

He'll go to Vatican

Rev. Higgins leaves St. Pius for theology, canon law study

By MARY RODA
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This Sunday, parishioners at St. Pius X Catholic Church will say a bittersweet goodbye to Rev. Michael Higgins, associate pastor at the Chula Vista church.

The priest has accepted an opportunity to study moral theology and canon law at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., followed by more study at Gregorian University in Rome, with some "practical work" thrown in at the Vatican.

THE WORK will groom Father Higgins to help with revisions in the church's canon law, rules regulating church worship which have not been changed since 1917, and it will also signal the beginning of his career in Catholic hierarchy.

Both laymen and clergy who work closely with the priest are not surprised by official recognition of his abilities. He has the driving force, intelligence and dedication that makes him successful both as a minister to his people and as a theologian.

Rev. Higgins has an uncanny feeling for change in the church, but he also sees the validity and solidness in Catholic Church teachings. He is expressive when he talks about the "crisis" in organized religion.

"There have been turmoil and 'crisis' in the Catholic church," he admitted, "but I think we're going to come out with a much greater church."

AS A CANON LAW specialist, Rev. Higgins will be at the heart of the change.

"We're looking forward to a terrific renewal going on in the church," the priest declared. "As I see it, the law must take a different approach."

Instead of leveling widespread rules governing specific areas, the clergyman advocates general principles which would leave practical application up to the bishop and local clergy.

"In some cases, clergy have come to disregard the law," Rev. Higgins noted. "It's not out of disrespect, but priests realize the law is 55 years old."

AN EXAMPLE of a problem that could crop up, he said, might be the case of parents who want a non-Catholic to be the sponsor of their child in baptism.

Even if a non-Catholic couple would be the legal guardians of a Catholic youngster, Rev. Higgins observed, present Church law prevents them from becoming the religious guardians of that child.

The 1917 laws are not intended to serve the educated congregations that exist today, the priest remarked.

"People want to observe the law in a more positive sense," he explained. "They want to do things on their own. It's a response of love rather than out of fear, which the law often brings about."

The church has experienced a "separation between theology and law," Rev. Higgins stated. "They should both help to build the church, and too often they are going in opposite directions."



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REV. MICHAEL HIGGINS LEAVES PIUS X
Priest will study in Washington and the Vatican.

ALTHOUGH Father Higgins would like to see some changes made, he is critical of the "prophets of doom" who have predicted the end of organized religion, especially the Catholic Church.

"I think they have been very unfair to the church," he insisted. "You aren't going to solve problems by leaving it. You need institutions to change institutions. And I haven't noticed any drop in church attendance."

In cases where Catholics seriously disagree, on moral grounds, with a church teaching, such as birth control, a church member may follow his conscience as long as he gives the matter serious thought and prayer, the priest indicated.

"I'm not advocating situation ethics," Rev. Higgins emphasized, "or a morality that is completely subjective for every act," but there are cases when an individual honestly cannot accept something the church teaches.

THE MOST important point is allowing room in church law for

the "operation of the spirit," he explained. "To lay down a definite plan would be to rely too much on academics rather than the supernatural."

For example, Rev. Higgins added, 25 years ago, "who would ever believe Catholics and Protestants would pray together for peace?"

Eventually, he said, all churches will unify, "but I don't know whether we'll see it in our lives or not."

The priest has been active in the Chula Vista Ministerial Assn., and he served as president of the group last year.

The group can "tackle some of the problems in the community," he noted, while the ministers of various denominations learn more about their differences and their similarities.

"I RECEIVED a greater understanding of Protestantism through the ministerial association than I ever got from Protestant theology courses in the seminary," the priest said. "It helped break down barriers and fears with regard to other clergy."

Ministers encounter many of the same problems, he noted, and association in a group can help the movement toward unification.

"The ecumenical movement is very important," Rev. Higgins asserted. "There's so much work to be done churches can no longer be fighting among themselves."

The priest, a native of Ireland who was ordained in San Diego in 1964, admits that he will miss parish work, even though he has an important mission to perform renewing church law.

"I really like Pius X," Father Higgins said. "I'll miss working with people, and I'm fond of Father (James) McGinley. He's a wonderful pastor and he gave me great freedom to develop different programs. He really lived the philosophy of co-responsibility."

Reception scheduled for Higgin's farewell

Members of St. Pius X Church, Chula Vista, will hold a reception for Rev. Michael Higgins from 7 to 9 p.m. Sunday in the parish hall.

Father Higgins is returning today from a three-week vacation before he begins studies in canon law and moral theology in Washington, D.C., and in Rome, Italy.

The priest, who also served at St. Rose of Lima Church, Chula Vista, after he was ordained in 1964, was president of the Chula Vista Ministerial Assoc. last year.