

DEMOCRATIZING CLEVELAND CHAPTER 2: SEE, JUDGE, ACT

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Chapter 2

SEE, JUDGE, ACT:

The Founding of the Commission on Catholic Community Action.

The Church is called to demonstrate, by its own community life, that every person should be allowed to develop fully, precisely because he or she is a person. The Church is also called to be a social prophet and catalyst, protesting every injustice, offering reasons to hope and motives to serve.

*Empowerment: Skills for Parish Social Action, Harry Fagan, 1979*¹

The Commission on Catholic Community Action, the social action arm of the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, was critical to the launch of the community organizing movement. It, in turn, was the product of past activism, both inside and outside of the church.

Examples of this activism could be seen in the organizing on the east side that paved the way for the mayoral victory of Carl B. Stokes in 1967. The welfare rights movement began in Cleveland with a 1966 march from Cleveland to Columbus for higher benefits, sponsored by the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). The west side of Cleveland saw organizing by Active Clevelanders Together (ACT), the West Side Development Corporation, the West Side Citizens for Better Health Services, Low Income People Together, Citizens to Save Our Metro Health System, and the Tremont West Development Corporation. Groups such as WELCOME helped defuse the potential for violence stemming from the desegregation of Cleveland schools in 1979. All of these movements were beholden to the civil rights and anti-war movements that shattered the post-war complacency of the 1950s.

Catholic lay organizations such as the Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers, and the Christian Family Movement influenced the founders of the commission. Rev. Neil Conway was active in the Young Christian Students movement and the Christian Family Movement in Cleveland. He observed:

They brought a lot of social consciousness to people. They had a simple method: see, judge, and act. They would look at the gospel. They would look at social problems, and would figure out what to do about it.²

For Catholic activists, the 1960s began with the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church. It revolutionized how the church operated in the modern world. The reforms enacted by the Second Vatican Council opened up opportunities for Catholic social activists that previously would have been unthinkable.

Vatican II Comes to Cleveland

The Second Vatican Council (1963-65), better known as Vatican II, brought the Roman Catholic Church into the modern world. Vatican II legitimized political action in general and political action in the cause of social justice in particular. It changed the way the church operated relative to other religions by allowing the church to enter into ecumenical coalitions and efforts.

Vatican II opened up the hierarchy and was known as “the bishops’ council”. It gave the bishops of the church a much greater role in integrating church doctrine with practice, and it welcomed lay persons into the day-to-day functioning of the church, especially in writing documents on social problems.³

The bishops of the U.S. church took full advantage of these openings. In 1967, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops was formed. Between 1967 and the early 1990s, the conference issued more than 150 statements on social issues in the United States. This was unprecedented in church history. These statements did not speak in bland generalities; they were quite specific in their analysis of problems, and suggested solutions that inspired Catholic activists and legitimized their organizing within the larger community.

As much as Vatican II may have changed the church in Rome, change was far slower at the local level. Bringing Vatican II to Cleveland was a major struggle for liberal Catholics. Their struggle laid the foundation for the Catholic Commission.

An Underground Church

Much of the organizing that led to the formation of the Commission on Catholic Community Action (CCAC) was informal, and included liberal Cleveland area Catholics such as Rev. William Cosgrove, Rev. Neil Conway, and Harry Fagan. They began to meet in the mid-1960s for special Sunday Masses in the

basement of St. Henry's Catholic Church, an African-American parish on Cleveland's east side. They called themselves an "underground" church looking for ways to bring Vatican II to Cleveland.

One of the greatest challenges they would face was Cleveland's toxic racial atmosphere. Cleveland was then, and still is, one of the most segregated cities in the country. It had witnessed two major riots. Major battles were waged over segregation in schools and housing. In one incident, a young priest was run over and killed by a bulldozer while protesting the construction of a school that would reinforce school segregation.

