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Conflict In Baton Rouge Diocese Seen As Crucial Showdown

By FRANK MORRIS

(Special to *The Wanderer*)

BATON ROUGE, La. — The real Catholic *Magisterium* and the "progressive" counter-authority are locked here in what could be a crucial showdown battle. I spent six days observing the activities, and will report them as fully as possible for readers of *The Wanderer*.

As with so many other serious conflicts, the confrontation came about almost casually, though the forces had been gathering for a

long time. When information reached Bishop Joseph Sullivan of Baton Rouge that Fr. Charles Curran, perhaps Hero No. 1 of the progressives and victor of the battle for the Catholic University of America, would speak in the Claretian-directed (but diocesan owned and supported) Christ the King student center, the Bishop acted. He ordered Fr. Dan Drinan not to allow Fr. Curran to speak at the center. This was in mid-February. On March 28th Bishop

(Continued on Page 7)

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(Continued from Page 1)

Sullivan announced that the Claretians, with whom no contract existed and in fact there was an understanding the arrangement could be ended at any time by either party, would be replaced as of Aug. 1st.

This announcement was the call to battle for the progressives and many others who have regard for the Claretians but who undoubtedly are unaware of the issues. Ever since a series of protests and demonstrations against the decision and against the Bishop personally have been mounted, and are still being mounted now under directions of a group calling themselves "Friends of the Diocese," but who are certainly no friends of the Bishop or likely any Bishop who would not give in to their wishes. (See accompanying article.)

HONEST MISTAKES

On March 31st a full-page ad from "Concerned Catholic Students" in the *Morning Advocate*, Baton Rouge daily, announced that the 10:30 Mass the next day would be the focal point of resistance to what the ad alleged was an exercise of authority that could "seriously jeopardize the well-being of the Church in the Diocese." Supporters of the Claretians say 2,000 attended, which would be some 1,000 more than the chapel seats. (I was told by the *Morning Advocate* that the rate for a full-page ad is \$1,895.)

The "Friends of the Diocese" have the use of the student center facilities for their activities against the Bishop, who is in effect the center's chief superior. Their numbers are claimed to be 2,000 — possibly to coincide with the claimed number at the April 1st 10:30 Mass. But only a handful appear on television interviews, one of which during my stay was held at the convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph. (A St. Joseph Sister assists at the center.)

Fr. Dan Drinan is a boyish 30, though ordained only two years ago. He laughingly claims to have had the reputation among fellow Claretians as being overly conservative, and objective observers have told me that could well be true, in light of the more general Claretian philosophic orientation.

However, the first prayer or hymn in the booklet in the pews at the chapel consists of Beatle lyrics that include the words about "getting high with my friends." There are some traditional songs in the book, particularly seasonal (Christmas). Fr. Drinan admits to honest mistakes in having used illicit canons for the Mass and of once celebrating an unauthorized home Mass outside the chapel's jurisdiction. He says he accepted correction for these mistakes.

Fr. Drinan vigorously defends the Claretians and blames his abrasive words about the Bishop's actions, made on several television interviews, upon anger at what he (and apparently his Provincial, the Very Rev. James Maloney) apparently consider unfair treatment, deception, and public untruths. They insist that they were assured by Bishop Sullivan they would remain in charge of the chapel. This is almost certainly their interpretation of what the Bishop did tell them — that he would not take any punitive action against Fr. Drinan or any Claretian. Bishop Sullivan does not, however, consider an exercise of legitimate authority in ending an informal relationship (and with six months' notice) punitive, after maintaining the relationship from his arrival — five years ago — till now.

Fr. Drinan admits that Bishop Sullivan acted within his authority, that all done was legally done. When I asked if the appeal to Rome and the campaign for reversal of the Bishop's decision was within the spirit of obedience, he claimed Pope John Paul II's first encyclical had invited "questioning" within the Church. We will examine in other articles what Fr. Drinan and his friends consider "questioning."

