

## A Church of and for the Poor

It is a lovely spring morning in the inner city. The yellow forsythia has burst forth in blossom and the red-breasted robins are letting their presence be known. In this spring scene a little church nestles almost on the verge of the city sidewalk. I step into the sanctuary of worship that probably in a pinch could not accommodate more than a decade of baker's dozens of people.

I slide quietly into a pew, welcomed by friendly faces, all around me. The priests are leading their people in the ancient devotions of the earthly journey of the Man of Sorrows, through His Mother Mary to the Heavenly courts of the Father. The rhythm and the repetition of the rosary prayers are soothing to one's psyche. As the people enter, young and old, slip forward to light a candle at the feet of a plaster of Paris statue of our Lady, a cast off from another church. This is St. Raphael's Old Catholic Church, a family parish and so the figure of St. Joseph compliments that of the Blessed Virgin. One is slightly surprised by the snapping on of the six tall electric altar candles towering over the six natural wax votive candles. Then one also becomes conscious of the profusion of flowers - all being artificial. This is a congregation of the poor, where

beeswax candles and fresh flowers are luxuries that they can ill afford.

The hour has come, the vestry bell chimes and the Bishop and priests, resplendent in Eucharistic vestments enter. The processional hymn is sung by all lustily and loudly. This is followed by the gentle showers of the baptismal waters of the asperges and then the censuring of the altar and congregation, until all are immersed in a crucible of perfumed prayerful mist. The ministry of the word continues with a homily, during which nearly everyone present becomes involved. There are participating laughter and comments, and questions are fielded. Bishop and priests join the banter. While infants cry the homilist is speaking of the need to become childlike, emphasizing the play on words that the Aramaic language of Jesus portrays for child (Yalda) in the process of the new birth (yalid). A young Jewish woman responds that the words are the same in Hebrew. By now every pew is packed and there are people standing at the entrance of the temple.

Throughout the Intercessions and the Canon the organist plays softly, possibly as in Apostolic times (Col. 3:16). Then comes the great expressive act of solidarity, when the Our Father is said separately in English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Philippine, Portuguese,

Spanish, Sri Lankan, culminating in Latin, chanted by the Bishop. One senses that this truly is a House of Prayer for all Peoples. Every one approaches the altar in great reverence, receiving the Holy Elements by intinction and the babies and infants receiving the blessings of the chalice. All sense the power in the repetition of the priestly words "Corpus Christi".

In conclusion the Bishop holding his crosier reaches for the crucifix above the tabernacle and turning blesses the congregation and the world. Short notices for the week follow, and a welcome to all visitors. The clergy recess during the singing of the final hymn. The Bishop and priests stand in the narthex. The Agape is about to begin. A server hands out loaves of fresh whole wheat bread to each and everyone, who have participated in the Mass. It reminds one, but in a more practical way, of the prosphora distributed at the conclusion of the Orthodox Liturgy. This place has truly become a contemporary Bethlehem, a house of bread, all made possible by the kindness of a Polish neighbor. The people show openly their love for their Bishop and priests, kissing their hands and raising them to touch their foreheads. The congregation continues to spill out to the sidewalk and on to the streets. People are taking photos of families with their priests. Medals are

being blessed. Baptisms and weddings are being arranged.

In today's world this church is an anomaly. Packed to the doors and overflowing with all ages and conditions of humanity. They are a gathered congregation from all over the city. They come to participate in the Church's seven sacraments, culminating in the Feast of Faith, the Mass. They visit with their priests in their homes or around the kitchen table of the rectory. Admittedly in so many ways they are a church of the poor (anawim) with no trained choir, no church bulletins, no copier, no computer, no e-mail. They possess no parish hall, no Sunday School, no youth group, no women's auxiliary or men's group.

Neither is this a church that can afford to respond in knee-jerk reactions to every new fad or worldly trend. These are the poor. They worship to simply survive as human beings, from one Lord's Day to the next. They have accepted that they cannot as the children of God afford the luxuries of things and time of the middle-class. Most work at one or more menial occupations, some are between jobs, some retired, many are recent immigrants, the displaced, the refugee, the broken and the bruised. Their missionary outreach is to immediate neighbors or relatives and simply the people of the Beatitudes,

with all that it implies. The Son of Man taught us that the poor and unfortunate (anawim) are the sacrament of His presence, amongst all of us.

How does a church of the poor (anawim) like this survive, in the sophistication that exists in our society on the edge of the 21st century? It survives out of a collective felt need. These people (anawim) have a common bond with One who lived as a common carpenter, always just on the edge. In a sense they recognize as He did that they are the rejects of class, culture, country and creed. In their simplicity of necessity they have had to turn away from much of society's rituals, rules and regulations. They are bound together by the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53), whose commandment is "Love one another." They do not talk about forsaking the inner city, for where would they go? In the meantime they simply keep alive for all of us the spirit of springtime in today's Family of God.

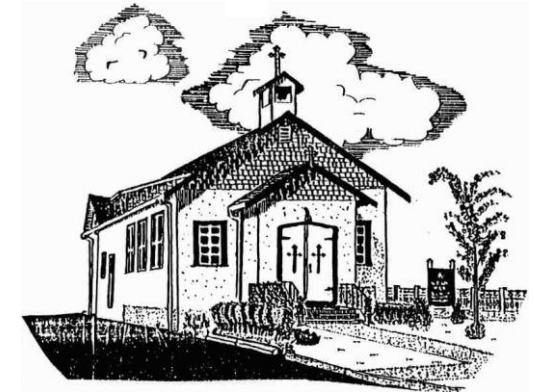
The Rt. Rev. Dr. L.M.McFerran Bishop
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**In Essentials - Unity  
In Non-Essentials - Liberty  
In All Things - Charity**

## The Anawim

### A Church of and for the Poor



St. Raphael's Church

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