The diocese of Cleveland responded to the challenge of racial injustice with the usual conservative timidity at which it was so adept. It allowed formation of a local chapter of the Catholic Interracial Council, which Rev. John LaFarge of New York City formed in 1934 to promote racial tolerance, but only on the condition that it call itself the St. Augustan Guild. When the national Interracial Council held a convention at John Carroll University in Cleveland, it did so without the endorsement of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese.

It was not until Edward Hoban, Bishop of the Diocese of Cleveland, died in 1966 and was replaced by Bishop Clarence Isenmann (1966-1974) that the local interracial council was able to shed its St. Augustan Guild trappings and become the Catholic Interracial Council of Cleveland. It was a step forward in a diocese that would have preferred to avoid the topic altogether. The council was barely founded before people concerned with racism began expressing further frustration with the diocese's timidity in dealing with racism in Cleveland and within the diocese.

Catholic activists repeatedly butted heads with the local church hierarchy over civil rights. They saw other dioceses take a leading role in confronting racism in their communities, but in Cleveland, Catholic leaders protested that they were addressing issues of racial justice through quiet diplomacy behind the scenes. The diocese defended itself by reminding its critics how explosive the issues were in the parishes of Cleveland, and protested that if it took a more forthright public stand, it would only make racial polarization worse and impede progress.

Critics responded that the church displayed little hesitation in telling husbands and wives how they could behave in the bedroom, and showed little timidity in defending its institutional interests. They demanded moral leadership that was unafraid of conflict in the cause of social justice and Christian values.

It wasn't until the administration of Bishop James Hickey (1974-80) that Catholic activists concerned about racism found a sympathetic ear in the chancery offices. Until then, they were on their own. They responded by organizing the Committee for a Council movement.

The Committee for a Council was formed in 1966. It was a lay organization of 150 members who proposed the establishment of a "little council" in the Cleveland Catholic Diocese to implement the policies of Vatican II. The committee worked for two-and-a-half months in early 1966 and produced a series of eight reports on

everything from Christian marriage to liturgy.

The report of the Committee for a Council was one of the most important policy documents in the history of the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland. The report cited as a problem the isolation from other races of the Catholic population, especially Catholic suburbanites. The report proposed the establishment of a diocesan office of urban affairs.

The report described the many failures of the church in dealing with racism, such as incidents of racial violence by parish members directed not only at African-Americans, but, in at least one case, at a priest trying to keep the peace. It criticized the training and orientation of priests, claiming that they were better trained for missionary work in foreign countries than for work in the inner cities of the U.S.

The committee addressed its reports to Bishop Isenmann, and sent along petitions in support of creating a council signed by approximately 10,000 parishioners. The response from the diocesan hierarchy was not warm. Rev. Bob Begin, a prominent figure in liberal Catholicism in Cleveland, recalled the bishop's response to the petition:

The bishop just wouldn't hear anything about it. In fact, he called a compulsory meeting of all the priests of the diocese and had in his hands the petition and threw it across the stage and said, 'Anybody who wants to talk to me, especially the priests, can come to my door and knock. They don't have to sign a petition.'⁴

The church was also profoundly divided over the war in Vietnam. One of the most vocal anti-war activists was Rev. Bob Begin. Begin's interest in the issue began with conversations he had with former students who had just returned from Vietnam. Again, as with the issue of racism, the diocese actively discouraged Catholic peace activists. In 1967, when Begin tried to form a branch of the Catholic Peace Movement, Bishop Isenmann told him to take the word "Catholic" out of it, saying, "This is not a Catholic peace movement. This is your peace movement."

Peace activists, including Begin, made common cause with the broader reform movement in the Cleveland church, as is evident in a statement issued by the Cleveland Catholic Peace Movement on April 10, 1968. In it, the group stated that in spite of official pronouncements on social justice and race relations, the Catholic laity was largely uninvolved in the issues of the day. The task of changing this situation fell to Catholic activists, who found themselves isolated in their parishes.⁵

The year 1968 was spent by Catholic peace activists, promoting educational programs aimed at the Catholic community of Cleveland, even soliciting the involvement of the clergy in a Vietnam Sunday program in October. With the escalation of both the war and the movement against it, there was a feeling among activists that more dramatic actions were called for, and they split from the Cleveland Catholic Peace Movement, to form a new group, Christians Who Care.

