

Subverting Vocations?

By FRANK MORRISS

Woodstock College, where many young men aspiring to be Jesuits study, recently held a "day of shared reflection" marked by the presence of fifty formerly active priests and their wives. The question I would like to raise about this concerns just what was going to be shared between seminarians, Jesuits, and the one-time practicing priests.

The college's business, ostensibly, is the Religious vocation, particularly the vocation to be a celibate priest in the Society of Jesus. The now-married priests have forsaken the vocation of celibate priest. Now since it is almost beyond reason to think that visiting Woodstock and "sharing reflection" is going to reverse the abandonment of their first vocation by these priests, we can only conclude that if the "shared reflection" is going to have any influence on anyone it will be on the young seminarians and still active, unmarried Jesuits.

One of the topics discussed and "prayed over" (in the words of AMERICA magazine) was "marriage spirituality." It is possible some, even all, of the married priests have been laicized and are therefore legitimately married and qualified to talk about the spiritual aspects of their lately perceived marriage vocation. But then they are certainly no more qualified in this regard than married men who have never been priests.

AMERICA saw it as a chance for these priests to help unravel the perplexity caused by their withdrawal from

the ministry, and to articulate their relationship between past commitment and present situation. If you recognize in those phrases a certain amount of existential jargon — it is AMERICA's, not mine. All I am trying to do is translate it all into something that makes either sense or nonsense.

In my translation it comes out this way: Someone thought that some former practicing priests could make a good explanation why it is better to stop working at being a priest and instead work at being a husband, and that this explanation would somehow benefit all concerned — seminarians, practicing priests, and ex-practicing priests.

If this is a last-ditch effort to persuade seminarians to drop out, and if these seminarians do not truly have the priestly vocation, well and good. In that case I'll go along with having the priestly dropouts "share reflections." But if it is, as I suspect, an effort to convince seminarians that the married "situation" is possibly better than the celibate priesthood, or worse, to persuade them that perhaps the priesthood properly demands marriage, then what has happened at Woodstock is nothing more than subversion. It is an effort by a recognized and authorized Jesuit seminary to undermine vocations, at least as the Church demands those vocations be carried out.

What helps make me rather jaundiced in my judgment about the motives behind what happened at Woodstock is the recent sad history of that school and in fact, that whole Jesuit province. Woodstock and the province itself was headed by Fr. Sponga, who suddenly dropped out of the priesthood to marry at a time, as far as I can learn, when he was not free to marry in the eyes of the Church. Further, Woodstock, at least prior to HUMANAE VITAE, was counseling future Jesuit priests that contraception was moral. It is, therefore, difficult for me to accept that the presence of married priests at a "day of shared reflection" is an attempt to serve the true priestly vocation. I know my judgment will arouse "righteous" Liberal wrath, but I am getting used to that. What I really resent is the brazen attempt of the Liberals, including AMERICA's editors, to clothe in deceptive jargon something that is at least ninety-nine percent pure nonsense.