"SCAR TISSUE"

For the moment it is necessary to give Fr. Drinan's version of the Curran affair. The Claretian in fact denies sponsorship or even major interest in the appearance of Curran, though he admits having studied under "Charlie" at the Catholic University. Fr. Drinan contends the lecture was a suggestion of the United Campus Ministries, which is under the direction of the Rev. Will Finnin. According to Fr. Drinan, when he was approached to join in sponsorship of Curran's talk, he informed Finnin Christ the King could not share in financing, since he did not

think "the Bishop would approve." He says he did, however, agree to make the center's facilities available. (After the Bishop's objection the talk was moved elsewhere on campus under Methodist auspices.)

Though attempts to interview the Rev. Mr. Finnin on the matter had not been successful as of the writing of this article, there is some evidence that would question Fr. Drinan's version. One faculty member at LSU tells me that Methodists there are twitting Catholic friends for having "left us holding the bag" and "putting one over" on them in the Curran affair. In fact, the report is that underneath the humor is considerable resentment on the part of the Methodists for being described as the originators of the idea for a Curran lecture. (This reporter hopes to have more concrete evidence on this angle to the story later.)

Fr. Drinan goes beyond admitting the legitimacy of Bishop Sullivan's actions. He insisted to this reporter that he "got along" well with the Bishop, but that is when they are not in the presence of "those" blamed for a situation that the young Claretian told TV watchers had left "scar tissue" in the Diocese. Specifically charged are Msgr. Cage Gordon, Chancellor, and Msgr. Donald J. Songy, vicar for financial affairs, for "using" the Bishop and for "amplifying" difficulties. Specific charges are that Msgr. Gordon interferes with communication with the Bishop, that Catholic education has been "dismantled," and that the office of community relations is being denied funds to help the needy and poor.

I will deal with these specific charges elsewhere, but before leaving Fr. Drinan there are a few details to report. First, he revealed that the substance of the matter was being given to Archbishop Jean Jadot for transmission specifically to Cardinals Sebastiano Baggio (Sacred Congregation for Bishops) and Eduardo Pironio (Sacred Congregation for Religious). The appeal asserts that the matter is of pastoral concern in light of the fact that there are at least 12,000 Catholic students on the LSU campus.

NO GREY EMINENCE

It is in fact Fr. Drinan's contention that his removal (his staff consists of two Claretians, one Trinitarian priest, one secular priest, and a Sister of St. Joseph) will result in the loss of as many as 1,500 students — mostly to "fundamentalism." Why such loss would happen Fr. Drinan did not explain, though no one questions his effectiveness with young people. The point not dealt with is whether he alone could be effective.

A serious objection he raised was the action of Bishop Sullivan reserving to himself cases of excommunication for abortion. It is the canonical right of a Bishop to have cases of excommunication brought to his attention, rather than having this penalty lifted by ordinary confessors. Fr. Drinan says this policy interferes with his dealing with some distraught girl who might come in disturbed by the excommunication penalty. (The penalty is incurred only when the party knows about it at the time the sin — in this case, abortion — is committed.)

It is known that Bishop Sullivan considers abortion too serious a thing for the penalty to be summarily lifted, without something that would impress upon those involved the gravity of the matter. Reserving the excommunication to himself is one way of making such an impression, rather than being intended as any barrier to repentance.

After meeting with Msgr. Gordon I can state my unshakeable conviction that he is not any kind of grey eminence, controlling Bishop Sullivan or concealing anything from him. He is an outspoken man, but one of good humor, attentive and open. Like all (or certainly most Chancellors) he handles routine matters for the Bishop. That includes opening mail — but Msgr. Gordon assured me he opens nothing marked "matter of conscience" or "for the Bishop only."

I also found the Religious Education office — far from "dismantled," as Fr. Drinan charges — in the capable hands of an experienced Marist educator, Fr. Francis X. Kane, and the Catholic School Office in the capable hands of Dominican Sister M. Michaeline. Fr. Kane patiently explained his method in helping train a large number of teachers to reach some 20,000 young persons who are not in Catholic schools. He relies largely on correspondence courses for the teachers, and corrects all the papers himself, "usually the same day they are received." He maintains he has been able to "meet" far more teachers in this manner than under the regime of his predecessors, who traveled conducting two or three-day courses.

