The tendency of the third generation is to drift back to religion

The Suburban Parish

by ANDREW M. GREELEY

IT WAS not too many years ago that American Catholics were being warned that the decline of the national parish would have dire results for the Church. Social scientists visiting from Europe had deduced, not without reason, that the national parishes were the main explanation of the fact that the American Church had not lost the urban working class. Therefore, as the national parishes broke up and the third generation of immigrants became thoroughly Americanized, there would be an inevitable tendency to drift away from the Church, since the Church in its national-parish manifestation would be part of the Old World culture which the new Americans would reject.

It was a fine theory, but like so many fine theories it was simply not true. The European theorists made the mistake of assuming that the drift away from the Old World religion, which indeed was characteristic of the second generation, would continue in the third. As the studies of Herberg and Hansen have shown, the tendency of the third generation is rather to drift back into religious practice as it seeks some sort of social identity. We have no reliable statistics on the extent of this return to religion in the suburbs, but few question the fact that some sort of counter drift is going on. With certain national groups such as the Irish there is no question of a counter drift, since there was little drift away in the first place. We hear considerably less today about the problem of "leakage" from the Church than we did a decade ago. This is no proof that leakage is not as serious a problem as it was in the past; but it would seem that the social trends of the post-war world have not made it a noticeably more serious problem. Quite the contrary; the suburban religious revival may have made it somewhat less serious.

If one is to seek a reason for the failure of the prophecies about the decline of religious practice, one might find that the European scholars and their American admirers put too much emphasis on the fact that the modern urban parish is not a community. It is not a community in the sense that the small, stable, integrated rural parishes in European peasant cultures were communities. But this type of community is a vanishing thing in modern civilization. The national parish certainly did not approximate it. On the natural level people identified with the national parish because it met certain social needs which they felt. The transitional parish, one might call it "second generation" parish, met certain other needs. The suburban parish is no exception: if it is to provide a natural community, it must meet still other needs.

The hypothesis might be hazarded that the American parish has always been a social service organization and that in different circumstances the type of service offered has been different. The "national" parishes attempted to meet the problems of the new immigrants; in the new suburban neighborhood the parish is trying to meet the problems of the third generation. The transition from Old Neighborhood to suburb then is not a transition from religious practice to non-practice, but rather from one type of social service to another. On the whole, the transition is not being made too badly.

It is still too early in the history of the suburban parish to say what new forms will ultimately be evolved or how different these forms will be from the old ones. Again, there is no such thing as a typical suburban parish because there is no typical suburb or typical pastor. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect some general outlines of development which give interesting hints to the future.

FIRST OF ALL, the suburban pastor is a pioneer with an extremely difficult physical task. The construction of the American parish plant follows a rather definite pattern—a school with a hall which can be used for Mass, a convent, rectory, church, and perhaps a social center with school addition. While the construction of such a plant has never been particularly leisurely, it was not unusual for it to be spread over a twenty-year period. In the suburbs it seems imperative that it be done within five years, or ten at the very most. Growth and expansion in the community

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go on at a frantic pace, and the parish is expected to keep up. Hence the suburban pastor normally finds himself burdened with a huge debt and facilities that are rapidly becoming inadequate. It is not at all rare for a new school to be too small even before it is finished. To complicate his problem the pastor is faced with parishioners who are only too quick to complain that (a) he is demanding too much money and (b) seems reluctant to provide more classrooms and (c) is holding back the parish which will never amount to anything until the pastor stops worrying about finances and gets some more activities going. Or provides space for the Cub pack to meet. Or builds a new parking lot.

The worry about finances, however, is not unwarranted, especially in the early days of a parish. Virtually all the members of a new parish are mortgaged to the hilt; they are paying high taxes for poor public service and an expensive public school system. They may be as generous as they possibly can and yet have very little money to contribute to their parish. More than one parish has two thousand children of grammar school age and literally no money to build a school. Some pastors never escape the problem, since their parishes are the "ready-made slums" where only the poorest of the suburbanites will live. Once families make a little more money, they will move to a better suburb. These parishes with hundreds of couples in their twenties or early thirties and three hundred baptisms a year may be lively, but they will never be stable, and in these parishes the pastor's life expectancy cannot be too great.

These are the construction problems of the suburban parish at its best. This is the picture in dioceses which have the resources and personnel to stay not too far behind the pace of suburban expansion. The situation is much grimmer where the Catholics are a limited minority of the population and the suburban pastor must add size and distance to his other difficulties. In some areas of the country, there simply are no religious facilities for the Catholic suburbanite. The Church in these areas is faced with problems as grave as any it has faced throughout its history in the United States.

This pioneer situation is bound to influence the tone of a suburban parish. The never-ending financial crisis will inevitably affect the course of development. In a few places radical innovations have been made in which the laity have been assigned all sorts of functions that the clergy formerly reserved to themselves—for example, bookkeeping, census work, planning, fund raising. Two reasons are given for these experiments: the priest just cannot perform all of these functions, and if the laity do them, they may begin to appreciate the problems of their priests. In other parishes, teacher aids and home religion classes are helping to alleviate the shortage of classrooms and teachers. Whether any of these innovations will become widespread remains to be seen. Not a few priests are beginning to suspect that even more radical changes will be necessary if the suburban parish is to keep up with the growth around it.

