

Leader In Liturgical Changes Cautions Against 'Gimmicks'

By JAMES E. ADAMS
Post-Dispatch Religion Editor

In the Advent season of 1940 the Rev. Martin B. Hellriegel, who had just been appointed pastor of Holy Cross Church in Baden, installed a motorized Advent wreath that could be lowered from high in the sanctuary.

In a tradition that has held firm, the parish still holds a brief service on the four Sunday evenings before Christmas. There are prayers, songs and a message. Then the candles are lighted, and the wreath slowly ascends.

It is one of the many small but richly symbolic liturgical ceremonies that still hold profound meaning for the 600 families of Holy Cross.

And it shows much about the philosophy of the St. Louis parish priest who became an international leader in the Catholic liturgical revision movement that culminated 10 years ago with a Vatican Council II decree.

For Msgr. Hellriegel, the liturgical shake-up in the Catholic Church was never intended to replace or abolish ancient symbols. Rather, its purpose was to explain, personalize and deepen those symbols for the fullness of Catholic devotional life.

If liturgical changes in recent years have left the devotional life of some Catholic parishes in disarray, the fault lies in teachers and pastors who have not prepared themselves or their flocks for change, Msgr. Hellriegel said.

The fault lies also in priests who have substituted the "gimmicks of demonstration" for the "symbols of celebration," Msgr. Hellriegel, 83 years old, said in an interview this week.

"Shows, theatrical things, demonstrations — the people see through that," he said. "Why, I was at a service recently where they must have let go 100 balloons in the church. Ach! That's demonstration, not celebration."

Despite an occasional barb against theatrical liturgists, and with the note that there is still much work to be done, Msgr. Hellriegel is generally optimistic about the state of the liturgy revisions that he began to push 40 years ago.

Msgr. Hellriegel came to the United States from Germany in

1907. He was ordained a priest of the St. Louis Archdiocese on Dec. 20, 1914. He was pastor in St. Charles and then a chaplain at Precious Blood Convent in O'Fallon until he began liturgy-oriented studies in Europe in 1920.

When he returned to St. Louis, he joined a loose network of American priests and monks seeking liturgical changes. The first major conference was held at a Collegeville, Minn., Benedictine abbey in 1929, Msgr. Hellriegel recalled. Eleven years later, the first national Liturgical Convention was held in Chicago, with Msgr. Hellriegel one of the speakers. He later was national president of the Liturgical Conference.

During the 1940-60 era, Msgr. Hellriegel and others were urging a broad range of changes in Catholic Mass rite and sacraments, including optional use of English and national languages.

At best, they were regarded as dreamers. At worst, some Catholics regarded them as "Protestants," "Communists," or "kooks." The opposition was in part inevitable, he says now, and the rest was due to misunderstanding.

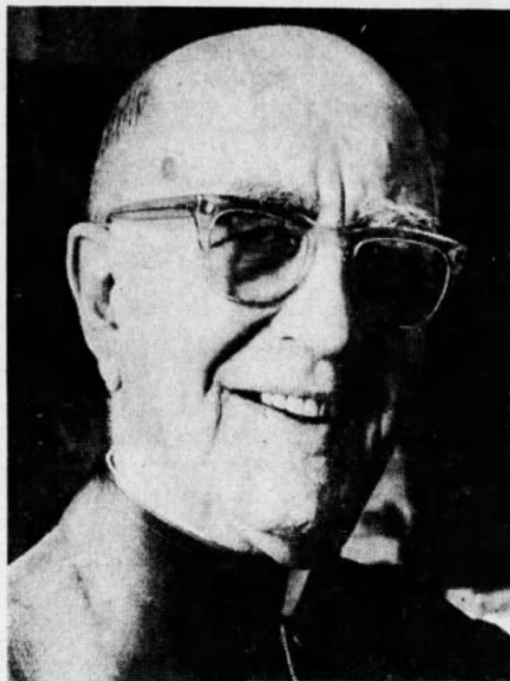
"There was all kind of squawking after the new missal was introduced at the Council of Trent 400 years ago," he said. "The church recovered from that, and it will recover from the squawking going on in recent years."

Holy Cross Parish thrives today with its liturgical sanity and vigor intact, as well it should, because it had a 30-year jump on most Catholic parishes in the country.

The church, situated at 8115 Church Road overlooking the Baden community, is the spiritual center of about 600 Catholic families, most of them of German descent. It is a stable congregation, slightly less affluent than the average St. Louis parish, and about as conservative as most, Msgr. Hellriegel notes.

The smooth, yet lively participation at Saturday evening and Sunday morning Masses has been created over the years by threefold stress: gradual but persistent changes; thorough preparation and instruction to all members, and maintaining a solemnity and dignity at all times.

The small things are important, Msgr. Hellriegel said. All



Msgr. Martin B. Hellriegel
"Celebration, not demonstration"

weekend Masses at Holy Cross are "High Masses," that is, they are sung and use such traditional liturgical accoutrements as incense burning.

He elaborated on use of incense as one of those small yet rich symbols that have got lost in liturgical shuffle of recent years. It is a solid Biblical practice, he said, still unsurpassed as a sacramental sign of the people's prayers, hopes, fears and joys ascending to God.

"I had an assistant priest here a few years back," he said. "good enough man, but he scoffed at the idea of the censer — said he has no use for that pot with its smoke."

Msgr. Hellriegel said he has made singing a natural liturgical habit for all ages in his parish by "starting 33 years ago with children." Over the years, the parish has incorporated 231 English hymns (published in 1963 in a church hymnal), as well as seven different Mass chants in Latin.

For leading congregational singing, the parish has an adult and a children's choir. It maintains also a junior and senior altar boy corps and 24 lay readers (including two women).

The parish has many active lay societies, including a FISH group. These are lay helpers whose work includes bringing in sick and aged about four times a year for the Sacrament of Holy Anointing.

Preaching at Holy Cross is short, and it stays with the eternal themes of the Gospel. "I don't want to say we exclude comment on social matters when appropriate, but we do not build our sermons on political things that come and go," he said.

Perhaps the best indication of the liturgical maturity at Holy Cross is the easy integration of English and Latin languages.

There is no split over language that has occurred in some Catholic parishes. Neither English nor Latin is a "sacred cow" at Holy Cross.

Once a month, the parish has a full Latin rite except for the Scripture readings. But the time of the Latin Mass varies because, Msgr. Hellriegel says, a regular time would tend to divide the people artificially into "Latin lovers" and "English lovers."

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