

# Saginaw: Portrait Of A Collapsing Diocese

By WILLIAM H. MARSHNER

PART III

Saginaw, Mich., is a place where pastors, parents, children, even teachers (and maybe even the bishop) have to be "managed" to make them accept an utterly unnatural idea, namely, that the diocesan school system does not exist to teach the Catholic Faith but to inculcate "human values." This amounts to saying that the diocese's largest bloc of personnel (429 full-time, salaried teachers — almost four times the number of diocesan priests) is paid every year a giant share of the laity's total contributions in order to do something at best — at best — tangentially related to the Catholic religion. So outlandish, in fact, is this idea that various disguises have had to be invented for it. Such as:

— We are just using a new "method," a "better" way to teach religion to young people;

— The new method doesn't confuse the child with "mere information" but informs the heart with "Christian attitudes";

— The "human values" that we speak of are really the same as "basic Christian principles";

— Really, all the doctrines of the Church are contained in our new textbooks, if you just look for them;

— Or (failing all else) well, perhaps there are some omissions from our new program, but the whole content of Divine Revelation can't be taught all at once, for Heaven's sake!

The reality is very different. No impartial evaluation has ever been made of these new "methods," but it is known that teenagers are abandoning the Catholic Faith in record numbers. In fact they have been taught to do so. I have dozens of statements from all over Saginaw, swearing that children in all grade levels have been told (a) that there is no obligation to attend Mass and (b) that there is no necessity to obey the Ten Commandments. Hundreds of intelligent parents, not only in Saginaw but all over America, have inspected the preferred textbooks (Sadlier, Benziger, Paulist, etc.) and have been unable to find in them anywhere a clear affirmation of such basic Catholic teachings as Papal infallibility or the existence of moral absolutes.

## EVEN IN SAGINAW

I talked to many parents who had been victimized by these disguises. Many of them had watched helplessly as their own children's faith was slowly destroyed. I have copies of letters from diocesan officials (especially Beitz, the bishop's secretary, and Gentner, the Director of Religious Education) in which these men attempt to mollify anguished parents by repeating one or more of these slick insinuations. But even in Saginaw the truth occasionally breaks through.

On Oct. 21st, 1970, Sr. Allen Thomas, the principal of Sts. Peter and Paul Area High School, gave an interview to a local paper, the *Township Times*. She said: "Religion courses in the Catholic schools are not what the general public might believe them to be."

"No? What then?"  
 "We exist to teach Christian principles, not to teach religion."  
 But, one wonders, what the devil are "Christian principles," if they are not the same as "religion"? Sr. Allen explains: "It's not catechism."

Make a note of that: the Sadlier books and such are not catechisms, after all. Sister goes on: "We're teaching the Church in our age, with the thrust of values, attitudes, and Christian sensitivity. We try to make students conscious of other people and their needs. We try to tell them of poverty, and the problem of the ghetto."

In other words, according to this high school principal, Saginaw's Catholic schools are not teaching religion by a new method, nor are they teaching religion along with social concern (which might be a valuable thing to do, if done well); they are not teaching religion at all. Period.

Why not?  
 This is perhaps the most difficult question of all. If we succeed in answering it, we shall have discovered something terribly important about a collapsing diocese like Saginaw, where the religious-education apparatus dominates everything, thanks to the support of Bishop Reh. I can venture only a tentative answer in these pages, comprising three distinct parts: psychology, ideology, and economics.

1) Psychology — I have already suggested that dissident priests and Sisters, precisely because they hate the Catholic past, are driven

to manipulate the Catholic present, in order to make it psychologically comfortable for themselves. The Catholicism of their parents must, therefore, be consigned to extinction. Any effort at resistance must be labeled "divisive" and put down severely. Central to the success of this endeavor, of course, are children, especially teenagers. If there is one thing that drives hot-shot, young priests and nuns right up the wall, it is to hear traditional Catholicism spouted by someone younger than themselves. The dissident's very sense of identity (including his ability to believe that he is still a Catholic) requires — requires! — a conviction that the young are on his side, making his total vindication a matter of time alone, making change "inevitable."

