

a Youngling

Cartoonist pokes fun at parish peculiarities

STORY BY ROB CULLIVAN

Be careful if Mark A. J. O'Neill volunteers at your parish — you and your fellow Catholics might end up in the comic strip "Potluck Parish."

True-to-life Catholics and parish experiences are the inspiration for such characters as "Father Quigley," an ice-cream-loving cleric who is never late to "Sundae Services." And "Ollie," a parish maintenance man who solves the problem of squeaky church doors by handing out earplugs to parishioners.

O'Neill, 35, holds the pen that created "Potluck Parish," a daily panel cartoon that is available at United Media's Web site www.comics.com. The comic, which focuses on life at a fictional Catholic parish, is named for all those potluck suppers churches hold. O'Neill said he bases his characters and their situations on whom and what he's seen as a lector and usher in various faith communities over the years. He currently attends St. Patrick's Cathedral in Norwich, Conn.

"I'm familiar with religious life and have many priest friends, so that helps me," he added in an e-mail interview from Preston, Conn., where he currently lives.

The single cartoonist spent the first 12 years of his life as a parishioner of St. James Church, Irondequoit, and as a student at the parish school, before his family moved to Connecticut. The son of John and Joan O'Neill, he still has relatives in the Rochester area, and credited his grandparents and mother for inspiring him to take up the pen.

"My mother's handwriting is so perfect, a gym teacher once hung her note for me to get out of gym class up on the wall," he said.

O'Neill added that he's nurtured dreams of being a cartoonist since his childhood.

"I've always like doodling, and usually did drawings of people's faces," he said.

"Eventually, I got bored with doing serious drawings of people's faces, and so noses started getting bigger, eyes got goofier, and, before you know it, I was doing cartoons and caricatures."

Although he listed "Peanuts" and "The Far Side" among his favorite comics, O'Neill said he didn't have any specific cartoonist heroes to whom he looked for inspiration. In both high school and at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, O'Neill said he spent more time drawing than studying. He began working on the idea for a regular comic strip during his college years while earning a degree in communications.

"I thought about doing a one-panel strip, it would be a lot easier," he said. "But you really need three panels to tell a mini-story and to be able to flesh out the characters a bit more."

For the past 11 years or so, he's worked on various versions of his strip, and has sent out dozens of examples of it to various syndicates. One day, he received an e-mail from United Media, which syndicates "Peanuts" and "Dilbert." The company indicated it was interested in picking up "Potluck Parish" and posting it on the Web. O'Neill said he was "absolutely thrilled" that his lifelong dream of being a cartoonist was becoming a reality. The strip first appeared at www.comics.com on March 13.

Exposure via the Web has garnered him interest from all over the world, the cartoonist said, pointing out that readers from as far away as Malaysia and Australia have contacted him about the strip. Eventually, O'Neill said, he hopes that "Potluck Parish" will be syndicated in newspapers. And he's not concerned that the strip's subtle spirituality will undermine his chances in the secular publishing world.

"I always knew I wanted to have some sort of religious angle to my strip, but I didn't want it to be preachy or something that excluded non-Catholics from enjoying it," O'Neill said. "Even in most of my silliest cartoons, I try to have a little, nice message in there. Nothing subliminal, just a friendly little

message."

message."

One example of a recent strip that illustrates his point shows a parishioner sitting down and talking with "Father Gus," the pastor. The parishioner lets the priest know he has only five minutes to talk, and could the pastor tell him, "Who is the real me? What is my purpose in life? Why do I often feel so inadequate? And why are we here?" The pastor pauses for a moment before replying: "Make it 10."

"On one hand, the very reason I picked a parish as a setting is because I am trying to add a little spirituality to the mainstream — not that I'm taking myself too seriously," O'Neill said. "This is just a comic strip after all. But it is equally important to me to make this a strip that people of any faith can enjoy."

O'Neill, who works at home, said that it takes him about an hour and a half to create a strip, though the ideas for them come both quickly in flashes of inspiration or slowly through hours of laborious thought. Once an idea seems worth illustrating, he sits down to draw "Potluck Parish."

"I begin by making the three empty box outlines on my paper," he said. "Then I do the lettering. After that comes the pencil sketch of my illustration, and following that I ink in the illustrations."

O'Neill has a year's worth of strips already prepared, so he's not afraid of running out of ideas any time soon.