In other cities, Catholics were interrupting Masses, demanding that the church address the issue of Vietnam. Begin and Rev. Bernard Meyer disagreed with this tactic. They settled on another tactic: They decided to hold a peace mass at St. John Cathedral, the home church of the diocese on January 26, 1969. Begin described the thinking behind the action,

Our assumption was that once a Mass had started, no one would dare interrupt it because that's a sin. Our assumption was wrong, so not only did they interrupt it, but they brought the police in and arrested us.⁶

The arrest of Begin and Meyer at St. John Cathedral was one of the most famous anti-war events in Cleveland during the 1960s. The actions of the Cleveland police and the Catholic Diocese created as much controversy as the act itself. There were charges that reporters were roughed up by the police and that one priest stepped on the consecrated host after it had been knocked from Begin's hands. The arrests of Begin and Meyer were looked upon by many as a gross overreaction on the part of the diocese. Begin and Meyer were suspended from the priesthood, further fueling the charges of diocesan overreaction. The hierarchy of the church made Begin and Meyer instant heroes of the local anti-war movement.

The events of January 26 generated responses to the arrests within the peace movement and in the Catholic Interracial Council of Cleveland. A leader of the Cleveland Catholic Peace Movement criticized the overreaction of the diocese, but also denounced Meyer's and Begin's recklessness that threatened to undermine moves being made by the diocese to meet demands of church reformers.

One of the most noteworthy statements issued in response to the incident came from the Catholic Interracial Council of Cleveland whose board unanimously passed a resolution on January 28 that was sympathetic to the mission of Christians Who Care. The board of the council criticized the tactics of Christians Who Care, but expressed an understanding of the frustration that drove the tactics. The board stated:

We agree with many parts of the statement issued by Christians Who Care. We agree that the diocese of Cleveland has not effectively addressed itself to the role of racism in the white community and in the church. We agree that the church, its officials and members have not treated the problems of the poor with the urgency that they deserve.⁷

The council gave credit to those reformers within the church, but noted that they were still a minority who had received minimal support within the church hierarchy. This caused one of the board members who had not been present at the board vote, to resign in protest, but the resignation did not deter the interracial council from holding firm to its stand. It expressed hope that the diocese would get

serious about the concerns of the council.

Frustration was the daily fare of liberal Catholics in the 1960s. Social change is never realistic or practical until it happens. The problem is that those promoting it often fail to recognize the evidence of their successes. Those who were fighting for reform, who represented the anti-war movement and the Catholic Interracial Council and the Committee for a Council, were starting to move the mountain of the local diocesan hierarchy. Probably their greatest accomplishment was the creation of the Catholic Commission. In contrast to past diocesan equivocation and timidity, it was founded on a call for a total response to the challenge of social injustice in Cleveland.

A Total Response: Founding the Commission

Auxiliary Bishop William Cosgrove found himself in the middle of the controversy over the arrests of Begin and Meyer. Begin and Meyer had told him ahead of time about plans for the St. John anti-war Mass. Bishop Cosgrove told them he wished they wouldn't do it because his efforts at reform were starting to bear fruit. He had commissioned a diocesan study by Rev. Dan Reidy, an Akron based priest who was an expert in urban affairs and who would be an early leader of the Commission on Catholic Community Action. Reidy's proposal for a Catholic commission was due to be released in just weeks.

Cosgrove was probably deeply embarrassed by the protest Mass at St. John, because he had announced on January 17 that he would appear at a February 2 forum sponsored by the Cleveland Catholic Peace Movement on the fourteen Milwaukee protesters who had been jailed for burning draft records. This could not have strengthened his position within the diocese. First, he had to deal with the turmoil swirling around the January 26 anti-war Mass, then the release of the founding document of the commission proposing the organization that would be his greatest legacy.

