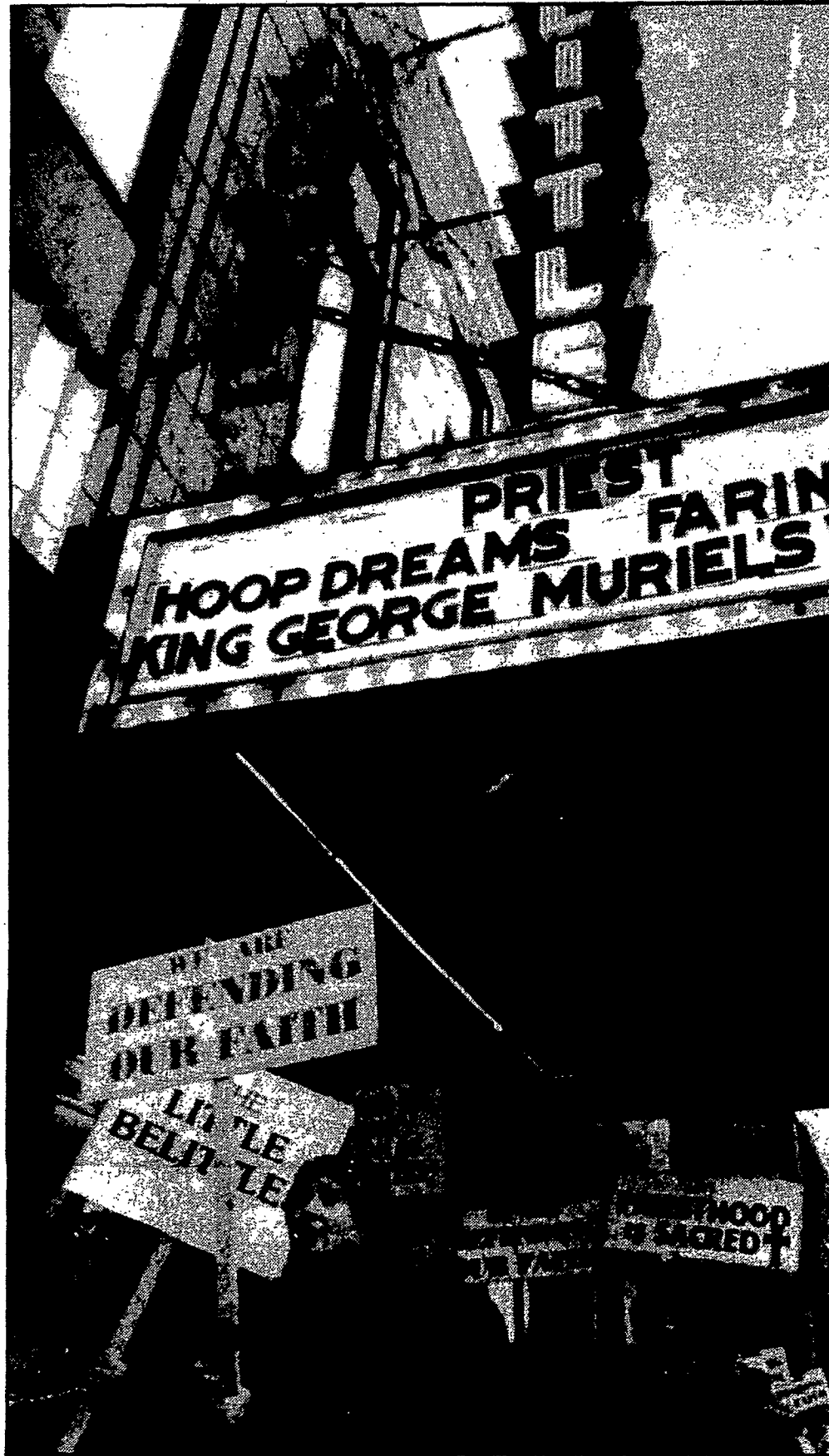
Father Tormey predicted that the majority of Catholics "are not going to lose their faith over this movie. They're not going to change their feelings about priests."

He pointed out that no single movie or television role should be considered reflective of all priests.

"As much as I liked the character of (Father) Matthew, there are very few Matthews around," Father Tormey maintained. "I think people have to avoid stereotypes."

According to Kara Putzrath, the Little Theatre's promotions director, controversy surrounding "Priest" did not have a noticeable effect on box-office receipts for the first week. She said the movie attracted 1,021 viewers in 14 showings through Sunday, April 23.

"I don't think the publicity has helped it or hurt it," Putzrath said.



More than 50 protesters picketed outside Rochester's Little Theatre April 19, the nationwide release date of "Priest."

However, Bill Coppard, the Little's owner, predicted that "Priest" would ultimately do better than "Romero," which drew sparse crowds when it was shown there in 1989.

"I just think it's a shame when a movie like "Romero" gets lost," Coppard said.

He added that if the sexual content of "Priest" were removed, it would diminish fanfare surrounding the movie

"by about 75 percent."

Yet generally, said Father James E. Boyle, movies and TV shows about priests don't draw controversy.

"I'm not personally offended by most of the things," said Father Boyle, who serves as pastor at Fairport's St. John of Rochester Church. "You think back to 'M*A*S*H', and the man (Father Mulahy) was a little silly, but people saw him



File photo
Pope John Paul chosen as 'Man of the Year' 1994 by *Time* magazine.

as a person of God."

Father Boyle remarked that both good and bad traits of priests are held up to intense media scrutiny in this day and age.

"In general, all institutions are much more challenged. There's no presumption that they're performing what they claim to," Father Boyle said.

This trend has not been favorable to clergy, commented Father William V. Spilly. He maintains that controversial news about priests generates far more press than the good things priests are doing.

When news of a pedophile priest surfaces, for example, "there has been a hype," said Father Spilly, pastor of the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community. "It's pictured as priesthood in general."

Father Spilly agreed with Father Boyle's assertion that many institutions are under attack by the media.

"People who are politicians are reticent about hugging babies in public anymore," the Corning pastor said.

Father Spilly's perceptions have a fair amount of substance, according to results of a study to be released May 1 by the University of Rochester.

The analysis explored several daily newspapers' portrayal of American religion. Pittsford resident Nancy Woodhull, who served as the study's co-director, concluded that there is "an unfair representation of religion and the people who represent it."

Woodhull, former managing editor of Rochester's *Democrat & Chronicle* and *Times-Union* and a founding editor of *USA Today*, said city or assignment editors are "turned on by action." Hence, stories blending priests and controversy have more appeal to editors than positive human-interest pieces about priests.

"It almost seems as if the press becomes uncomfortable with the faith side," observed Woodhull.

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