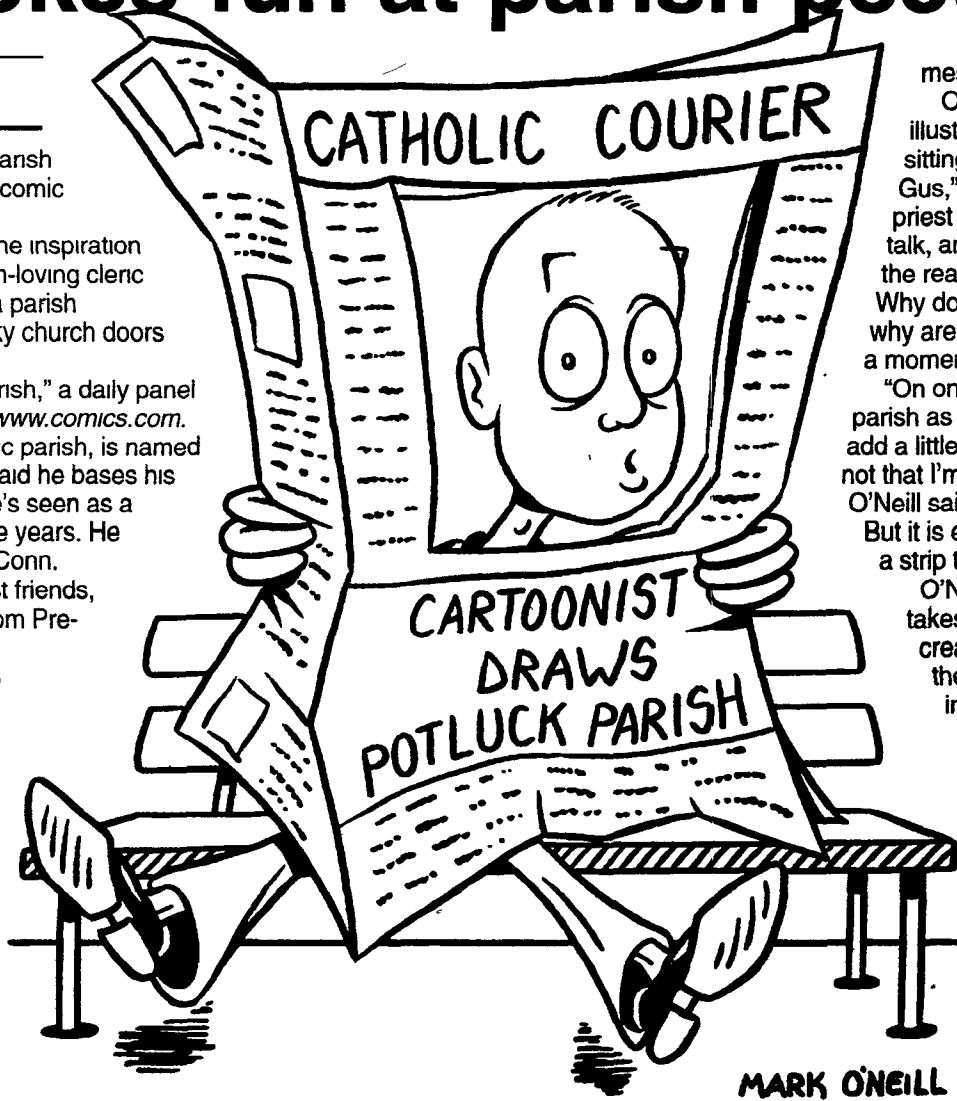
In addition to "Potluck

Parish," the cartoonist also creates a monthly cartoon for a local newsletter, has illustrated a children's book, and works part-time for a small library. He also creates comedy videos that air on a local cable access channel.

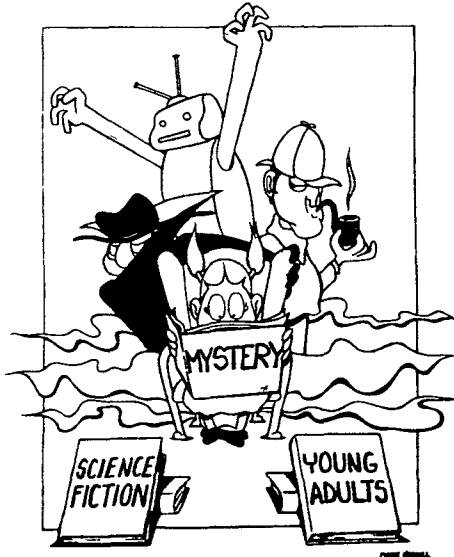
Although he likes poking fun at parish life, O'Neill considers himself a loyal Catholic.

"I take my faith very seriously, and will never poke fun at the church," he said. "I just have fun with people in a parish setting."

"I'm not interested in taking shots at the church or getting into controversial issues," O'Neill added. "I want this strip to be a place people can come to get away from it all for a moment or two."



MARK O'NEILL



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