The founding document of the commission was prepared by Rev. Dan Reidy. Cosgrove had noticed Rev. Reidy during the recent riots in the Opportunity Park neighborhood of Akron. Building on his past history of anti-poverty activism in the neighborhood, Reidy had played an honest broker role between the community and the city administration when rioting broke out in response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968.

Cosgrove met with Reidy, who at the time was working at the Department of Urban Affairs at the University of Akron and was completing a doctoral degree at the University of Pittsburgh. He asked Reidy to do a study of the parishes in the Cleveland diocese, focusing on how they fit into the surrounding neighborhoods and how the diocese could address the issues and problems plaguing the city. The recommendations of the document that Reidy produced led to the founding of the Commission on Catholic Community Action.

In the February 12, 1969, proposal, the argument for the establishment of the commission was made:

The contemporary crises in American social life need no elaborate analysis here. We have all been witnesses in recent months and years to the great social evils in our national life and our international relations. Our own community has been ravaged by violence, hatred, and great social inequities. Our seeming inability to resolve these great social problems has led to widespread public confusion and much social disruption. We are told, 'America has lost its way'; 'The churches are irrelevant'.⁸

Reidy itemized examples of social failure in continuing poverty, deteriorating neighborhoods and racial strife. He then issued a call to action.

The time for words has ended. The time for education as our sole major effort has ended, the time for patchwork approaches to inadequate jobs and inadequate housing has ended. We will no longer be part of a half-hearted effort to show our love to our brothers in need. Rather, the problems of human and social blight must be approached with an immediacy, an urgency that means TOTAL RESPONSE.⁹

The document declared the establishment of the Commission on Catholic Community Action (CCCA). The commission would cooperate with all efforts for social justice, evaluate the performance of diocesan institutions "to see that they are measuring up to their fullest capacity to meet the problems of social indignity," and most important, "the Commission will also function as a catalyst to the larger community."

In founding the commission, Reidy wanted a clean break for the new organization with a large role for the laity in the governing board. Cosgrove, was pushing from the other direction to gain the cooperation of traditional institutions, such as Catholic Charities and the Catholic school system, to make the commission work. As Rev. Begin had learned after his protest Mass at St. John Cathedral, one did not get very far making frontal assaults against the church. The work had to be done from the inside of the organization if it were to get anywhere, a lesson Cosgrove knew well. This grated against Reidy's irreverence towards Church bureaucracy.

The document outlined the commission's organizational structure. The formal organization gave it the benefits of being both within the diocese and possessing enough independence to maintain the flexibility of its movement origins. Decisions on the programs and direction of the commission were to be made in internal standing committees and in independent and permanent task forces. Within the task forces, the

legacy of the old organizations, such as the Committee for a Council and Christians Who Care, was apparent. Proposed task forces covered the entire panoply of issues, from crime and law enforcement to neighborhoods and social services.

The task forces were unique because they were independent of the commission, yet existed alongside it. The commission wanted the task forces to be free-wheeling centers for give-and-take and experimentation. They were not constrained by being a formal part of the commission or under the control of the church. Both the hierarchy and the task forces found comfort in this arrangement.

One of the greatest assets of the early commission was the unique synergy that existed within its founding staff. The figures who were most powerful in setting the direction of the commission were Auxiliary Bishop William Cosgrove, Rev. Dan Reidy and Harry Fagan. Cosgrove's longtime friends Rev. Neil Conway and Charles Murray joined them. Early in the commission's history, Conway and Murray became active in criminal justice issues, rather than the community organizing activities that dominated the work of Fagan and Reidy. All the same, they were influential in the commission and had come up through the grassroots with Fagan and Cosgrove in building a liberal Catholic constituency within the church hierarchy.

Cosgrove was the father figure, protector, and spiritual mentor of the commission. Reidy was its intellectual, theoretician, and strategist. Fagan was the commission's salesperson and public relations person.

