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NCR Archives: Saginaw Bishop Untener ?There goes a shepherd?

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SAGINAW, Mich. -- Foxes have their lairs, birds their nests, but the bishop of Saginaw, Kenneth Untener, has his car, a black Chevrolet Corsica LT. If he does not quite live in it, he certainly lives out of it.

The backseat and trunk are packed with bags, boxes of plastic cups, a set of golf clubs, a tennis racket, a miter that he rarely wears and a crosier, a genuine $12 shepherd?s crook from Iowa.

When Untener first came here from Detroit in 1980, he introduced himself to the people of Saginaw after his ordination in the city hall. ?Hello, I?m Ken and I?m going to be your waiter? is what people remember.

It was a typically imaginative way of communicating the idea that ministry means service. Untener, who used to be a homiletics professor in the Detroit seminary, has thought hard about communication. He always manages to get a fresh angle on the familiar clichés.

Take the shepherd and his flock -- the image that is at the basis of all ?pastoral? work. The caricature of the church makes pastoral work a matter of cramming as many sheep as possible into the sheepfold. Isn?t his shepherd?s crook used for clipping the recalcitrant into line?

Jesus, Untener points out, used exactly the opposite image: ?He describes the shepherd as one who comes to the sheepfold and leads the sheep out of it. The shepherd brings them to the wide open spaces, green pastures, wider horizons, where they can have a freedom they never knew before.?

Untener?s episcopal motto is, ?That they may have life? -- the ?more abundant life? announced in John?s gospel.

Untener has the theological self-confidence that stems from his Gregorian University thesis on the ecclesiological thought of French Dominican Yves Congar, whom he came to know well.

The name Untener is of German origin, but his family was Hungarian. He grew up, the seventh of nine children, on Belle Isle, an island in the Detroit River. His dad was caretaker of the canoes. They were the only family on the island.

Young Ken found it a magical place, especially in winter. From the tip of the island he could gaze out into the immensity of Lake St. Clair. He grew up in the belief, he says, that God had given every family an island of their own.

From birth, he suffered from a twisted right ankle, and his right leg was shorter than the left. This did not stop him from playing games very competitively. But the year before ordination, he broke his right leg. The physicians decided amputation was better than resetting.

Untener says the key question about amputation is always: Is it below the knee? If it is below the knee, then one can continue to keep fit. He gets up at 5:30 and plays nine holes of golf.

The top 10 golfers among the Saginaw clergy play an annual three-day match against the top 10 of the Detroit diocese -- and usually win, though they have only 100 priests to Detroit?s 500.

Untener does not have to qualify to play. He gets his place as bishop. There was no question of Cardinal Edmund Szoka playing, but his successor, Archbishop Adam J. Maida, would like to join in when he can find the time.

Golf is not the first thing one associates Untener with. One thinks of him as someone who speaks out on the ?big issues? -- the Gulf War, the nonreception of Humanae Vitae, above all the ordination of women (see accompanying story).

Untener is well-aware that ?speaking out? involves the risk of misunderstanding in the media. During the Gulf War, he addressed Catholic high-school students on the need to act ?not simply on feelings, but to learn to reflect on wider truths.?

A draft counselor then explained the procedures for conscientious objection. It made the 6 o?clock news, and the next day the local paper had the headline ?Catholic students taught to dodge draft.?

Untener last year published a reasoned and learned article in Worship magazine that questioned the argument that women cannot be priests because a woman cannot act in persona Christi.

Is the priest in presiding at the Eucharist representing or in some sense ?impersonating? Christ? Older priests used to lean low over the altar as they pronounced the words of consecration, ?This is my body,? which might seem to lend some support to the ?impersonation? theory.

But the eucharistic prayers are addressed to the Father, asking the Holy Spirit to make the gifts holy ?so that they may become the body and blood of your son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at whose command we celebrate the Eucharist.?

These words -- and there are many parallels -- make it clear that the priest at the altar is not so much representing Jesus as representing the church. He obeys the instruction of Jesus: Do this in memory of me.

He speaks in the name of a church in which divisions of race, class and sex have been in principle transcended.

But if that is true, then it follows not only that women should not be excluded from this role of representing the church, but also that it is positively desirable to cast them in it.

It is not easy to state that argument briefly. Untener tried it in a 15-minute interview with a reporter from the Detroit Free Press a few months ago.

The reporting was accurate but the ?spin? put on it was not. Untener was said to be ?the first Catholic bishop in the world to come out in favor of the ordination of women.? This is plainly not true.

Apart from Brazilian bishops who have spoken up in favor, his predecessor in Saginaw, Bishop Francis Reh, said in 1983 that he ?hoped the Holy Spirit would lead us to be open to the ordination of women.?

The Detroit Free Press headlined the story ?Bishop advocates women priests,? which was close enough to his meaning. Other papers picked up the story and headlined, ?Bishop defies pope.?

Untener found this upsetting because he had no intention of defying the pope and had written articles pointing out ?the need for a strong papacy, and I have explained the distinctive role of the vicar of Peter in our Roman Catholic tradition.?

Untener does not deny that he has a difference of opinion with Pope John Paul II on this matter. That is a world away from ?defiance.?

As Untener puts it, ?Husbands and wives sometimes disagree. This should not be construed as `defiance.? And what should they do when they disagree? They should talk. That is what I think needs to be done on the ordination of women, ... and that is why I gave my opinion.?