## THEIR BALL AND BAT?

Therefore, the dissident clique has no higher priority than monopoly control of Catholic education. Here are just three examples out of the unconscionable number which could be cited.

A) The St. John's Affair. In late 1970, some sixteen families in the Bay City area, tired of the inadequate religious instruction then being offered to their children, requested the use of some space in St. John's parish school, Essexville. They proposed to teach a program themselves, for six children, using catechetical materials published by the widely acclaimed Daughters of St. Paul.

Had these parents been Protestants or Jews, their zeal would have merited statewide acclaim from their clergy. But since they were Catholics in Bishop Reh's Saginaw, they merited a bureaucratic squelch. It was plain up to them to imagine that they could "operate a religious-education program other than that authorized or prescribed by the Diocesan Office of Religious Education," concluded the Diocesan Board of Education in a vote published on Dec. 18th. Use of the St. John's facilities was vetoed. "Board Takes Dim View Of Parent School Use," proclaimed the headline of the *Catholic Weekly*, which reported also, at the end of its story, as follows: "The (Daughters of St. Paul) catechetical books" — used, by the way, in scores of dioceses here and abroad — "have not been approved for use in the Saginaw Diocese."

B) The Neubecker Affair. As of Dec., 1973, there was no high school CCD program in the rural Beal City area, and so a number of concerned parents asked a retired pastor to instruct their children. This was Fr. Edward Neubecker, a classmate of Lawrence Cardinal Shehan at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore and a priest of the Diocese of Grand Rapids for over fifty years. From 1946 until 1970, Fr. Neubecker was pastor of St. Philomena's in Beal City, a parish whose name has recently been changed to St. Joseph the Worker. (Until 1971 this area was within the boundaries of Grand Rapids but is now under Bishop Reh's jurisdiction.) Fr. Neubecker was dearly loved by his people. He built the parish from next to nothing and kept out the funny "catechisms" despite the restiveness of the nuns, until his departure in 1970. It was natural, therefore, that the parents should seek him out for their teenagers' CCD and natural, too, that they should begin to bring along some smaller children to Father's sessions — children whom dissatisfied parents had already pulled out of the Sadlier program at St. Joseph's. (It had taken the determined nuns, led by a certain Sr. Theodine, just one year to revolutionize the catechetical program after Fr. Neubecker's retirement.) Between December of 1973, and February of 1974, then, Fr. Neubecker held about ten of these classes at the parents' request.

As befits a man of long pastoral experience, Fr. Neubecker was a gifted teacher. He could relate to the young ones without elaborate gimmicks and could make the things of God dance with fascination. A little girl ran home to her mother bursting with the news that ("Mom, guess what?") we are born with Original Sin. A small thing, but it meant a lot to these parents to see the boredom in their children's eyes replaced by joy of discovery.

Then on Feb. 21st, 1974, Fr. Neubecker received a letter from Bishop Reh. It asked no questions, required no explanations, offered no appeal, but simply commanded him to cease teaching under the vow of obedience. Stunned and

mystified, the parents sought to learn what had happened. In bits and pieces the story emerged: the nuns at St. Joseph's were enraged by the withdrawal of even a handful of children from their well-meaning ministrations. Unwilling to blame their failures upon themselves, they took it into their heads that Fr. Neubecker had seduced the parents and children from their grasp. Hence they labelled him a "divisive force" and taxed him with the unrest they themselves had created. They took their complaints to the new pastor, a pentecostal, an advocate of contraception, and a virulent enemy of traditional Catholicism, named Fr. Donald Dueweke. Dueweke carried the tale of divisiveness, no doubt suitably embellished, to the Bishop, and hence the draconian letter of Feb. 21st.

It is necessary to be precise:

(1) Fr. Neubecker did not approach the parents; they approached him.

(2) The children involved were not withdrawn from Sr. Theodine's program at the behest of Fr. Neubecker, nor even in anticipation of his teaching them. They had been withdrawn solely as a parental response to the inadequacies of the Sisters' own work.

(3) Fr. Neubecker did not proselytize, did not polemicize, did not advertise, did not polarize; he simply taught.

(4) It was the very teaching itself — the very existence of alternative education — which was held to constitute the crime. Whoever doubts this may consult the text of the bishop's letter.