Auxiliary Bishop William Cosgrove thrived in the atmosphere created by Vatican II. He was committed to social justice before Vatican II legitimized it. His first experience with activism was union organizing, when he helped organize custodial workers in the county hospital system. Cosgrove and Neil Conway were also active in the organizing drive to unionize the custodial staff of St. Luke's Hospital in the 1960s.¹⁰

Conway described Cosgrove as a Dorothy Day/Catholic Worker type of ascetic. Cosgrove played a unique role in the church, which made him indispensable in the founding of the commission. According to Reidy:

Cosgrove was the protector of it. He was the head person. Everyone realized that the commission was his baby. He made sure that it had a high and positive profile in the Catholic bureaucracy. He got funding for it. He allowed it to grow, and during the time we were connected, it kept growing with size and influence.¹¹

Cosgrove was wise enough to give his managers the freedom to run the commission. Bishop Cosgrove was a loyal member of the institutional church, and he knew how to operate in that setting. He did not favor criticism of the church hierarchy, and he would tell critics that they (the church hierarchy) have their job, and we have ours.¹² His role as an organization man of the traditional church and

his attention to traditional religious duties enabled Cosgrove to sell the idea of the commission to a church hierarchy that had heretofore resisted similar such efforts as too radical. Rev. Reidy said of Cosgrove:

By the force of energy, he was able to get these things done. He was well liked beforehand. He was a very social guy. He was an athlete. He was a golfer, he played baseball, handball. He was well liked by the clergy. Even clergy who weren't interested in social justice liked him as a person. So when he'd be leaning on them to do something, they remembered the guy they played golf with who was one of the boys.¹³

According to Reidy, Cosgrove's passion was social justice. He recalled:

He was a very courageous person and was strongly committed to doing something positive in social justice. He saw the CCCA as a vehicle to do that. These programs weren't service programs. He saw them as prophetic acts, like the Old Testament prophets. What we were to do was to do some courageous prophetic acts.¹⁴

Cosgrove was not particularly interested in community organizing, Reidy said:

He wasn't interested in community organizing for its own sake or changing government. But he allowed those of us who thought it was a good way to promote social justice to do it, and protected us from criticism and attack.¹⁵

Also important in Cosgrove's ability to act was the support he received from Bishop James Hickey (1974 to 1980). In 1974, Hickey succeeded Bishop Issenmann, whose main contribution to the founding of the commission was to leave it alone and to give Cosgrove a free hand.

Hickey offered active support. The commission was unique within the American Catholic church. For Hickey, it was a source of pride, and he regularly promoted it in meetings of the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops. At these gatherings, he would bring along Cosgrove and Fagan and have them describe the work of the commission. According to Neil Conway, having Hickey in charge of the diocese was a stroke of supreme good luck for the commission in its infancy.

Rev. Dan Reidy became one of the intellectual architects of not only the commission, but of the entire strategy that would launch the community organizing movement with Project Interface and the Buckeye Woodland Community Congress. Reidy's contributions are largely unknown to all but the earliest veterans of the era. He left Cleveland and the church in 1976, and his reputation was rapidly eclipsed by Fagan's.

Reidy grew up in the western suburbs of Cleveland and took an early interest in the civil rights movement. He volunteered at Karamu House, the African-American cultural center on the east side of Cleveland, while going to school. From 1965 to 1969, he lived in Akron, doing graduate work at the Center for Urban Studies at the University of Akron. While in Akron, he lived in the African-American neighborhood of Opportunity Park and was active in War on Poverty programs in the neighborhood.

The first person to serve as executive director of the commission soon left the position. Reidy was his replacement. While no one doubted Reidy's ability to offer the commission a vision or initial strategy, he did not receive rave reviews as a manager.

Reidy could be abrasive. He was almost anti-clerical in his attitudes, and he had little regard for the church hierarchy. Fagan thought Reidy was an ineffective Lone Ranger. Conway said Reidy would provide finances and analysis, but for support, you went to Cosgrove.

The relationship between Cosgrove and Reidy was that of a mentor and a brilliant student. The relationship between Reidy and Fagan was much more complex, with hints of sibling rivalry. Those who witnessed the relationship either said that it was warm and close, or that there was conflict between the two. There was mention of Reidy starting to feel jealous of Fagan's meteoric rise within the commission.