Untener conceives the church on the model of the family. A family is dysfunctional if people are unwilling to talk about a problem that is manifestly there. This happens with contraception.

At the U.S. bishops? meeting in November 1990, Untener raised some questions about a draft of guidelines for sexual education.

After restating the doctrine of Humanae Vitae, the document went on to ?hope that the logic expressed here is compelling.?

Untener wondered whether ?compelling? was quite the right word. The teaching is ?not compelling to people in general,? he told his fellow bishops, ?not compelling to the Catholic laity, not compelling to many priests, and not compelling to many bishops.?

Commenting on the document?s ?earnest belief that God?s Holy Spirit is acting through the Magisterium ... in developing this doctrine,? Untener added that it is also ?our earnest belief that the Spirit acts through the entire people of God in developing doctrine.?

The sensus fidelium is more than an opinion poll, and it is not a head count. But ?when people disagree with us,? Untener goes on, ?we must not assume that it is mere opinion,? and what happens ?in the heads and hearts of our people must count for something.?

The document they were considering called for those who ?dissent? to study and pray over their position. Untener has a very characteristic response: ?Could they not say to us: `We will ... if you will, and let?s do it together?? Would such a process weaken the authority of the bishops, or would it, in fact, strengthen our authority??

So Untener asks the questions that are habitually repressed. Repressed questions do not go away; they go underground and poison the life of the church. But this is my language, not Untener?s. He is extremely careful to avoid the language of recrimination, accusation or violence.

?I ask my questions up front and out loud,? he concluded his remarks to the bishops in 1990, ?in the conviction that if we do not ask them, we are unintentionally causing great damage to the credibility and unity of this church that we love.?

Loving the church: This is a key point. Untener told me he once had a conversation with Hans Küng, who was prepared to argue the case for ?staying in the church? but less keen to admit to ?loving the church.? It would be like selling out, becoming a good Boy Scout.

Untener talks about himself only with reluctance. Have you noticed, he asked, how in a group the bishop is always the center of the conversation? The bishop?s concerns prevail; the bishop sets the agenda. Even his hero, Cardinal John J. Dearden, was like that.

When Pope John Paul II came to Detroit in 1987, he had lunch with the local bishops but asked no questions about a city where he had never been before. Unless one asks the questions and listens to the answers, one will not learn.

Untener defines prophecy -- a gift to which all pastors should aspire -- as speaking the hard truth of the gospel. The prophet should be reluctant -- not because of the flak he will receive, but because of the focus on himself.

?If you preach the hard message,? he told the National Federation of Priests? Councils at Orlando, Fla., in April 1991, ?you are standing out there, a little ahead of or apart from the others, and you are claiming to know better than the rest.?

This sounds autobiographical, as do the warnings with which Untener surrounds his remarks on prophecy. Beware the prophet who too easily wears the mantle of the prophet.

Beware the prophet who has everything figured out. Beware of the prophet with narrow horizons. Beware of the prophet who sets out to act and look like a prophet.

Pope John XXIII, undoubtedly a prophetic figure in the late 20th-century church, did not look like or act like a prophet. Says Untener, ?He looked like someone who should be selling pizza.?

The prophet, in short, is an enabler and empowerer. He allows the Lord to build the house, and unless we leave him that freedom we labor in vain.

?More and more I have come to believe,? says Untener, ?that my task is to craft something small, something good, that the master builder will use. ? Untener has crafted many small, good things in his diocese that the master builder can use.

For example, last year he issued his ?decree on the poor.? This meant that any meeting in the diocese, of whatever nature, would begin by asking itself: How does what we are discussing affect the poor?

Neither gimmick nor panacea, this approach helped sensitize the diocese to the poor. But the poor have to be looked for. They are not in our ?networks.? You don?t meet them in the mall or the supermarket. ?They don?t always go to church,? says Untener, ?and if they do, they try hard not to look poor.? The diocese has begun to reach out to its poor.

Equally bold is Untener?s pastoral letter on abortion. He tore up three or four drafts, finally deciding that what was needed was not more words but more action and commitment.

So he addressed ?all people who struggle with the problems that might lead to an abortion.? He assured them that they would have understanding, financial help, whatever they needed.

Pastoral letters are usually signed by the bishop alone. Untener asked the diocese to join him in signing this letter, which offered more than immediate help: ?We?ll do more than that. We?ll work together to get the

legislation and programs that mothers and fathers and children and families need. We?ll work on the underlying causes, particularly attitudes toward women.?

The response from the diocese has been good, but all the signatures have not yet been collated. And there have been practical results. In the first year since the pastoral, 168 people have been helped with finance, counseling and referral. The number includes 58 people who have received extensive counseling, says Tom Conklin, director of the program.

I was at St. John the Baptist, Carrellton, a while back. We prayed for Pope John Paul, for our bishop Kenneth and for our pastor Virginia.

The gospel, delivered by heart as usual, was about Jesus sending out the 72 disciples, who were to travel lightly. Jesus didn?t give them a manual about what to do; maybe he should have, but he didn?t. Instead, he lit a fire.

So Untener wondered aloud whether the church had not become too manual-based an operation. And he prayed that it would catch fire in the Holy Spirit.

Untener loves the following story. One day he was walking down the street, staff in hand, toward the church. ?Look, Mom,? cried an 8-year-old girl, ?there goes a shepherd. ? That?s it.

[Peter Hebblethwaite was NCR?s Vatican Affairs Writer from 1978 until is death Dec. 18, 1994.]

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