## A CRITICAL SILENCE

C) The Weier Affair. Fr. Thomas Weier, O.F.M. Cap., gave lectures at the request of many active lay people who wanted to be unconfused. From 1969 until the end of 1971, he lectured weekly to what proved to be an enthusiastic and ever-expanding audience. Adult Catholics were hungry to hear again the truths of their Faith, which Fr. Weier expounded to them from such subversive sources as the documents of Vatican II, the weekly talks of Pope Paul VI, the same Pope's *Credo of the People of God*, and the Bible. So, of course, the Office of Religious Education wanted him silenced.

Various attempts in this direction failed, until in 1971 Fr. Weier did an absolutely unforgivable thing. He devoted some of his talks to the *General Catechetical Directory*, with its famous Addendum. The reader may recall that this Addendum dealt with first Communion and first Confession.

Sore subject! As soon as that document had been published, it was obvious that Rome was pulling the rug out from under the U.S. religious-education establishment, which had worked tirelessly to eliminate the Sacrament of Penance from American childhood. Bishop Reh's image was on the rocks, too, because he had backed up the establishment completely, making postponement of first Confession an official diocesan policy (contrary to the norms of Pope Pius X, set forth in the 1910 document *Quam Singulari*). Well, in these delicate circumstances, the Bishop was not about to allow some monk to criticize the Saginaw policy in public. Maneuvers were initiated to deny Fr. Weier's audience a regular meeting hall and even to secure Weier's removal from Saginaw by his Capuchin superiors.

Fr. John Gentner, the Director of Religious Education, confronted Fr. Weier with an alleged diocesan policy, according to which lectures such as his would have to be "coordinated" by Gentner's office and subject to his "approval." Whereupon Gentner flatly announced that such lectures would not be approved.

Never mind why — I'll get to that in a minute.

Had Fr. Weier been a less scrupulous priest, he might have gone ahead with his talks any way. But he took the rule of St. Francis very seriously: friars are not to preach in a diocese where the Bishop doesn't want them. He believed that his conduct ought not to give Gentner-and-company anything substantive to hold against him. So, he refused to go on without approval.

The hundreds of lay people who had profited from Fr. Weier's lucid talks were determined to fight, however. They confronted Gentner and refuted the "charges" which he advanced. To no avail. They

conducted a petition campaign and secured almost 1,500 signatures demanding that the Bishop allow the lectures to continue. To no avail. Appointments with Bishop Reh were continually denied. A large group finally went to the Chancery without an appointment, was seated by Beitz, the Bishop's secretary, and was firmly promised that the Bishop would see them, as soon as he came in. He came in and disappeared into his office; the group waited; and waited. "When will he see us?" they demanded of Beitz. "He'll see you; he'll see you." So they waited, and waited some more. Then one of the group noticed that the galoshes which the Bishop had been wearing when he came in, and which he left in front of his office door, had disappeared. Son of a Seacock! Bishop Reh had sneaked out the back way, leaving his laity to stew in his juice.

Now for the reason why. In reality, of course, Fr. Weier had to be silenced because he represented alternative education. He was a threat to the clique's monopoly. Period. But nothing so bald could be admitted in public. It was necessary to claim that Fr. Weier was undermining the Bishop's position in the diocese by publicly attacking his policy on first Confession. Unfortunately, the claim was not true. Fr. Weier had never attacked the experimental policy; indeed, he had never mentioned it. He had merely explained the preference presented in the Pope's Addendum. Complete tapes of his talks were offered to the Bishop and to Gentner to prove as much. Never mind. The tapes were never listened to. Once a charge has been manufactured, by God, it is going to stick.

How? How can something a man never said be held against him? The answer is contained in Bishop Reh's letter of June 23rd, 1972, to Fr. Weier's superior, Fr. Blaze Gitzen, O.F.M. Cap. With emphasis added, I quote:

"Fr. Weier asked me whether he could give his lectures again. I told him that if he gave lectures, I would expect that he not downgrade the official policy of the Bishop of this diocese regarding the reception of first Eucharist and Penance. . . . The policy of the diocese can be attacked also by silence, by not mentioning it and by lecturing on the disciplinary teaching of Pope Pius X. It can also be attacked or at least downgraded by only stressing the preference of the *General Catechetical Directory* for the pristine practice and not mentioning what it allows conferences of bishops to do. . . ."

