

Hell-raiser in a collar wins fight for parish

Michael O'Malley Religion News Service | Jun. 19, 2009



Two homeless men talk during a community meal, one of the social ministrations of St. Colman Church in Cleveland March 21. (CNS photo/Dennis Sadowski)

CLEVELAND

He is this city's rebel priest, a hell-raiser in a collar who broke laws to protest the immoralities of war, racism and poverty. He took on the government, the military, the weapons industry and the Catholic Church. He destroyed property, was jailed, suspended from the priesthood and targeted by the FBI.

That was 40 years ago, when Fr. Bob Begin first took his vision of Christianity to the streets.

Today, at age 71, he appears calm and contemplative -- a far cry from the angry young man who splattered blood inside Dow Chemical's corporate offices and hijacked St. John's Cathedral to protest the Vietnam War.

The white-haired, bearded Begin, now pastor of a socially conscious urban church, has the bearing of a distinguished sage, not a bullhorn militant. But the fire that drove him in his younger days burns with the same intensity.

And Begin still fights the good fight. "It's who I am," he said in an interview. "It doesn't go away."

His latest battle ended in victory in May after he led a grassroots resistance against an order by Cleveland Bishop Richard Lennon to close Begin's 129-year-old parish, St. Colman's, as part of the diocese's downsizing plan.

Begin was the only priest who publicly criticized Lennon's decision and vowed to fight it. "We have a conscious obligation to continue our ministry," he told *The Plain Dealer* in March. "That's not negotiable."

Begin, a lawyer, wasted no time organizing parishioners and filing a formal appeal with the diocese.

"The biggest struggle was to keep it from becoming adversarial," he said. "And so many people wanted to be adversarial. Thank God it didn't come to that. I would have gotten fired and they would have had to evict me

from the rectory."

On the brink of taking it to the streets again, he sought the guidance of retired Bishop Anthony Pilla, who had worked with Begin years ago to tame his rebellious streak. "I told him to keep a cool head and trust in the Holy Spirit," Pilla said.

Begin obeyed.

And after two meetings with Lennon, he convinced the bishop that St. Colman's social services were vital lifelines to the neighborhood's poor people and that the church was capable of operating in the black. Lennon agreed to rescind his order and keep St. Colman's open.

In early June, a packed congregation burst into applause during a Mass of celebration. Begin then led them in a chant, "The church is the people! The church is the people!"

For Begin, it was the people who saved St. Colman's, but without his leadership, his followers say, the people would have been lost.

"He had the right tone, despite his reputation as the rebel priest," said Eileen Kelly, outreach minister at St. Colman's. "He was calm, not confrontational. It takes courage to speak to authority -- to speak truth to power. Bob has that courage and he has the experience. He was the right person for leading us."

Begin's courage and experience come from years of disturbing the powers that be with his simple Christian gospel.

"He's not intimidated by any power or institution," said his brother, the Rev. Dan Begin, one of his 12 siblings and a priest of the Cleveland diocese. "He follows his heart, his mind and his faith. Our mother always said, 'Do what you are supposed to do.' "

Forty years ago, Begin felt he was supposed to do whatever it took to stop what he viewed as an immoral war. On a snowy January night in 1969, he led a group of protesters into St. John Cathedral and seized control of a midnight Mass.

Begin and another priest rushed the altar and began saying their own Mass. The priest on duty called police and shouted to the congregation, "This is not a Mass. These are not priests. Please leave." Then he shut off the lights.

Begin and company lit candles and read a statement condemning the war and challenging the very Christianity of the diocese. Begin came off the altar to distribute Communion, but another priest grabbed his hand, spilling consecrated hosts to the floor. Two dozen cops wielding billy clubs arrived, shoving, kicking and carrying the two priests and their followers out the doors.

Begin and the other priest were booked for trespassing and immediately suspended from the priesthood. Less than two months later, the two clerical comrades were among nine anti-war activists who broke into Dow Chemical Co. offices in Washington, D.C., to protest the company's manufacturing of napalm, Agent Orange and plastic body bags, all used in Vietnam.

Known as the "D.C. 9," the protesters poured human blood throughout the offices and threw company files out a fourth-story window. They were arrested, jailed and charged with burglary and destroying property.

A month later, Begin, speaking through a bullhorn, told 1,500 students at Kent State University: "The revolution is begun and either you come along with the revolution or the revolution will run over you."

Looking back on his hell-raising days, Begin said, "It's hard to measure the effectiveness of all that. But eventually it was popular opinion that stopped the war." Asked whether he would do it again the same way, he said, "Yes, given the same circumstances."

Still, he admitted he's a smarter hell-raiser today than he was back then.

"For most struggles, you have to wait for the right timing," he said. "It takes strategy. It takes time. I know a lot more now than I did then. I know you don't rush into things all by yourself. ... My approach now is like downloading a computer. You keep clicking 'next' and 'continue.'

Four years after the Dow action, Begin was sentenced to four years probation after pleading guilty to unlawful entry. He remained suspended from the priesthood for two years. During that time he organized and lived in a communal house for the down and out.

Begin was eventually reinstated, but he continued to agitate and embarrass the church. "I still have axes to grind," he told *The Plain Dealer* in 1973. "I'm ready for confrontation."

Asked at the time why he didn't just leave the priesthood, Begin responded: "I want to stay in the church. The bishops will have to deal with me whether they want to or not."

Pilla, the retired bishop, was eventually able to have a meeting of the minds with Begin and found him opportunities to work on poverty, homelessness, AIDS advocacy and refugees. Begin had an ally, and "under him there was never a need to do confrontation in the church," Begin said.

It was a relief for the new bishop.

"I was asking, 'Why do we have to get to this point?' I didn't doubt his sincerity, but it hurt the church," Pilla said.

Former Congresswoman Mary Rose Oakar, who calls Begin "one of the heroes of my Catholic faith," said his take-over of the cathedral was a wake-up call for many Catholics to put their faith into action. The fight to save St. Colman's, she said, wasn't much different.

"He was ready to take the same tactic in the battle to save St. Colman's," she said. "He sure as hell wasn't going to give up that church without a battle."

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