

The Holy Name Society

THE HOLY NAME SOCIETY - A SODALITY

WHEN I first became a Catholic, at the end of 1955, I was in St Agatha's Parish of Pennant Hills. Father Maurice Martin was a very go-ahead parish priest from the Shamrock Isle. Among his apostolic strategies were the lay groups called sodalities. These were parish organizations which gave the support of social solidarity to the faithful for Sunday Mass and the sacramental life of monthly Confession and often weekly devout Holy Communion.

At Pennant Hills in 1956 and 1957, there were three sodalities: the **Holy Name Society** for men and boys, with a Mass on the second Sunday of a month; the **Women's Sacred Heart Sodality**, on the first Sunday; and the **Children of Mary**, for the girls, on the third Sunday. In some parishes like Harris Park in 1965-66 the Catholic Youth Organization had the early Mass on the fourth Sunday, and then went on a picnic.

The Holy Name and the Sacred Heart sodalities had so many members that they formed a solid block for most of the church at their monthly 7 a.m. Mass on their respective Sundays. The Children of Mary and the Catholic Youth Organization were not as big.

On their respective Sundays, these groups returned to church for evening devotions — of Rosary, Litany, Sermon and Benediction — and others came, too.

Don't imagine that the sodalities split up or weakened or neglected family unity — on the contrary, the thing I most noticed in Catholic preaching and pastoral practice was the persistent stress on marriage and family.

At Pennant Hills, on Holy Name Sundays, the only space remaining for women and children at the early Mass was at the far back of the church, so full was the rest of it packed with men and boys. The Holy Name members sat in groups of about a dozen or so, each taking up two or three pews, and with their banner on a pole, proclaiming their saint, e.g. St Dominic, St Francis, etc. Each group had a prefect, who marked the roll, and who later on tactfully chased up those missing, and recruited new members.

In those halcyon days, there were no evening Masses on Saturday or Sunday. In Australia, evening Masses were confined to weekdays, and the fast before Holy Communion was three hours. At Pennant Hills, as I recollect it, there was a second Mass about 9 a.m., and a third Mass at St Joachim's, Thornleigh. This third Mass necessitated a permanent "supply" from the now extinct Pennant Hills Redemptorist Fathers, monastery and novitiate. Sometimes, the parish priest went to Thornleigh and the visiting priest to Pennant Hills. The Redemptorist Monastery housed the missionaries, who went out, two by two, for the intense parish renewals called a Parish Mission, which might last a week or a fortnight. Each parish was obliged to have a mission every three years.

POPE ST PIUS X

THE SODALITIES of the mid-1950s were implementing" a pastoral strategy set by Pope St Pius X. He not only restored first Holy Communion to seven year olds in 1907, but earlier on, in 1905, had restored frequent Holy Communion.

It is hard to realize now that, in medieval times, Catholics usually received Holy Communion only once a

year, on Easter Sunday, preceded by their annual Confession, even though they went to Mass every Sunday, and often on weekdays, too, and besides, there were so many Holy Days of Obligation that employers complained against the Church giving workers so many holidays. A legacy of this perdures in the 2nd and 3rd Precepts of the Church, binding us to an annual Confession (for those in mortal sin) and an Easter Season Holy Communion. See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2042, and the *Catholic Family Catechism Disciples' Edition II* p. 98.

Thus another feature of the sodalities was their monthly Confession, on the Saturday afternoon or evening, to prepare for Holy Communion the next day. Of course, many of the faithful went to Holy Communion every Sunday, and some to evening devotions when-ever they were on. But the sodalities were a support for the less fervent. "I came not to call the virtuous, but sinners" — a warning for the Pharisees.

There were three further characteristics of a Holy Name Society monthly Mass: the Pledge; the prayers after Holy Communion; and the badge.

HOLY NAME PLEDGE

The Holy Name pledge was recited at the end of the sermon, and (I think) before the Creed. That was prior to 1965, when there was no Prayer of the Faithful.

The priest asked all the men and boys to stand, and to raise their right hands, like taking an oath in court, and repeat the phrases after him.

The original was less grammatical, and switched from addressing Christ directly to a declaration about Him, from 2nd to 3rd person. The version here is p. 97 in the *Catholic Family Catechism Disciples' Edition*, on the 2nd Commandment:

I BELIEVE, O Jesus, that Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

I believe all the sacred truths

that the Holy Catholic Church believes and teaches.

I proclaim my love for Thy Vicar on earth, the Pope.

I promise to give good example

by the regular practice of my faith.

In honour of Thy Divine Name

I pledge myself against perjury, blasphemy,

profanity and obscene speech.

I pledge my support for all lawful authority,

both civil and religious.

I dedicate my manhood to Thy Sacred Name, O Jesus,

and beg Thou keep'st me faithful

to these pledges until death.

This Pledge enshrined one of the central aims of the sodality, to honour the Holy Name of Jesus against its **profanation** in daily speech, especially in the work places of men. Shame on us for abandoning it!

Note the four items "perjury, blasphemy, profanity and obscene speech". **Obscene speech** is swear words, or coarse and crude language unworthy of the lips and minds of communicants. Such words are not sinful in themselves, but uttering them can be a failure in the edification we owe our neighbour. Further, they often lead on to dirty stories, which in turn weaken resistance to impure thoughts, words and deeds, at least, for some of those who tell or hear them

Careless attitudes to imperfections, and associated venial sins, lead on to worse venial sins, such as **profanity**. Profanity is the irreverent use of the Holy Name of Jesus, or God, or the Holy Spirit.

