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# A PARISH PROGRAM TO COMBAT DELINQUENCY

JAMES F. O'DONNELL\*

FIFTY YEARS AGO Pope Pius X noted the Church's greatest need was for intelligent Catholic laymen on the parish level. That need was never greater than it is today, even in America. For notwithstanding Pope John XXIII's recent praise, Catholics in America are suffering from and contributing to what has been called a national mediocrity. The development of Sputnik by the Russians and the rising crime rate, costing us \$1.10 for every \$1.00 spent on education, are but two of the dramatic examples of this national mediocrity to which all Americans, Catholic and non-Catholic, have contributed. Less notable but just as real an example of mediocrity, especially among American Catholics, is our lack of scholars, scientists, artists and professional personnel, as cited by such men as Fathers John A. O'Brien and Gustave Weigel and Monsignor John Tracy Ellis.

In an article on *The Youthful Offender* in the July, 1957, edition of THE CATHOLIC LAWYER, Queens County District Attorney Frank O'Connor alluded in closing to the part that laymen could play on the local or parish level in the broad and varied development of themselves, their children, their nation and Church. Mr. O'Connor was echoing Pius X's statement of fifty years ago and providing a modern and pertinent context for its application in citing the rising proportion of juvenile delinquents who claimed to be Catholics. He noted that most of these had not seen, as many of our future Catholics will not see, the inside of a Catholic educational institution. This underscored for him, as for many others, the importance of revitalizing the resources of the individual parish in an effort to reach the ever-increasing proportion of Catholics whose contact with the Church will be casual, to say nothing of the obvious need of providing aid and counsel to regularly practicing Catholics, especially the young, in their search for educational and vocational opportunities.

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What are some new fields where lay help, indeed lay leadership, is needed? Take for one the field of juvenile delinquency. Only because "criminal" delinquency is such a focal point of interest do we use it here to illustrate the possible uses to which parish resources can be devoted. It is obviously but one of several fields which need exploration of this kind.



JAMES F. O'DONNELL

Last year in Queens County, a representative American community, over 5,000 youngsters from 7 to 21 were involved with the law. Around fifty per cent professed to be Catholics of some kind or other.

Although in the hundred-odd parishes in Queens there is no equal distribution of these delinquents, let us for the sake of illustration assume that there were between 15 to 35 youngsters with delinquency records in each—15 to 35 youngsters in definite need of help not after but before they get into trouble.

Sad, but true, the scene is repeated again and again of the pastor of a parish being called in at the last moment, sentence time, or even at arrest time which is late enough, to intercede for some youngster involved with the law. Such a situation should and does give pause to the religious involved and to the court. Where was the Church before? Or rather, where was the family and what consideration did they give to the boy's need for the Church?

Presuming each parish has a reasonably good idea, albeit from an infrequent census,

of the number and identity of its parishioners, the liaison between the troublesome family and the parish should not be so belated as the often vain call for help in the circumstances we have outlined.

Of course, of the two, the stronger obligation to stay in contact rests with the parishioner—certainly in terms of Sunday Mass. Generally speaking, weight of numbers alone precludes any other arrangement. But the initial contact outside of Sunday Mass may be, in certain cases of underprivileged families, more the responsibility of the Church. In this contact the laity can and should play a vital part. It already does to some degree in the administration of Saint Vincent de Paul societies.

But the laity must play a larger part.

The heavy responsibility of making the parish and its activities interesting and attractive, as well as meaningful, must rest not only with the priests and sisters but also with the lay people, who are indeed their brothers' keepers. This is especially true where delinquent youngsters are involved. By delinquent we do not mean just criminally delinquent, although because of the dramatic nature of the problem and the fact that there are not enough trained personnel or public or private facilities to handle them, the efforts of the parish laity should be directed toward the criminally delinquent youngsters initially, although not exclusively.

To illustrate the present problem with regard to the lack of personnel and resources in the field of juvenile delinquency we have only to refer to the statement of the Presiding Justice of the Domestic Relations Court in New York City which appeared in the *New York Post* on December 7, 1958: "We are short of psychiatrists, psychologists and psychiatric social work-

ers. I just can't staff our clinic with the salaries paid by the city." According to the *New York Post*, the Children's Court clinic had been forced to lower its case load from about 250 to less than 40. The clinic, which undertakes the diagnosis and treatment of youngsters from 7 to 16 at the recommendation of the judges, has curtailed its services sharply after losing key personnel during the past two years. Of an authorized strength of 15 psychiatrists, 12 psychologists, and 8 psychiatric social workers, the clinic is now operated with only 8 psychiatrists, 8 psychologists and 2 psychiatric social workers.

