



Sun photo—Irving Phillips  
REV. RONALD BELSCHNER  
... leaving St. Gregory's

# Priest found 'lot of great things' in ghetto parish

By WELDON WALLACE

Masses at St. Gregory the Great, Catholic Church each Saturday and Sunday attract about 200 young people under the age of 18—many of them non-Catholic, the pastor estimates. Youths make up half the congregation, said the Rev. Ronald W. Belschner.

His church, at Baker and Gilmore streets, is in a West Baltimore neighborhood where the economic level is low and the crime rate high. The type of housing forces people, in the priest's words, "to live in each other's arm open spaces."

"In the early 1970's, this neighborhood was one of the top 10 drug-infested areas in the country," according to Father Belschner.

There, however, St. Gregory's has been a stabilizing influence. Along with its troubles, the priest found "a lot of great things" about the neighborhood.

Shortly, Father Belschner is to leave St. Gregory's to become pastor of All Saints Church, a racially mixed parish on Liberty Heights avenue. For all his feelings about moving, he feels St. Gregory's now may be ready for another kind of leadership.

Meanwhile, as for its next pastor, "if he grows as much as I did, he will be a better person for it."

Ron, as he is called by almost everyone, remembers when "the street kids" had no such warm feelings for the church as they manifest today. The teen club of St. Gregory's, he said, was "very cliquish." Its members cherished their status and liked to certify their membership by carrying CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) cards.

The members had special privileges, such as discounts at parish dances, and "that offended the street kids."

Shortly after Father Belschner became associate pas-

tor in 1969, the club simply fell apart. "And that gave it a chance to start all over again."

Father Belschner, now 37, had had no experience in the inner city nor in working with black people, who make up the congregation at St. Gregory's. He had come to Baker street from St. Mark's in Catonsville, a parish of 10,000 members.

The whole ministry was different, he explained, for St. Gregory's had "an important community role" to fill, and the service it gave was not limited to the parish census. Instead of the 400 people who attend mass, Father Belschner has, in an a practical sense, 44,000 people to serve—the population of that neighborhood.

Getting elected officials interested in helping the community has proved exceedingly difficult. The neighborhood has few registered voters, so "politicians don't re-

spond" to its needs. In turn, the lack of political response discourages people from registering to vote. "It's a vicious circle."

The priest's first efforts to win trust and confidence were directed toward breaking down "buffers," which, he said, traditionally isolate a priest from his people.

At his instigation the parish rented a three-story row house on Warwick avenue and turned it into a community center. A neighborhood improvement association was formed, a teen club organized. Tutoring was started, and to help people get jobs, employers were invited in.

Father Belschner became pastor, the sole priest on the staff, a year after his arrival at St. Gregory's—and he found himself the lone tenant in a rectory of 21 rooms.

So he moved into the community, first taking an apartment and then a row house. Today the rectory serves a

community function as a center for alcoholics.

"A rectory," explained Father Belschner, "is a buffer." Moving out of that special place and becoming a resident of the community like everyone else helped promote his relations with the neighborhood, he found.

The very title "Father" was another buffer. He did not suggest to people that they stop using the title, but he formed the habit of identifying himself as "Ron," so it became natural for them to answer in kind.

As for young people, they have become organized into 10 units, geared to different ages and interests.

The Young Brothers and Young Sisters are boys and girls from 8 to 12.

Pamojan, an African word that means "being together," is for 13-to-15-year-olds. The See BELSCHNER, C2, Col. 4

# Departing priest found 'great things' in parish

BELSCHNER, from C1  
Shades of Soul number youths 16 to 18.

Other units are a Karate Club, two basketball teams, the Baltimore Minstrels, a dance group, and two groups with a religious tone, the Servers and the Candle Carriers.

"Servers" assist the priest and are not called "altar boys."

"The word 'boy' is off limits here," explained 18-year-old Clinton Tate, vice president of St. Gregory's parish council.

Discussing Father Belschner's approach, young

"I knew I was accepted," recalled Father Belschner, "when I would say to someone, 'If you see so-and-so, tell him I want to see him, and in five minutes he'd be there.'"

Pinball play-off  
Ocean City (Special) — After a record-breaking 80 hours and 31 minutes, two pinball players, one of them

Tates said that "he always has time to talk to you. If you have a problem, he takes the time even if it's five minutes before mass."

"His house is open to all of us, and he makes us feel like we're at home. He's close to all of us."

Father Belschner said that in working in the city, "you have to deal with yourself."

He realized that he had "unconscious racism" in not being able to tell black people apart. "I knew I'd better start looking and seeing. I began to change my vocabulary so that I would not continue verbal racism by equating the word black with bad and white with God's life."

"I knew I was accepted," recalled Father Belschner, "when I would say to someone, 'If you see so-and-so, tell him I want to see him, and in five minutes he'd be there.'"

Pinball play-off  
Ocean City (Special) — After a record-breaking 80 hours and 31 minutes, two pinball players, one of them

Pinball play-off  
Ocean City (Special) — After a record-breaking 80 hours and 31 minutes, two pinball players, one of them