While Reidy gave the early commission intellectual integrity and vision, he was not the one to carry that to the larger community. A salesperson was needed, and that salesperson was Fagan. Fagan was a native Clevelander whose family ran bars and restaurants. At the time he became active in church organizing, he was working in the advertising department of the Plain Dealer and living in University Heights with his family. In trying to describe how Harry became Harry, his friend Neil Conway explained that you had to understand that Harry was raised behind a bar.¹⁶ Gregarious, fun loving, a renowned conversationalist, Fagan was intensely interested in people. The social skills he possessed were made to order for the work he would perform for the commission.

He was very successful at advertising, but it did not fit in with his real interests. Working for the commission did because it involved him with his passion, which was people. He did not consider working for the commission to be work. It was fun. Along with the idealism and the enjoyment of working with people, Fagan was driven by other desires. He wanted to be somebody. He wanted his life to have a greater purpose than just selling ads. And, most prophetically, he was convinced that he would not live long. He told people that longevity did not run in his family. Both his father and grandfather had died young. He would ask people who were close to him, "What would you want to do if someone told you that you only had six months to live?"¹⁷

Genes aside, his lifestyle did not favor a long life. Fagan, according to Conway,

was a bohemian. He loved to party, he drank too much, he chain smoked cigarettes, he had a horrible diet, he hung out at jazz clubs, and he was a workaholic. When he assumed supervisory duties at the commission after Reidy's departure, he said that what he was looking for in a staff person was a "workaholic with values who liked to have a couple of beers after work as well."¹⁸ An informal group of Catholic activists that Fagan was a part of was called Beer and Bibles. Participants combined scriptural readings and discussions with what could only be called a happy hour. When the commission was underway with its first burst of organizing, Fagan hosted socials at the bar his parents founded in the Flats, Fagan's, where staff from the commission and organizers could meet informally, discuss their work, and kick around ideas for future campaigns.

Above all, his talents were as a salesperson. Holly Gigante, a Catholic nun who worked for the early commission, described Fagan's skills:

He knew what result he wanted, which an organizer often does. You have a trick in each pocket and you know what you want to get. What you want is the group to take ownership and make some decisions. You wanted the impetus. You want people to leave with homework and know what they're doing.¹⁹

Action for a Change: The Commission's First Great Success

With a structure and a staff in place, the Catholic Commission needed an initial project that would put it on the map of Cleveland institutions. That project was Action for a Change. It was an experiential education project focused on Cleveland parishes whose members would attend a series of educational forums and discussion groups designed to explore the many social issues that were foremost on the public agenda at the time. The program was in six parts, each taking on a new subject, such as housing, jobs, welfare.

Program organizers tried to follow the methodology of Paulo Freire, the renowned Brazilian educator, social activist, and critic. Freire based his educational philosophy on dialogue between educators and those being educated. The educator did not lecture: He or she worked with students. Lessons came from examining the lived experience of those involved. The goal of the process was action to make change, enhance community, and build social capital.²⁰

A priority of the program was racism. The program focused on giving white, suburban, middle class people a taste of the realities that inner city poor people were experiencing. The seminars were held throughout the city and were televised on the local public television affiliate, WVIZ. Between 5,000 and 10,000 people went through the experience. Fagan explained:

We were trying to say, we don't care where you come in on that conversation. The point is there's something wrong. No matter what issue you look at, people get screwed. You've got to go one step deeper.²¹

A key part of the experience was field trips and exercises, such as filling out a form to apply for welfare benefits. These exercises put people into contact with the daily problems faced by residents of the inner city.

It also made the commission a place where people came for help in combating social problems and injustices ranging from housing discrimination to the redlining of inner-city neighborhoods. It provided institutional cover and resources to Cleveland activists wanting to organize a grassroots response to the many problems of a troubled city.

As Cleveland moved into the 1970s, it possessed in the Commission on Catholic Community Action what it had not seen since the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s or the African-American churches of the 1950s and 60s: an institutional launching pad for social change activism.

The stage was now set for launching a movement.