While it is true that in many instances prudent, intelligent men and women would be reluctant to interfere where there are no wiser men to tread, the experts themselves attest to the work that the intelligent and dedicated volunteer can accomplish with less serious cases, to say nothing of the help of the competent professional people in these fields who might be recruited on a part-time basis. And each parish has within its confines doctors and lawyers, businessmen, teachers, social workers and recreational experts to fill some of the needs outlined above for at least an interim period until that seemingly distant day when public and private agencies in the youth care and development fields will be sufficiently staffed.

Many questions and difficulties undoubtedly present themselves regarding the utilization of the personnel of the parish in this way, which at first consideration might seem to be practical obstacles of no mean proportions. We have mentioned several already. Still another is that to a great extent the utilization of parish resources along these lines is a new field. There is no firm ground of tradition or custom which

we can follow in establishing any kind of organizational structure to this end. Analogously, however, we have long had organizational structures in parishes on which we could pattern this new project — the Knights of Columbus has its Squires; the Holy Name Society its Junior Holy Name; there are the Sea Scouts and the Boy Scouts. All of these agencies could be utilized in some way not only to attract and hold youngsters as they already do but also to provide a pattern on which to base further expansion of services for the delinquent young.

The first step in organizing a group of parish volunteers to help delinquent youngsters would be the setting up of a parish resources board to make a preliminary investigation of the personnel and institutional resources available. Such an investigation could utilize existing parish and inter-parish organizations like the Holy Name, Knights of Columbus and the Catholic Big Brothers for recruiting volunteers to help with such a project initially and to help with delinquent youth eventually. Once operating, the board would, if necessary, designate representative volunteers to attend courses on delinquency where available — such as the one established at St. John's University two years ago by Dr. Walter Willigan. This course had the purpose of educating at least one representative volunteer lay person in each parish as a possible seeding agent for eventual activity and organizational growth in this direction. Such a board would, under the chairmanship of the pastor or an assistant, supervise the foundation and activity of several of the following committees, some or all of which, according to need and parish ability, might be instituted to meet the requirements of the particular parish.

The make-up of the committees would depend on the number and qualifications of the people available, but on the board itself there should certainly be representation from the medical, legal, religious, business, educational and, if possible, psychiatric professions. This is not to limit the make-up of the board to these professions alone, but to give some idea of the core from which the board could draw its membership.

Here are some of the committees which could serve under the board:

1. A committee on behavior-problem youngsters, seemingly not manageable at school or home. Spotting and researching a handful of 15 to 35 problem youngsters a year is not a great project. A few problem youngsters are identifiable in every Catholic school. Others are former Catholic school problems transferred to the public school; others are public school youngsters observable at released time or Sunday school either in boisterous attendance or truancy. Still others are professing but not practicing Catholics who can be singled out with the help of official agencies like the Bureau of Attendance of the Board of Education, the Police Department Juvenile Aid Bureau, the Probation Department or the District Attorney's office which has, in Queens County for example, a map of the residences of every youngster between 16 and 21 arrested in the county. These we try to help through the Youth Counsel Bureau.<sup>1</sup>

Once established, such a committee might be able to spot troublesome young-

sters before they violated the law. Given early enough in a youngster's life any help extended by this committee would be more likely to be accepted and could indeed concentrate on a more malleable problem in conjunction with other agencies.

Practically speaking, some of these youngsters at any age might reject what aid and counsel such a committee and its board and organization could provide. Properly established and realistically run, however, I believe the number of such youngsters rejecting help would be in the minority. Such action on their part might well lessen their chances of receiving the help of parish authorities at some later date.

2. A committee on vocational guidance. This would include educational guidance with reference to schools for professional and other studies.<sup>2</sup>

3. A committee on occupations. This could be patterned, if necessary, on YES — Youth Employment Services — set up in some western cities and manned on occasion by the youths themselves.<sup>3</sup>

These are three committees whose formation could bring to bear the many resources of the parish on several of its basic needs.<sup>4</sup> They would easily lend themselves

<sup>2</sup> This field in public and even private schools is still in the pioneering stage. The composition of this subcommittee would undoubtedly call for a personnel manager, a teacher and a priest, just to name three. Leads to and advice on college and professional schools could be provided — in addition to recommendations to these institutions — by college and professional members of the parish itself.

<sup>3</sup> Again membership should include a personnel manager or certainly a business executive. Leads for jobs could be secured by the simple expedient of a parishioner dropping a note to the committee on openings in his business or vocation.

<sup>4</sup> Practically speaking, the success of any or all

<sup>1</sup> Any problem as to the possible violation of a youngster's legal rights in this connection should be viewed here as elsewhere in the light of providing help to the youth and therefore could be adjusted either with his consent or the consent of his parents without sacrificing or endangering his rights against self-incrimination, etc.

to being expanded to help not only delinquent youngsters but all youngsters and even young adults and older people as well. Indeed, it would be better if, while each group thought in terms of delinquency first, it acted in terms of its parish's general need.