You see? There is no way out (Even in Saginaw, silence does not give consent).

These have been three examples of what obviously are not rational reactions. The parents who bought their own textbooks and were going to do their own teaching at St. John's — they were no threat to anybody. Their children had been withdrawn from the established programs already. The aged Fr. Neubecker, giving classes to a handful of children in tiny, remote Beal City — he was no threat. And Fr. Weier had nothing remotely to do with the clique's kiddie empire. Yet all of them were crushed.

## HARDLY A 'SUBVERSIVE' GROUP

Overreaction, unreasonable hostility — these psychological mechanisms come into fullest play when the dissident priests and nuns are face to face with an organization known as Catholics United for the Faith (CUF). People in several parts of the Saginaw Diocese assured me that this CUF is some kind of "radical group."

One lady thought it might be Communist-inspired. Many had heard that its purpose was "to destroy the Church." The organizers of local CUF chapters in several parts of the diocese have received hate mail of the most astonishing sort. All of this, I think, is a measure of how peculiar a place Saginaw is. For in fact, Catholics United for the Faith is a member organization in good standing of the National Conference of Catholic Laity. The work of CUF was praised in glowing terms at a recent meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops by Archbishop McDonough of Louisville. Bishops, Archbishops, and even Cardinals have spoken at "forums" sponsored by this organization. Yet in Saginaw, the very mention of it seems to be verboten. Why? I talked to several officers of this group in the Saginaw area, to see whether they were cooking up any gigantic plots which might explain the hate-campaign that is being directed against them. And do you know what I discovered? Why, these sinister individuals were actually promoting a plan to have all the parishes of the diocese (are you ready?) consecrated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

No, the only thing that CUF has ever done, either locally or nationally, to annoy the sort of people who are defaming it in Saginaw is to publish several well-documented criticisms of the Sadlier series and other dubious forms of "catechetics." This, apparently, is an unpardonable offense.

We have been speaking of a Pavlovian response, an irrational hostility or paranoia on the part of the clique, which causes its members to overreact to anything they perceive as a challenge to their hegemony over Catholic education. But these psychological mechanisms would have little duration were they not strengthened by something else, namely, an invincible conviction of "professional superiority" or, if you will, an educational ideology.

2) Ideology — The years since Vatican II in the American Catholic Church are conventionally described as a time of theological uproar, of liturgical change, etc. These are shallow descriptions compared to a certain sociological reality: the post-conciliar years are precisely the period in which three or four publishing companies created a new, highly self-conscious professional class within the Roman Catholic Church. I call this class the pneumato-technologists — a class that proposes to use the social sciences, especially developmental psychology, to engineer results in the spiritual order.

Working hand-in-glove with a small number of neo-Modernist think tanks, like the Lumen Vitae group in Belgium, the publishers manufactured a "need" for new catechetical "methods" (which went under various names, such as "inductive method," "kerygmatic method," etc.). The companies propagandized assiduously in teacher-training workshops, CCD conventions, summer seminars for religious, NCEA conventions — in thousands of shop-talk gatherings to which neither the bishops nor the press ever paid the slightest attention. It was a heady time, during and after Vatican II: clever manipulation of the right slogans from the Council would empower a huckster to sell anything. The largest and most successful educational apparatus in the entire Catholic world was somehow convinced that its "methods" were worthless. Everything needed a radical "renewal," and true, authentic renewal needed glossy products from Sadlier and Benziger.

