Church: guardian of the past

or agent of social change?

Inner City Initiatives

by Geno Baroni

Another excerpt from the CARA conference papers and the new book THE CHURCH IN THE CHANGING CITY

AT THE 1965 JOINT MEETING of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice (NCCIJ) and the National Catholic Social Action Conference (NCSAC) dedicated to "The Human Face of Poverty: Challenge to Interracial Action," a two-day workshop on the "Apostolate of the Church in the Inner City" demonstrated a serious division of views that seemed to leave grass-roots practitioners confused.

On the one hand, there are those who want the Church to play its customary role as guardian of the values and institutions of the past. They usually couch their attitude in terms which suggest that the Church should "stay out of politics or controversy." On the other hand, there is a growing group of laity and clergy alike which insists that the Church should play a more direct role in social change. For Harvey Cox, the nub of the question is the secular significance of the Church. Jesuit Thomas Clarke seems to agree when he writes in *America* that the future image of Vatican II probably will not be either collegiality or even ecumenism but "Christian Secularity."

This is the theological mood of the coming era—Christians plunging into the social order to struggle for justice and peace—but it is not a mood which everyone accepts with enthusiasm. Protestant theologian Martin Marty writes:

> There is a hushed-up revolution abroad in our land. One side of the revolution says that the Christian Church should be involved in the struggle of today's poor in the city and on the farm; at the side of the delinquents, the racially oppressed, the politically exploited. The other side says: The Church should love these people but should not become involved in the politics of their problems. Tensions set in motion by this hushed-up revolution are far-reaching. They simmer just below the surface at national meetings of church agencies and organizations.

These tensions were very much in evidence at the joint conference of the NCCIJ and NCSAC. It is not that these differences have not always been there—they have; but recently a strong and young group of clergy within the Church have gained momentum because of their involvement in the civil rights movement. Saul Alinsky, the controversial head of the Industrial Areas Foundation, has said, "The unions are now the haves—they are part of the 'status quo.' The Christian Churches are now taking the leadership in social change." At any gathering of clergy, there seems to be a clear demarcation between those who have participated in direct action and those who have not. This is the frontier along which any new division is apt to erupt.

The community action concept of the Church's initiative in the inner city apostolate can be defined as an attempt to aid poor people of the city in solving their own problems. It means giving them a collective voice to be heard when their garbage is not picked up, when the landlords cheat them, and when their elected officials refuse to listen to them. It means, fundamentally, giving the people a means to fight city hall. Unless the poor can be so organized as to make their voices heard in legal social protest, they will continue to be ignored in the decision making of the democratic process.

The question will be immediately asked can and should be federal government subsidize the protest? The experience of the labor unions in the thirties and the recent involvement of the poor in effective demonstrations to further the cause of the civil rights movement are often cited as examples which show that the poor themselves must be involved if any progress is to be truly effective. In many ways the community action program of the Economic Opportunity Act represents a new phase in the civil rights struggle—a switchover from a decade which concentrated on breaking down legal barriers to one in which those whom society had excluded seek genuine equality in jobs, education, and housing.

We Catholics have not evolved any detailed planning or policy for the city. We are engaged however in the vast organization of urban social life. Our universities and seminaries, until recently, have ignored the challenge, but we are now engaged by it, and the point of most pressing engagement is the inner city parish, the home of that race, which, despite all rhetoric, is still subject to the economic whims and exactions of the white man.

Even in the past, small groups of Catholics have always been involved in the cause of unions, interracial justice, minimum wage, and sound welfare legislation. But few of us have participated in the specialized social action apostolate. Our institutions, hospitals, and organized charities undoubtedly "serve" many in the inner city. However, our schools, particularly our high schools, have a minimum Negro enrollment, because Negro children find it difficult to compete against suburban children with better economic and family assets

Our most urgent problem is to integrate the Church into the Negro community, and, through the Church's influence, help integrate the American Negro into the mainstream of American life. ■

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Say, Man, Dig Our Kingdom

by Mike Scahill

ONE OF THE MOST wonderful things about being human is that we can experience the beauty of an overdue spring and summer. We always look for the traditional "signs of spring", which are seen in our overworked robin and the chattering of air drills on pavement.

But for the area which the science of sociology has termed the "inner city," summer is introduced neither by nature nor urban renewal. For politicians, an inner city summer is heralded by a downtown demonstration. For policemen, an inner city summer is marked by an outbreak of minor violence to be followed by "a riot" later on. For humanitarians, an inner city summer bursts out with garbage-paved alleys and evictions.

While all of these are "sure signs" and facts, there is overlooked the only genuine testimony for a summer here: that given by those who live the daily despairs and elations of a slum. To the most authentic dwellers of the Negro ghetto—children and teenagers—summer is not inherent in any of the above; summer for them is the time when the Negro youth, boy or girl, expresses himself or herself in a way which is unique to each of them, and can best be understood only by a person who is actually "one of them".

The annual cavalcade of tutors, social workers, and religious to the inner city each summer seeks to bring beauty and creativity to their brother. Yet one only needs to experience a summer with the "deprived youth" to find out what beauty, creativity, and artistry stem from.

By writing on a way to view a summer in the ghetto, I am not attempting to speak for the youths whom I describe; many social workers, ministers, civil rights leaders, and even the youths themselves can accomplish this in a way far more forceful and sincere than I could hope to. What I do wish to bring out, though, is an amazing contrast which modern Christianity has overlooked. It is a contrast found in the sincerity of a people who have not yet heard the gospel but are preaching it, in their own mannerisms, to a church which consistently mouths empty echoes.

What sentimentalist writers and even Christians have done to the youths growing up in congested tenements is the same thing they have done to the message of the church. They have reduced both to a cliche. They have overlooked the tremendous contribution of empathy and uniqueness which the youths of these condensed areas possess so intimately. Many writers have used the actions and conditions of this people to drain the emotions of their audience in order to sway them to their side. This is a subtle form of exploitation. The church has done this and, I might say, with growing success.

A few years ago, there was a boy named Syl, who used to travel on his bicycle from his State Street project to a different basketball court every evening. Basketball to Syl was not what it is to an affluent youth of a modern suburb who plays it strictly for a sport. To watch Syl play was to see a poet write a poem without a pen. He was what his companions called a "pretty boy," because of his style. He never did well on an organized team because he refused to learn conventional ways of playing a game which to him ceased to be a sport and became an art. Yet Syl was not so different, though he was unique. There are so many others like him, who wear out the soles of their "gymies" on the baked asphalt of our urban playgrounds which have become social centers now.

Syl and the other youths growing up in his neighborhood can be seen at every "set," dancing in a way which to them is both beautiful and expressive. Even their dress is so simple, yet so creative, that it makes one think they are conformists because new ideas and fashions spread so rapidly. To describe a boy wearing a cut sweat shirt and gym shoes is to draw a picture of a typical American youth. But to see what can actually be done to a sweat shirt and gym shoes is a pleasure which can only be appreciated by beholding it.

Sociology and literature have been the means by which much of this expression is communicated. Yet the most sincere expression communicating the creativity of these urban artists is their own "jive." Some of this is being related to us by the James Baldwins and the LeRoi Joneses who have both experienced and reflected upon the thought of a seemingly stifled environment.

One of the factors which contribute to the contrast between inner city youths and the church is that they repeatedly remind us of our nature. The nature of our church is a preaching one because it is founded on Jesus, the man who came to preach not babbling words or mediocrity, but a Kingdom which is now, in the midst of us. It is a Kingdom which is neither black nor white, rich nor poor, lay nor clergy, but man—realizing that the gospel has freed him from the powers of death in a neon desert and preaching this

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