A second characteristic of the suburban parish is that, like the suburb of which it is a part, it is child-centered. It is very much to be feared that the Catholic suburbanite thinks of his parish primarily as a place for his children. Here they are to be educated—not just in religion, but in all the social graces, dancing included. Here they are to receive their instructions about sex. Here they are to have their recreation and their athletic programs. Here they can be sent to get them out of their mother's hair for five hours each day. Here is where the blame is to be assigned if they act up or do not get good grades. Here is the place for a good part of their social life when they become teen-agers.

Of course, the school has always been an important element in the American parish, but one doubts that it has been quite the center of parish life that it has become in the suburbs. Even the children themselves think of it in this fashion, and they will use the parish name by itself when they are referring to their school or its recreation yard. When they leave the grammar school to go to high school they think of themselves less as parishioners than they did before; and the collegian considers himself to be, for all practical purposes, no longer a member of the parish. He feels that he will become a parishioner once again when he moves to another parish and begins to raise a family of his own.

Activities dealing with children and their problems are the most popular in the parish. Home School Conferences (the Catholic version of the P.T.A.) attract men whom the priests barely see from one end of the year to the other. A Sunday afternoon football game will have a larger crowd than a Forty Hours procession. Couples can be sold on Cub Scout work who wouldn't touch the Christian Family Movement with a ten-foot pole. Such interest in children is of course commendable, but there is some danger that suburbanites are beginning to think of the parish as a glorified day-nursery and the priests and nuns as highly trained baby sitters.

Child-centered activities, however, are not the only social services a parish offers or is expected to offer. A "bad" parish is one where there is "nothing going on," and a "good" parish is one where there is a never-ending bustle of activities—bowling leagues, discussion groups, Catholic Action organizations, library committees, pamphlet rack committees and just about any other possible kind of organization, committee, or meeting that the mind of man can conceive. By no means all

parishioners or even a majority are involved in such activity, but a good many of them are, and one gets the impression that a far higher percentage are active than in the typical older parish.

SUBURBANITES demand an extremely high degree of competence from their clergy. In fact, at times they seem to demand almost the impossible. A priest must be a good preacher, a skilled counselor, a lively socializer, a gifted organizer, an accomplished diplomat, a shrewd coach or athletic director, a wise planner and builder and a genius with teen-agers. He must be as skillful in his many diverse areas of operation as the up-and-coming suburbanite professional is expected to be in his own area.

Even the priest's minor failures and mistakes are often treated with a savage criticism which is strangely unrealistic. At times one begins to wonder if the suburbanite does not secretly resent his clergy. Could it be that the suburbanite who has had to struggle for every bit of status and prestige he has resents men who have prestige and status ex officio? Could it be that a man who must worry constantly about security for himself and his family resents the comfort and security the clergy possess without any necessary competence? Could it be that a man who dares not make a major mistake lest it ruin his career resents a man whose career is not seriously threatened by any number of seeming blunders? Perhaps not; but there is at least a possibility that in the suburbs can be found the beginnings of a sentiment which, while not anti-clericalism in the European sense, can nevertheless pose a fairly serious problem for the future, a problem which can be solved only with great patience and honesty on both sides.

At least one serious religious difficulty comes from the very fact that a parish is in the suburbs; like the suburb it tends to become isolated from many aspects of life. In a steel-mill parish the economic problems of the day are self-evident. In a racially changing neighborhood, the problems of the migrant groups are obvious. In a slum neighborhood, the implications of metropolitan development are not to be denied. In a university parish the intellectual currents of the age cannot very well be ignored. But the ordinary suburban parish is so concerned with its own problems of growth and so busy building up its own tight little community that it is not the best platform for social action in the world of human activities and ideas. For the husbands and fathers this is particularly true. They spend so few of their waking hours within the parish boundaries that they are apt to think of the parish as a place for their women and children, with little to contribute to the important decisions of life. No one has yet discovered an effective way of linking the suburban parish with the larger economic and social questions of the day.

The suburban parish looks quite different from its predecessors. Its functional church, low-slung school, and the acres of parking space represent a new image on the American scene. Its method of operation seems to be undergoing change from the techniques of the Old Neighborhood. Its human relational problems are new and more complicated. It has a reservoir of past experience to draw from, but it must provide new solutions of its own if it is to fulfill its purpose. Despite all the changes, however, it still must be a place where God is worshipped; a place where His Gospel is preached. If these basic tasks are not its ultimate goal, then, however successful it may appear to be on the natural level, its sound and fury are nothing more than the clash of cymbals.

OFF-BROADWAY THEATER

Box Office and the Muse

by GERALD WEALES

WHEN THE Provincetown Playhouse was in its infant's heyday, just as the United States edged into World War I, its plays were printed so that the playgoer could stop on his way out of the theater and pick up a copy of, say, Edna St. Vincent Millay's "The Princess Marries the Page." Recently, a leading commercial publisher has issued a collection of plays acted off-Broadway within the last few seasons (*The Off-Broadway Theatre*. Ed. Richard Cordell and Lowell Matson. Random House. $5.). The so different kinds of publication only underline the fact that the off-Broadway theater of today is not nearly so direct a descendant of the little-theater movements of the twenties and thirties as the editors of the new collection insist. In their introduction, the editors, who have incidentally done an extremely bad job—failing to provide basic facts about time, place and circumstances of productions—imply a continuity that does not exist.

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