

Baton Rouge Catholics Beginning To Rally To Their Bishop

By FRANK MORRISS

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BATON ROUGE, La. — Catholics loyal to Bishop Joseph Sullivan were taken somewhat by surprise by the storm of public criticism against him that burst into print and words on television after his ban on the use of diocesan facilities for a talk by Fr. Charles Curran, and his subsequent order relieving Claretian Fathers from staffing the diocesan student center at Louisiana State University. That began in mid-February and until this writing there was little or no vocal support for the Bishop, other than letters to the editor that papers deigned to carry. Nothing favorable to the loyalist cause was heard, however, on television, and no editorial comment in any daily papers defended the Bishop here in one of the more Catholic areas of the country. In fact, criticism of the Bishop was carried in his own diocesan paper by regular columnists. (Tom Barbarie has since become editor and installed a greater sense of decency.)

Things began to change, however, over the Mother's Day weekend. Loyalists were attending meetings, preparing to appoint committees and to go over to the offensive. A delegation is

preparing to visit Rome, and all who are loyal to Bishop Sullivan will be encouraged to make their viewpoints known. The goal is to contact every Catholic in the Diocese, even though it is certain some will be apathetic or take a quietist stance that prayer is the only recourse.

One unplanned demonstration of loyalty happened, however, on May 6th. An annual May Crowning of the Blessed Virgin's statue is held in the Christ-court of the diocesan center. This year its attendance was double that of the largest in the past. Nobody had promoted it as a demonstration of support for their embattled Bishop. But that is what it turned out to be. After Bishop Sullivan offered Benediction and gave a few closing remarks, the crowd began to applaud. They applauded loud — and long, and longer. Some say it seemed at least like 15 minutes before the applause began to die down.

The Catholics were making themselves heard. They will make themselves heard more determinedly in the future. As the late Archbishop Robert J. Dwyer used to say, "Now the devil won't have all the lines."