## METHOD OVER CONTENT

The secret of success was disarmingly simple. You see, the publishers and their hired experts told the school and CCD teachers exactly what they wanted to hear: namely, that we are just beginning to learn what a very difficult affair religious education is; that it (like any other kind of education) is impossible without "professional" training. This was honey to the palate because Catholic school officials had watched enviously throughout the '50s, as their secular counterparts made more and more of a clinical science out of teaching. Classically, you see, teachers were not very prestigious. The glamor went to the "scholars," and the ordinary "teacher" was little more than a middleman, passing on information (and underpaid at that). A Ph.D. in education was (and is) a joke to those with earned degrees from serious graduate faculties. But in time the teachers learned how to strike back. They would discover that "method" is more important than "content" and thus create a new science of which they were the sole practitioners (and beneficiaries). Now, thanks to Sadlier and friends, the benefits of the same revolution would come to the Catholic catechists — and at a very small price. The price? Yes, a simple matter of redefinition. The purpose of religious education had to be slightly changed, that's all. No longer a humble ministry of passing along doctrinal information, religious education must become a technique for producing the assent of the heart. Pneumatotechnology.

I hear the reader object. "Wait a minute, the assent of the heart comes from grace and free will. There is no technique to produce it. There can't be."  
 Yes, I know. But try making that objection to a typical Sister in Saginaw. You will get an answer like this:  
 "Grace? You don't even know what 'grace' means today; why, the theologians have given us beautiful, new concepts of this word. All you know is what you learned twenty years ago in that stupid Baltimore Catechism. We will never go back to teaching that stuff again. We have beautiful visions of this next generation, because we are helping the children to love and to grow as persons. So don't try to mess with our ministry. If the new series goes, the Sisters go, too."

Now there, of course, is the rub. These women are like an army of Carrie Nations, obsessed with an idea that makes them feel important. If you try to cross them, well, "Hell hath no fury. . . ." Bishop Reh could decree tomorrow morning that the Sadlier-Benziger-Paulist junk was to be banished from the diocese, but tomorrow afternoon he would have no school system.

This is a state of affairs so perverse that it takes a long time to sink in. The teaching Sisters active in Saginaw belong to about ten different Religious orders: Franciscans, Dominicans, School Sisters of Notre Dame, Felicians, etc. They are women whose entire lives are wrapped up in the Catholic religion, and yet — as we have seen Sr. Allen Thomas confess — they refuse to teach it to other people. Are they mad? Are they secret unbelievers? Not at all. The Sisters have simply been convinced that they should not teach the Catholic religion on religious grounds. I mean, they have been convinced that a quasi-clinical manipulation of personality a la Sadlier (pneumatotechnology) is better than a dogmatic content. And they have a vested interest in clinging to this belief against all contrary evidence, because they want to be teacher-professionals.

## MANIPULATION OF CHILDREN

One of the most brilliant books published in the last decade is Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (New York, Harper and Row, 1970). Revolutionary in the most dangerous sense of the term, it is must reading for any parent who is tired of having arrogant teachers try to manipulate the personality and values of his children. Listen to a few samples: "School is an institution built on the axiom that learning is the result of teaching. And institutional wisdom continues to accept this axiom, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. . . . We have all learned most of what we know outside school. Pupils do most of their learning without, and often despite, their teachers" (p. 42).

"School, by its very nature, tends to make a total claim on the time and energies of its participants. This, in turn, makes the teacher into custodian, preacher, and therapist. . . . The teacher-as-therapist feels authorized to delve into the personal life of his pupil in order to help him grow as a person. . . . The claim that a liberal society can be founded on the modern school is paradoxical. The safeguards of individual freedom are all concealed in the dealings of a teacher with his pupil. When the schoolteacher fuses in his person the functions of judge, ideologue and doctor, the fundamental style of society is perverted by the very process which should prepare for life" (pp. 45-6).

"Epidemics of insatiable worldly expectations have occurred throughout history. . . . The school-induced expectation of the kingdom, on the other hand, is impersonal rather than prophetic, and universal rather than local. Man has become the engineer of his own messiah and promises the unlimited rewards of science to those who submit to progressive engineering for his reign. "School is. . . the New World Religion" (pp. 65-6).

## REQUISCAT IN PACE

The totally destructive and constantly progressive nature of obligatory instruction will fulfill its ultimate logic unless we begin to liberate ourselves right now from our pedagogical hubris, our belief that man can do what God cannot, namely, manipulate others for their own salvation" (p. 73).

Illich's book builds to a devastating refutation of the central assumptions on which Saginaw's educational apparatus operates. And the irony is that Illich is an ex-monsignor, a Catholic radical of the left-most stripe. It is Illich's very radicalism which allows him to see the evil of technocratic manipulation and hence of the one-dimensional, consumer-contractive society which technocracy tries to perpetuate.