In this connection, there are many other committees which suggest themselves. Some of them are already verified in certain parish structures in one way or another. They are as varied as a decent literature committee, which is an obvious one, and a recreation committee, headed by a teacher or coach and aided by college players in the parish, to provide a recreational medium for a wider percentage of our youth than that currently found in many parishes. Another committee could be designed to expand and make more frequent the present Cana Conferences and their services. It could conceivably work with the Saint Vincent de Paul Society in reference to problem or troubled families and then on its own in setting up an adult education program designed along the present Cana Conference format, but expanded to give practical help with budgets, housing and

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three of these committees would depend upon the feasibility of instituting testing procedures or using the results of those already instituted in private and public schools for the purposes of the committees. In many instances both public and private schools today utilize tests to determine personality, character and capabilities. The tests are not given frequently or early enough nor are the results readily available to any but the teaching faculty. Other and allied tests designed to reveal delinquent or potential delinquent or aggressive behavior or other possible indicia of behavior problems — sullenness, disinterest, rebellion — could be used by these committees in conjunction with the teaching faculties of the school. Thus the parish resources board could determine the pool of talent available in the parish as well as its potential problems.

other family problems.

The need for practical advice on running homes is more important than is generally recognized in private or public curricula, even for the average Catholic family which is generally larger than its counterpart in other religions and which, as indicated by a Notre Dame University survey a few years ago, generally has less money to spend on each child. As the cost of living climbs, especially in cities, which are generally the centers of Catholic concentration in the United States, the need not only to make the budget go as far as possible but to supplement it becomes apparent. The natural anxiety of the family to better its lot in various ways — to move to a better neighborhood, for example — is complicated by a second need to raise a Catholic family in a Catholic way. The stress therefore placed upon the whole family is often varied and profound. The father is called upon in many instances to seek a second job and the mother too is often forced to go out and work on her own. The possible damage to a family's integrity here, if the children are still young and impressionable, is obvious.

What are some of the benefits of such a board and its committees?

First, it will set up positive machinery for helping members of the parish as a matter of custom and not casually as so often is the case now. Second, it will create an atmosphere of practical helpfulness in the parish. Third, it will focus parish resources as much as possible on its problems and its talents and should tend to encourage the integration of outside agencies on these same problems and talents. Fourth, and perhaps most important of all, it will provide a spiritual context for help on an intimate local basis sometimes before and

certainly in most cases in addition to the public or private aid often given impersonally and without reference to the religious needs of the people involved.

Will such an organization produce fewer delinquents or more vocations? Obviously no one knows. As to the former, there is certainly a practical expectation that it would reduce the incidence of delinquency, if not in first offenders at least in second and third offenders. But these benefits are really by-products of such an organization's work. Its main reason for existence would be to help on the parish level, making the parish a greater center of influence than it is today.

If such an organization operating on only one of its levels can save one child from going seriously wrong or even from becoming a first offender in a minor way, it would be worth the effort. Obviously it faces a great task, not the least of which is to build up the strength of the family unit — initially — from the outside. This approach admits quite frankly that we have problem families whose salt, as it were, cannot be savored within their own context without outside help. Whether or not facilities and personnel of such an organization would better concentrate on a handful of less troublesome families is a question to be determined by local discretion.

But we have to start somewhere and attempt to isolate the origin of the problem as we get parishes to work at earlier and earlier stages. Is it the work of parishes alone? Obviously not. The university and diocese have resources, experience and agencies of their own on which the parishes can and must call, on which they must certainly depend and to which in many instances they will have to look for guidance,

leadership and authority. Catholic Charities would be an example. But in the current state of things the diocese cannot superimpose a structure like this on the parishes. Indeed, recent successful conferences on Catholic leadership in the community indicate that the diocese, where it can, will provide the context for meeting, education and discussion in addition to moral and physical support, but it cannot and will not dictate any set of rules to be followed in implementing this general call to Catholic lay leadership.

This is up to the laity and the individual parish or inter-parish organizations. The suggested organization cannot blossom overnight nor should it necessarily be patterned on the above outline — there is nothing panacea-like about its structure or suggestions. Admittedly, in some cases the need of an individual parish for such an organization would not be paramount. In such instances perhaps the establishment of an inter-parish organization along the suggested lines would better answer the purposes. But at the same time there is nothing particularly utopian or unrealistic about these suggestions or the basic reason for bringing them into existence in some form. What is utopian is the vague hope entertained by some that things will get better; that we will have fewer delinquents and encourage more vocations and more Catholic lay leaders in various fields; that if we don't do any or all of these things that it is God's will. That is christian existentialism at its worst. Such an attitude ignores completely the basic truths of the Christian faith that Christ came to cast a fire upon the earth and that he needs men and women, lay as well as religious, to do it . . . in the words of Saint Pius X . . . in the parish.