

The priests, the nuns and the people

James Flanigan | Feb. 17, 2009



Sr. Margaret McEntee is pictured in 1956 with her first-grade class at St. Anthony's School in the Bronx section of New York. McEntee's former religious name, Sister James, was used by an old first-grade pupil of hers, writer-director John Patrick Shanley, for a character in the movie "Doubt." (CNS)

In the recent film "Doubt," set in 1964, Fr. Brendan Flynn, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, pastor of a parish in the Bronx, wants to bring the church closer to the people. He tells Sr. Aloysius Beauvier, principal of the parish elementary school, that "we [the clergy and nuns] are really just like them," meaning the parishioners.

But Sr. Aloysius, played by Meryl Streep, protests vehemently, "We are not like them. We are different, and we must be different. These working-class people depend on us" to be different, to be above and apart from them, to guide them and to care for their children whom they have entrusted to us.

Both were right.

Fr. Flynn reflects the thinking of the Second Vatican Council, which ran from 1962 to 1965. Sr. Aloysius accurately reflects the thinking of the Bronx of the 1940s and 1950s and the neighborhoods of Irish immigrants and their Irish-American offspring. These were the "working-class" people we see in the movie, wearing their Sunday best to church, looking up reverently as the priest gives the homily.

I grew up in a Bronx neighborhood just like the one depicted in "Doubt." My neighborhood, west of Yankee Stadium, was named Highbridge for a footbridge over the Harlem River that was built in the 1830s by Irish laborers who later built the New York Central Railroad. The bridge was a registered landmark, included in guidebooks of the American Institute of Architects. But few of the Irish working people in the 1950s, grocery clerks and warehouse men, waitresses and part-time domestics, policemen, firefighters and bartenders, knew about architecture or any of the other arts.

They had come with little formal education from small farms and towns in the west of Ireland, and they were happy to have work. They were between two worlds. Their temporal lives were hitched to the economy of the New York metropolitan area, while their emotional lives remained back in Ireland, which they always called "home."

But their spiritual lives, and most important, the guidance of their children, were cared for by Sacred Heart Church, which comforted the old and taught the young.

Its school took their children, corrected the Irish brogues they brought from home, and taught them of a new country and a wider world. It taught them the value of their individual lives: "You are a temple of the Holy Ghost," Sr. Jane Frances de Chantal would say. "You are responsible for yourself and others."

The church protected them in practical ways also. If a young man stole a car, the police didn't book him but telephoned the pastor of Sacred Heart, then Msgr. William Humphrey, who inevitably would "know the boy's parents." Msgr. Humphrey would then ask the car's owner (probably a non-Catholic) not to press charges, assuring him that the car would be restored and any damages paid. The church would pony up the money. The parents would pay it back, then the boy would work it off. A police record was avoided, a productive life, perhaps, saved.

If the young fellow persisted in recalcitrant ways, as my friend, the rangy, wild Bobby O'Toole, did, he would be sent to Lincoln Hall, a reform school in then-rural Westchester County run by the New York archdiocese.

The church was protector, but a distant one necessarily. Sr. Aloysius understood that.

The unlettered parents seldom if ever spoke to priests or to the nuns and Christian Brothers who taught their children with anything other than bowed deference. A mother trying to defend her truant son before Fr. Stanislaus Jablonski, the legendary dean of discipline at Cardinal Hayes High School, might say that the boy had left for school but returned home feeling ill because "he's sick, Father."

Whereupon Fr. Jablonski, with courteous authority toward the mother but scarcely an unnecessary glance at the son, would say, "He's sick of school, Mrs. O'Connor, that's what he's sick of." And the mother would bow her head and concede that, of course, Father was the better judge.

Yet the religious and the people were embedded with each other.

First of all, there were great numbers of religious. The absolute majority of the teachers in the elementary schools and the nearby high schools -- All Hallows and Cardinal Hayes for the boys, Cathedral High and the Ursuline Academy for the girls -- were brothers and nuns. And they taught all day and into the night, drilling students in evening sessions for interscholastic competitions in mental arithmetic and spelling.

The nuns guided the girls' sodalities; the brothers coached the boys in basketball and American football, forming intramural play as early as sixth grade. It was called "American" football only because in that neighborhood, briefly, there was a different kind. Some of the fathers tried to form teams for Gaelic football. But the American version prevailed, of course.

The nuns and brothers, often offspring of immigrants themselves, recognized that their pupils were from different cultures. But they didn't dwell on that. The children's homes might be filled with Irish music or perhaps Italian opera, but the school dances introduced baritone saxophones, early rhythm and blues, and the beginnings of rock. The teachers knew that their role was to bring their charges into the new land and the new society, "secular" though it may be.

It is poetic but accurate to say that the clergy and religious provided a passage to America for those students.

And they provided that passage at "steerage" rates. The elementary schools were essentially free to the parents, the costs borne by the Sunday collection plates and the archdiocese. The high schools were reasonable even for

working-class families.

Cardinal Hayes, for example, charged \$10 per month tuition if parents could pay it, \$5 per month if they could not afford \$10. The multitudes of religious -- bound by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience -- made such bargains possible. Their lives, their own skills and ambitions, were essentially an offering of service. That was the difference that Sr. Aloysius understood.

But things were changing in 1950s America. The working class was moving up and moving on. High school graduates could get office jobs in Manhattan at the American Telephone & Telegraph Company or the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and in the emerging advertising and television industries. Many things were changing. In my neighborhood, Patsy Devlin, the prettiest girl in the eighth grade, was recruited by a modeling agency that turned her into a leading figure for fashion magazines. We boys were puzzled by how skinny they forced her to be.

The church was changing. Their new flocks were no longer from an Irish village, but moving on to Westchester County and Connecticut. Having minds of their own, the people didn't need protection. Nor did they think to show the old deference. Fr. Flynn, and Vatican II, understood that. And gradually the people and the clergy and religious did come to resemble each other; they became "the same people," as Fr. Flynn said.

Then, quite suddenly it seemed, the clergy and religious seemed to vanish. Their numbers dropped dramatically.

The schools went on, but with many more lay teachers, at wages and benefits appreciably higher than the old vow-of-poverty incomes. Costs went up, as did tuitions. Today high school tuitions are above \$5,000 a year. The schools get help from charitable institutions and foundations, and they need it.

Yet the work went on and goes on today, in Bronx and Manhattan neighborhoods.

The students once again are the children of working-class people, mainly African Americans and immigrants from Latin America and their descendants. The teachers, with only a few priests and religious, but many more dedicated lay personnel, still try to provide their charges with a passage to America, or more precisely to a fuller participation in American life, in the American dream.

The differences between the neighborhoods depicted in "Doubt" and those of today are dramatic in appearance but perhaps not so great in substance.

The essence of what happened then and is happening today is in the same great tradition, captured best in a line of William Butler Yeats. "Education is not the filling of a pail," wrote the poet, "but the lighting of a fire."

Fr. Flynn would understand that. Sr. Aloysius would have no doubt of it as well.

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Printed in the National Catholic Reporter, February 20, 2009.

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