Falling little by little on the slippery slide with the Gadarene swine, profanity can pave the way for grave sins of **blasphemy**, which is cursing God, and **perjury**, which is calling on God as a witness to a lie.

When I became assistant priest at Ryde late in 1967, the liturgical changes and the multiplicity of Masses and the pace of life were working against the sodalities. The monthly Holy Name Mass was only kept going by the zeal of a local lay apostle — and it was becoming difficult for the priest to persuade the men and boys in the congregation to stand up for the Pledge. On one occasion, particular inspiration was given me to announce, "Men and boys please stand - only women and girls seated." That did the trick...

PRAYERS AFTER HOLY COMMUNION

After Holy Communion, the priest led the men and boys in the Holy Name prayers — short Acts of Faith, Hope, Charity, Thanks, Praise, Adoration, Petition, Sorrow, Humility, and so on. The rest of the congregation also joined in. See *Book News* n. 42 for leaflet *Prayers Before and After Mass*.

THE HOLY NAME BADGE

There was also the distinctive Holy Name badge, with the XP monogram for *Christ* in Dominican black and white. A goodly number of university students wore it. It was a good talking point with non-Catholics: X & P for the Greek Ch & ρ.

EVENING DEVOTIONS

A feature of the evening devotions for the Holy Name Society, at least as I experienced it, was "pulpit swapping". The Irish priests were adepts at it: Father Martin would announce that he had "at long last, managed to procure the presence of Father X, a very learned priest from the parish of Y, (and unstated, a friend of his, or even from the same ordination class in Ireland), and that Father X would conduct the evening devotions next week *and preach*"

The Irish priests as a group were known jokingly among the clergy as the Druids. Probably, like most Irish jokes, the Irish invented this themselves. They all had a rich background in history and a great capacity for stories, which they used to good advantage in these occasional sermons at devotions. They were always well worth listening to. What was not mentioned, of course, was that Father X was also giving Father Martin a similar build-up, for his coming to do the devotions at Parish Y. It was a great system, so simple, so effective.

PASTORAL STRATEGY

As a piece of pastoral psychology, the Holy Name Society can only be described, like the pulpit swapping, as brilliant in its simplicity and effectiveness.

First of all, it encouraged men to persevere in practising their religion. Men have always needed such encouragement. It countered the lingering feeling that religion is women's business. (Just in passing, altar girls and altar women are a pastoral disaster for men and boys). Joining with other men in a monthly Mass was a proven powerful support for those tempted by the godlessness of the world. Remember, the Devil was active in the old days, just as he is now, though probably less successfully.

Next, the Holy Name Society **made boys feel that religion was a man's** business, and not sissy, not something to drop once they went to high school or left school. They saw other boys' fathers believing in God, honouring Him. Such example was a powerful reinforcement of the witness of their own fathers.

Third, the **monthly confession** kept them all up to the mark, and fourthly, the **evening devotions** as a monthly extra encouraged generosity in the service of God and the keeping of His commandments.

COMMUNION BREAKFAST

In the years 1956-1957, the Holy Name Society at Pennant Hills had an annual Communion Breakfast. After Mass and a good breakfast came a lively address by a Dominican priest, promoters of the devotion to the Holy Name, just as the Jesuits to the Sacred Heart.

Incidentally, this dear Father Martin never preached properly at Sunday Mass. It seems incredible now. After the Latin Epistle and Gospel had been re-read in English, the notices (and an interminable list of the faithful departed) were read out from a battered old exercise book — it was before the printing of parish bulletins. Now this Father Martin used to load up each announcement with tidbits of spiritual information and exhortation, so we were not left ignorant or uninspired — it was simply in small and easily digestible morsels. Then he would look at his watch, lament the excessive number of notices (which were actually a measure of a very active parish), and the time they took to read and comment on, and announce, "There's no time for a sermon today, so on with the Mass," and he would plunge into the Creed, and this, Sunday after Sunday. But at the evening devotions, that is, on the three Sundays out of the four in the month, he would preach to great effect, and at considerable length. The people loved him. He died young, at the age of 49, from cancer of the liver, and is buried in the North Rocks Cemetery in Carlingford Parish, in the same cemetery as Monsignor Hartigan (the famous "John O'Brien") and my own parents. May they all rest in peace.

CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES

Even before Vatican II, the *avant garde* among the priests in the 1950s were less than enthusiastic about sodalities. They had high-flown notions for parish renewal, and tended to ignore the less fervent faithful who needed propping up. **They were elitists, and not good psychologists.** They did not understand adolescence, nor manhood, nor family life. Nor did they reckon with the world, the flesh and the Devil.

It was the very success of the old pastoral strategies that led to the multiplication of Sunday Masses: thus in 1965, in my first year out as a priest in the small parish of Harris Park (near Parramatta), there were five Sunday Masses at 6, 7, 8.30, 10 a.m., and 6 p.m. The winter schedule (pre-daylight saving) was 7, 8, 9, 10.30 a.m., and 6 p.m. The Sunday evening Masses, which only started in 1963 (I think) had already eliminated the devotions, and the multiplicity of morning Masses was working against a big group coming at 7a.m. The Vigil Masses on Saturday nights did not start till 1974.

GOOD IDEAS are not mere nostalgia

This glance back to a past age of the Church in Australia shows a greater clout with politicians, Protestants and unbelievers. Our secret was being convincingly One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. Here and now we must **let the Lord renew us** to do it even better.

Father James Tierney

See also Handouts n.61, *The Church of the 1950's Revisited*