

Strings to the bow

The Affair At St. John's



By Frank Morriss

The charge and counter-charge at St. John's university are that the fired teachers were guilty of unprofessional conduct, including propagandizing; and that the university has violated the teachers' rights.

If, purely and simply, the St. John's administration has withheld something due its employes, then it is in the wrong. If, however, the teachers have taken the stand they have, not because of denied rights but because the university does not follow the philosophic, political, sociological, theological views they believe in — then, regardless of the validity or invalidity of those views, the teachers are wrong.

In other words, no staff member of any organization can complain because that organization does not orient itself in agreement with what that member believes. In such a case, the only recourse of the employe is to leave and work for what he believes in elsewhere.

There is evidence that the discontent of at least some of the fired professors is based on the fact they cannot make what they believe in prevail at St. John's university.

For example, Father Peter O'Reilly, union leader in the ferment, was quoted by Associated Press as blaming the

university for "failure to enter the 20th century and to keep up with the new ecumenical spirit in the Church."

It seems to me this is a matter for the owners, management, and religious superiors in authority at St. John's university to decide. I do not think any university or anyone else is required to let Father O'Reilly decide just what the 20th century is all about.

United Press International on Dec. 26 quoted Father O'Reilly as warning the dispute could spread to other Catholic schools across the nation. If he means some sort of secondary boycott is in the offing, then it means Catholic higher education may run the risk of being crippled in support of a minority of teachers at St. John's. If he means that all or much of Catholic higher education is being unjust to its teachers, then he is making a statement completely unsubstantiated by evidence.

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In either case, the indication is that "teachers' rights" at St. John's are not the main issue.

I do not for a minute mean that professors should not be free in teaching within their competence and the discipline of their fields of knowledge. But I think the university has the right to decide when that is violated, and when teaching becomes proselytism or propagandizing.