Fr. Kane made a simple answer to one charge made publicly against his office — that it forced students to learn "by rote." That

charge stems from the fact that he had distributed Bishop Sullivan's letter stating requirements for memorization. These were nothing more than what had been inserted in the *National Catechetical Directory* by vote of the U.S. Bishops, a stand also approved by the most recent world Synod of Bishops.

THE ONLY ACCEPTABLE METHOD

Fr. Drinan told me that many pastors are upset by the "tax" imposed on parishes. He also complained that although a \$20,000 yearly subsidy is given his student center by the Diocese, a \$22,000 tax is imposed.

I gained a more complete view on both matters from Msgr. Donald J. Songy, vicar for finance. He explained that the subsidy is exactly \$20,000 more than given any true parish (the Christ the King center is a student chapel, and not canonically a parish). Between that subsidy and \$500,000 spent a few years ago to renovate the student center facilities (repairing bad pipes, stopping leaks, changing the heating system, etc.) parishes are supporting the center (through their tax payments) at a considerable sum each year. Some \$200,000 will have to be spent immediately, according to Msgr. Songy, to repair continued leaking and heating problems that went unreported by the Claretians. Only the goodwill of contractors, who agreed to honor warranties legally expired, has saved the Diocese from a great loss because of this fact, according to the Monsignor.

He explained that the taxation of parishes was adopted before Bishop Sullivan's arrival, when a way was sought to retire a some \$3,000,000 debt incurred in setting up Baton Rouge as a separate Diocese carved out of what was then a part of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

There was an initial fund drive, which pastors demanded be the last. There was also a plethora of special collections, etc. A plan was then worked out under which a finance board and a budget committee (including lay persons, priests, Religious) would name a percentage of the required diocesan budget that all parishes would bear equitably, based upon their total incomes. The tax is based upon an average income of

the latest of the three preceding fiscal years. No other demands or collections are made (except for national ones required by the U.S. Hierarchy). The tax totals an average of some 16 or 17 percent of income, though for parishes whose current income increases the percent may be as low as 11 percent.

Though some complaints continue (principally because tuitions paid Catholic schools by parishioners are included in calculating the tax), the board has found no other more acceptable financing method. If the tuition was not figured in, the tax would be intolerable for a number of parishes, a study revealed. (Catholic schools in the Baton Rouge Diocese are mostly filled to capacity, incidentally.)

The Christ the King Student Center has an income larger than a number of the parishes in the Diocese, which accounts for the size of its tax. With the subsidy, however, it ends up paying only a \$2,000 tax.

Fr. Drinan complained that parsimony of money available for the poor and needy had forced his center to provide much in that area, money he says is obtainable from alumni and other donors. I learned, however, from Msgr. Songy that diocesan guarantee of a \$1,500,000 program for the elderly, Vietnamese and other refugees, school lunches, etc., is enabling an expenditure of \$2,500,000 in mostly federal funds for these areas. Among specific diocesan good works are financing (totally with no tax) of a student center for Blacks at the Southern University, and a center at the state school for the deaf. At this center a number of skills are sharpened, including use of a new Western Union method whereby deaf and voiceless persons may use a communications machine to communicate in making "telephone" calls.

Fr. Drinan was quoted on television as saying that his removal as director of the student center was only the "tip" of the iceberg. However, I pursued everything he told me about the rest of the iceberg and I have found nothing of substance. True, many like Fr. Drinan do not like some of the Bishop's ways of acting, or of conducting the affairs of the Diocese. Others insist he is under the control of associates — namely Monsignors Gordon and Songy. Others find him uncommunicative.

I find all charges unwarranted or highly exaggerated. But if they were true — as absolutely true as the enemies of the Bishop believe them to be — it would be small excuse to crucify Catholic truth, much less a gentleman like Bishop Sullivan.