There is an element of genuine tragedy here. I have said a great many harsh things about Saginaw's young, dissident priests; but I also feel sorry for them. Many of them, I am sure, are intelligent men with some kind of literary culture. Surely, they could pick up a volume of the Sadlier high school series and recognize if for what it is: trivial, trite, anti-intellectual. They could pick up a book like Illich's and be convinced by it. But thinking such free and daring thoughts — where would it get them? Why, straight into a head-on collision with those dear, little dumplings, the Sisters. Years ago, the dissident priests allied their cause with the ambitions of schoolmarm and now, as in a bad marriage, they cannot escape the embrace of mediocrity. They broke the authority of pastors and gave power to ill-educated women who have turned out to be habit-less frumps and haridians. The simple fact is that the bishop

and his powerful-seeming bureaucrats, like Gentner, are captives. They can back up the educational apparatus, but they can't buck it. They can stare down dissatisfied parents, and they can terrorize pastors (I am told that Gentner has what amounts to a spy system for this very purpose), but they cannot rule the Sisters. These women are convinced that they are nothing less than engineers of a new humanity, and neither Pope nor prelate can persuade them to renounce the textbooks which support their absurd pretention.

Educational ideology, then, is a powerful factor in keeping traditional Catholicism out of the schools that were built to perpetuate it. But there is another factor, even more powerful.

3) Economics — The textbook publishers knew what they were doing. They went to the trouble of creating a new professional class in the Catholic Church for hard, dollars-and-cents reasons. I have alluded to the fact that they generated a demand for new "methods" in order to generate an enormous demand for their wares. But this is only the beginning. They cynically convinced the aspiring little pneumato-technicians that their latest "method" was really "it." Perfection. But they know that there is no such thing as an effective pneumato-technology; in fact, their profits depend on there not being such a thing. You see, a perfect catechetical method would be like a perfect Chevrolet. If they could make it, they wouldn't because if they did, who would buy the next year's model? No, an unchanging method, like an unchanging doctrine, is bad business.

## REQUISCAT IN PACE

Every four or five years, when school administrators are beginning to think that they have all the hardware they need, and when a publisher's books, manuals, workbooks, slides, LPs, filmstrips, etc., have exhausted the profit-making potential of one method, the industry starts to demythologize that method and promote a new one. Let's see, they've been through "kerygmatic" method and "process" method. "Experiential" method is now doing well. They see a great future in "values formation," and there's a lot to be said sales-wise for "pre-catechetical humanization," too, because as the Catholic market declines, they can hawk it to the Quakers.

Notice, please, that the new books, reflecting the new "methods," are getting less religious all the time. This is no accident. It is not simply the result of some Modernist inner-logic working itself out. No, it is the result of market forecasting. Across the Nation, Catholic schools are closing at a rate of at least one a day. The textbook publishers, planning in tandem with the national and diocesan school administrators, see secularization as the only solution to this problem. First, secularization might attract Federal, State, or foundation money. It might. But even if it doesn't it will have a second effect. It will make Catholic schools attractive to a new set of clients: non-Catholics looking for safe, relatively cheap, nonpublic schools.

Let's go back to that astonishing interview which Sr. Allen Thomas, principal of one of Saginaw's largest Catholic high schools, gave to the *Township Times*. Remember, she said that "religion courses in the Catholic schools are not what the general public might believe them to be." Now let's establish the context. It is a sales pitch. The article reads: "Although a Catholic institution, the high school attracts students of other faiths, which Sr. Allen interprets as proof of the need for educational choice. . . ."

"Sr. Allen pointed out that non-Catholic students attending Sts. Peter and Paul were not required to take religion courses, but noted that all but two or three have done so voluntarily. A twinkle in her eye, she mused, 'We haven't converted anyone yet.'" No, that's the whole point, and it's good business. What Sister said with a twinkle in her eye is a perfect epitaph for the Catholicity of the Saginaw Catholic school system. And given the power relationships in that unhappy diocese, it may become the epitaph for the whole, sorry show.

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