

"Friends Of The Diocese"

Contest Bishop Of Baton Rouge

By FRANK MORRISS

(Special to *The Wanderer*)

BATON ROUGE, La. — It was 1:45 on the hot and humid afternoon of Saturday, May 12th, that the "Friends of the Diocese" began gathering in the covered "Christ court" of the Baton Rouge diocesan center. It was a "prayer meeting" seeking to change what the "Friends" consider the dictatorial tactics of Bishop Joseph Sullivan, climaxed by his recent decision to replace Claretian Fathers at the Louisiana State University student center. (Sometimes the Bishop is supposedly exonerated as a dupe, and the real reason for "oppression" is said to be his Chancellor.)

By 15 minutes after the scheduled start of the meeting the numbers had swollen to what would be the maximum, some 400, which meant that at least 1,600 of a claimed membership of 2,000 were absent — or else the "Friends" aren't as numerous as they claim.

If not numbers, such meetings rely on noise and charisma. It had the former, in the person of young ballad singers with guitars. Less than a quarter of those present, however, were of student-age a few wearing "Save Our Staff" and "Keep the Claretians" T-shirts, which along with "Keep the Claretians" bumper stickers are part of the "Friends"-led campaign that has managed to get almost daily publicity through one means or another, and which brought such journalistic ideological birds of prey as *Newsweek*, and the *National Catholic Reporter* to Baton Rouge for the story.

Besides the young student element, those attending were a mix of academic and professorial types, their equally intellectual ladies, charismatics and near charismatics, and a few genuine and unmistakable weirdos. (One piece of literature handed me complained about diocesan banquets, Lincoln Continentals, and insisted, "We must transfer Christian operations into the hands of lay Christians so that they cannot be destroyed by the Pharisees into whose hands we fallen (sic) in the past.")

I talked with those ranging from

even the downright vicious. One lady was concerned about good feelings for all, though she considers the diocesan Chancellor something of a villain. Another set of ladies at the chanting of the Our Father tried to get me into the daisy chain of hand-holding, until I told them I could pray without holding hands. Their look of rapture turned to one of near bewilderment. An English professor, his moustache bristling as well as it could in its somewhat straggly condition, ranted that "we will not tolerate the Bishop imposing his will on us." And a Mr. Pascal told me icily, "I do not consider *The Wanderer* a responsible newspaper, and I will answer none of your questions."

But all considered it was a responsible meeting, despite the fact that it was devoted to reading portions of Vatican II the "Friends" consider supportive, while ignoring those about the authority of the Bishop and duty of the laity and priests to obey.

Head of the "Friends" is of a different type, however. Ben McArdle could pass as a genial, round-faced, sandy-haired though balding salesman — one difficult not to like and believe. And indeed I do believe him, for he didn't conceal from me — or try to — his ignorance about some vital things. For example, he admitted not knowing — though being "somewhat frightened" — when I informed him the bishop is the only official teacher and interpreter of Vatican II for Catholics of a diocese, under the Pope of course. And he seemed somewhat unaware when I told him the historical context of some of the readings from St. Paul that were part of the meeting — namely, the rebellion of some very much like the "Friends" against official teachings of Paul and in favor of some personal, sectarian understandings.

McArdle — who is a youth counselor and takes courses at LSU — explained that the

"Friends" were an outgrowth of the Christ the King chapel "parish council," (Christ the King is not an actual parish), and that he, as council president, somewhat fell into the job of leader of the "Friends." They have, on the advice of attorneys, incorporated, and claim to have tax exemption for donations. It would be interesting indeed to see their purposes and goals as stated on their corporation application. McArdle was open enough in stating them to me — to get a change in the way the Diocese is run under Bishop Sullivan.

Asked about the opinion within his organization that Msgr. Gordon is the troublemaker, he was unable to make specific charges against the Chancellor. He could repeat only what he stressed was hearsay — that the Monsignor refused to speak on the street to nuns who are in ordinary lay dress; and that the Monsignor had boasted he had never read Vatican II and didn't intend to. (Both charges are ridiculous, of course.) He did say, however, that charges against the Chancellor had been laid before the Metropolitan, the Most Rev. Philip Hannan, Archbishop of New Orleans, when a delegation met with him in New Orleans.

McArdle echoed favorable opinion that had been heard about the newly appointed student center director, Fr. Greene, but he said he expects the "Friends" to stay in existence to keep an eye on things.

If so more "prayer meetings" such as this one can be expected for Christ the King court, where this one ended with silent, head-bent prayer of groups holding hands ring-around-the-rose style, and then a burst of loud "peace" exchanges. That followed hands-raised singing of something about the resurrection.

Not a sign of the cross was seen during the whole hour and a half of what was billed as prayer by "Friends" of the Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge.