

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of the Youngstown Diocese

Personal Experience

O.H. 1572

REVEREND HOMER G. OLIVER

Interviewed

by

Patrick H. Downey

on

November 5, 1992

was chairperson of Human Relations Committee of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, on May 9, 1966, and Prosynodal Judge, on August 11, 1966. He participated in the Portage County Ecumenical Committee on August 8, 1992.

Although retired, Rev. Oliver remains active in the affairs of the Youngstown Diocese and is currently serving at various parishes, until replacements are found.

Rev. Oliver maintained that few significant changes occurred during the formation of the Youngstown Diocese in 1943. Most of the social programs were already in place under the directive of Cleveland before the split. Rev. Oliver believed the most significant and positive changes in the Youngstown Diocese occurred after Vatican II, 1962-1965, in the form of greater participation in the Mass by the laity, annulments, and other changes in the liturgy. He believed the changes are ongoing and necessary for the Catholic Church to respond to the needs of both clergy and congregation.

-Patrick Downey

REVEREND HOMER OLIVER

Homer G. Oliver was born on January 24, 1916, in Canton, Ohio. He was the only child. His mother, Myrtle Swan was Lutheran, and his father, Homer G. Oliver, Sr., was baptized in the Catholic church but not raised as a Catholic. Reverend Oliver attended Summit Street School, in Canton, Ohio, until his mother's death when he was eight years old. At that time, he moved to his grandmother's, on his father's side, who was a devout Catholic and instrumental to his Catholicism. He entered St. Joseph School, 1924-1929, St. Peter School, 1929-1932, and St. John High School, sophomore year through graduation, in 1935. All of these schools were in Canton. From 1935-1937, he attended St. Charles College in Catonsville, Maryland. He described the atmosphere at St. Charles as strict and an excellent prep school for the major seminary. In 1943, he completed his studies at St. Mary Seminary, Cleveland, Ohio. He was ordained at St. John's Cathedral, in Cleveland, Ohio, on March 20, 1943, by Archbishop Edward F. Hoban.

Rev. Oliver's assignments were as follows: St. Aloysius, East Liverpool, Ohio, from April of 1943 to August of 1953. Sacred Heart, Youngstown, Ohio from August of 1953 to January of 1955. He was pastor of the following parishes: St. Patrick, Salineville, Ohio; Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Aurora, Ohio; Immaculate Conception, Ravenna, Ohio; and St. Joan of Arc, Canton, Ohio.

Rev. Oliver participated in a number of other assignments. On February 1, 1954, he was elected chairman of the Arts and Architecture Committee of the Diocesan Liturgical Commission. He

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INTERVIEWEE: REVEREND HOMER G. OLIVER
INTERVIEWER: Patrick H. Downey
SUBJECT: Vatican II, liturgy, Eucharist, women
DATE: November 5, 1992

D: This is an interview with Reverend Homer G. Oliver, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the History of the Youngstown Diocese project, by Patrick Downey, on November 5, 1992.

Okay, Reverend Oliver. Why don't you tell us about your childhood, growing up, and your home environment.

O: I was born in Canton, Ohio, on January 24, 1916, on South Market Street. The building is now leveled. My mother was a Lutheran. My father was baptized as a Catholic but never raised as a Catholic. That gives you some idea of the background. We later moved to North Cleveland Avenue. I was there until my mother died in 1924. I was eight years old at the time. As a result of my mother's death, I lived with my grandmother, who was an Irish Catholic, and was sent to St. Joseph's Parochial School in Canton, Ohio.

You want to keep in mind that, while my father was baptized in the Catholic Church, he was never raised as Catholic. I would not have gone to a parochial school if it had not been for the fact that my mother died and I went to live with my grandmother. Prior to that time, on a few occasions as a child, I had gone with my mother to the Lutheran Church.

D: So, your grandmother was really instrumental in your

upbringing?

O: Definitely. I attended St. Joseph's school in Canton, Ohio, up to and including the sixth grade. Half of that time, or better, I lived with my grandmother. Then, I went to live with my aunt and uncle, a brother to my father. They raised me together with their children until I completed the sixth grade. When I entered the seventh grade, I went to St. Peter's Parochial School on Cleveland Avenue. Why the change? My father had purchased a home on North Cleveland Avenue. I attended St. Peter's School from the seventh grade to the first year of high school. Then, I went to St. John's High School, which is just a block away. I graduated from there in 1935.

So, to retread a little bit, I was at St. Joseph's parish first, then, St. Peter's parish, and then, St. John's parish. It wasn't that the family had registered in these different parishes. I, as an individual, registered.

While at St. John's High School, I drove for the pastor. From there, I went to college in Catonsville, Maryland. That was in 1935. It was a prep seminary, not a major seminary. I graduated from St. Charles in Catonsville in 1937 and went to the major seminary, St. Mary's in Cleveland.

D: What was it like at St. Mary's in Cleveland, your studies and so forth?

O: Well, I was well prepared as a result of my two years at St. Charles in Catonsville. The Sulpician Fathers, who taught there, were strict. So, that, when I entered St. Mary's in Cleveland, it was a little easier . . . not necessarily the studies but the discipline. I took two years of philosophy there and then four years of theology. I was ordained on March 20, 1943, at St. John's Cathedral in Cleveland. From there on, my assignments are on that paper that you have.

D: What was your first assignment like? Maybe you can elaborate on that for us.

O: My first assignment was at St. Aloysius parish in East Liverpool. It is an old pottery town. I was there for ten years. The town was rather run-down, but the people were exceptional. The town certainly doesn't do credit to the people who live there.

D: What year was that?

O: Well, I was ordained on March 20, 1943. Shortly after my ordination, I was assigned to St. Aloysius parish in

East Liverpool. While I was there, we took care of St. Anne's Mission in East Liverpool. It later became a parish. What took place there? Does it mean anything to you that I sailed on the Ohio River?

D: Sure.

O: I wouldn't recommend sailing on any river.

D: So, you were ordained just after the Youngstown Diocese formed?

O: I was ordained in March. The diocese split sometime that following Summer. The reason I'm in the Youngstown Diocese is because, when the split came, the priests who were in the Youngstown area and wanted to remain were allowed to do so.

D: What do you feel are some of the major changes that occurred with the new diocese? And, some of the major figures that were involved?

O: I really don't think there were any major changes, at least from my viewpoint. We knew the men in the Cleveland Diocese, and it was hard to think of ourselves as two different dioceses. In the course of time, the break became quite definite, but to say there was any major difference. . . ?

D: Any new programs? Social programs? Or was it pretty much business as usual?

O: I would say so. It took us awhile to recognize the fact that we were actually two different dioceses, but we made new friends. They did the same in Cleveland.

D: Before the split, was some of the administration coming from Cleveland? Any influence from Cleveland?

O: Yes. All the administrators were from Cleveland. Before the split, we were the Cleveland Diocese. The changes--if we are talking about changes--wouldn't be in terms of the separation of the area into two different dioceses. The changes came as a result of the work of the Vatican II Council. Basically, we operated under the same conditions as we did in the Cleveland Diocese.

D: How about in annulments? Was that a change that occurred?

O: The same conditions existed in the diocese of Youngstown as in the diocese of Cleveland. The change, and it was long in coming, was a result of Vatican II. It didn't happen over night. It came gradually. I think

the church is wise now in recognizing that there are some marriages that, according to the letter of the law, are valid; but, for all practical purposes, are not because no commitment was made from the start.

I think much good can come out of the Second Vatican Council as long as we don't go too far. There is always the danger of interpreting what the Second Vatican Council says in too broad a sense. You still have to recognize there are limitations and guidelines. "Virtue stands in the middle." It's under these circumstances that the Second Vatican Council has done us a great service.

In terms of the liturgy, much good has been done because of the Second Vatican Council. We used to say Mass with our backs to the people. It became the priest's Mass. The people were out there observing . . . watching something that the priest did. The people were present, but really not sharing in the liturgy. If the three of us, for instance, were to say a prayer and if I were to turn my back to you, then, that puts God out there someplace. But, when you turn me around and the three of us face each other, that places God in our midst. That's exactly what we are doing with our altars. They were up against the back wall. We had to bring them out from the back wall to turn the priest around. That conveys the message of what Vatican II is saying. In other words, it's not just the priest's Mass; it's our Mass. Your Mass and mine. As a result of that, there are certain parts of the Mass that the people respond to. The priest and the choir have no right to take away the people's responses in the Mass.

In the past, we had our backs to the people when we consecrated the bread and wine. By that, I mean we took the bread and the wine into our hands and said, "This is my body. This is my blood. . . ." Are you familiar with at least that much of it?

D: I'm Catholic.

O: After the priest said, "this is my body, this is my blood. . . ." The priest raised the host and the chalice high above his head for the people to see. That was known as the Great Elevation. That doesn't mean much to you--you're too young--but it meant a lot to your parents. The only reason that was done was because the priest had his back to you. It wasn't that the gesture, in itself, was so meaningful. It was a necessary gesture. When you first turned us around, we continued to hold the host and the chalice high above our head. Then one day, it occurred to us that there was no reason for either to be so high. Now, we hold

the host and the chalice at eye level. It takes on real meaning.

One of the most beautiful gestures in the whole of the Mass is at the end of what we call the Eucharistic Prayer. In the past, at the end of that prayer, I had my back to the people and I raised the host and the chalice only a few inches above the altar to indicate that I had finished that the prayer. At the conclusion of the prayer, the altar boy would say, "Amen." Since I had my back to the people, they would not know what was going on. Now, at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, I face the people and, instead of just raising the host and the chalice a few inches above the altar, I hold them at eye level and sing, "Through Him, with Him, in Him, in the Unity of Holy Spirit. . . ." The people respond, "Amen." They sing that. In other words, I'm saying, it's no longer bread and wine. It's the body and blood of Christ. [It is] a beautiful gesture which was lost completely when I had my back to the people.

If the people really knew the meaning of the word "Amen," they would fill the church with that response. So, that when we hold the elements up in that fashion and our people sing "Amen," they are saying in so many words, though they don't always realize it, "I agree with you. My faith tells me that it is no longer the bread and wine, it's the body and blood of Christ." I site that as one example of what the Second Vatican Council has done for us in terms of the liturgy of the Mass.

- D: Was the response of the priests overwhelmingly positive, or were there some who were. . . ?
- O: Even to this day, there are some who are reluctant to go ahead. Our bishop, by the way, is to be given a great deal of credit for implementing the directives of the Second Vatican Council. We've had one conference after another telling us what the Second Vatican Council is saying.

Would you want me to go on with the [topic of] Mass?

- D: Certainly, and, any other changes with Vatican II.
- O: It's principally in the liturgy. Liturgy means the work of the people. Before, when I had my back to the people, it was the work of the priest. But, turn me around and you are able to say, "This is the work of the people, not just the work of the priest." Let's break it down.

The liturgy is divided into two parts. The first part

of the liturgy is called the Liturgy of the Word. It takes place at the pulpit. The second part takes place at the altar. Before they turned us around, all of this took place, basically, at the altar. It was only on Sunday that we went to the pulpit. During the week, everything took place at the altar. I say everything, in this sense: the first part of our Mass is the proclamation of the Word.

The second part of our Mass is the proclamation of the Eucharistic Prayer. Before Vatican II, all of that took place at the altar. That's why our altars were long and narrow. Your grandparents would relate to this. At the center of the altar, we said the Eucharistic Prayer, but on either side of the altar, we proclaimed the Word: the Epistle on one side and the Gospel on the other. Now, the directives are that the altar should no longer be long and narrow. There is no need. In fact, many of the altars are square. Not that they have to be square, but there is no need for them to be long and narrow. Why? Because the ends of the altar are no longer used for the reading of the Epistle and the Gospel. The proclamation of the Word takes place at the pulpit, which is as it should be.

The pulpit in so many words, should vie with the altar. It should be as impressive as the altar itself. In other words, we are placing more emphasis on the proclamation of the Word. Before, it was kind of secondary, and the emphasis was placed on the proclamation of the Eucharistic Prayer. Traditionally, in the Protestant Denomination, the liturgists placed emphasis on the proclamation of the Word. They had a communion table, but the emphasis was on the proclamation of the Word. We were doing just the opposite. We were placing emphasis on the table [the altar] and we weren't placing enough emphasis on the proclamation of the Word. When they construct our new churches, the pulpit should vie with the altar. It should be massive. It should be important. It should be of the same material as the altar. A neophyte should be able to walk into the church and say, "Whatever takes place at these two areas is of equal importance."

As a result of the Second Vatican Council, we make a mistake, and a serious one, if we don't admit our shortcomings. In this respect, if we are imitating what they are doing in the Protestant churches, we are doing the right thing. When we proclaim the Word of God, Christ's presence is just as real as when we go to the altar and consecrate the bread and wine. In the past, if we spoke of the Real Presence we would think of what takes place at the altar, the changing of the bread and wine. Your parents and grandparents would relate to that. The Real Presence is the Eucharist, you know.

But, when we proclaim the word of God, even before we get to the altar, we're saying there is a Real Presence there--a different kind of presence; but just as real. Also, Christ is present just because of the gathering of the congregation. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst."

Even before I get to the altar, by proclaiming the Word of God, there is a Real Presence there within our midst.

D: So, each one of these elements is interdependent to the whole? The Word, the Eucharist, the gathering. . . ?

O: You mean equally?

D: I don't know if equal is the right word, but they're all important.

O: That's right. We never said that proclaiming the Word of God wasn't important, but the emphasis was upon what we call the Eucharistic Prayer. Where as now, we say the emphasis should be on both, to the extent that they vie with one another. In fact, the pulpit and the altar should be of the same material. On occasion in the past, if you went into a Catholic Church, you would not find a pulpit. There was just a lectern from which the Word of God was proclaimed. That was wrong. There was the altar, the beautiful edifice from which the Eucharistic Prayer was proclaimed, with our back to the people, and a small little wooden lectern from which we proclaimed the Word of God. . . . We were wrong there. The altar and the pulpit should even be of the same material. We shouldn't have a marble altar and just a wooden stand from which to proclaim the Word of God. If the altar is marble, then the lectern should be marble.

I am trying to convey to you what the Vatican II Council, 1962-1965, has done for us. Of course it didn't happen overnight. It came gradually. But you asked, "Did everyone accept that?"

No. Even today, some people find it very, very difficult to accept. In terms of the liturgy, by way of example, the Second Vatican Council has emphasized what we call the acclamations within the Mass. When we come to a reading that is important, we want to emphasize it by singing an acclamation before it. When we come to the Eucharistic Prayer, or any other prayer that we want to emphasize, we sing an acclamation before or after it. I'll give you an example. At the pulpit, we proclaim the Word of God. We read from the Old Testament, we read from one of the Epistles, and we have a reading from the Gospel. Now, of these readings, which

is the most important? Why the reading of the Gospel is the most important. To emphasize that, before the reading of the Gospel, the cantor sings an Alleluia.

Giving importance to the acclamations within the Mass is the result of the work of the Second Vatican Council. When we sing the Alleluia before the Gospel, we're saying that what follows that Alleluia is the most important of the readings. We don't do it before the Epistle. We don't do it before one of the Old Testament readings. Acclamations should be sung. I've been to liturgies where, just before the Gospel is read, they say, "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia." Well, the bottom falls out of it. Like at a football game, an acclamation is shouted out. We don't shout it out in the liturgy; we sing it, of course. So, if we understand what we are doing, we will sing the acclamations. We will not say them. So that, in the first part of the Mass, the important reading is the reading of the Gospel and the alleluia is sung before it.

Let me go to the altar now. There are three acclamations in terms of the altar. What is the important prayer? That prayer, in the context of which the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ, is called the Eucharistic Prayer. Of all of the prayers that are said at the altar, the most important prayer is the Eucharistic Prayer. To emphasize that, there is an acclamation that goes before it, and that acclamation should be sung, not recited. Are you familiar with the mass?

D: Yes.

O: The "Holy, Holy, Holy" is an acclamation that says the Eucharistic Prayer which follows is very important. That acclamation should be sung. During the Eucharistic Prayer, right after we consecrate the bread and wine, there is another acclamation: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Then, at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, when we finish, and we hold the elements up and sing, "Through Him, with Him, in Him. . . ." We have an acclamation: the solemn "Amen." Now, why do I go into that?

I think the acclamations are very important in terms of good liturgy. Even if we don't sing anything else, the acclamations should be sung. In fact, the directives are that, before the Gospel, if the alleluia is not sung, it should be omitted.

D: So definitely, the liturgy was a major turning point with Vatican II. Can you think of any other changes that came out of Vatican II, positive or negative?

O: The lay people have a more prominent place in terms of the church, not just in terms of the liturgy but in terms of the whole administration of the church. Perhaps I can put it this way: more emphasis is given to what we call "the priesthood of the laity." In the past, it was not emphasized.

In the past, when we spoke of the priesthood, we would think in terms of the ordained priest. I would speak of my priesthood. Actually, it's not my priesthood. There's only one priesthood and that's the priesthood of Jesus Christ. I share in the priesthood of Christ through ordination. But, you also share in the priesthood of Christ through Baptism and Confirmation. There is only one priesthood. I can say to you, "Pat, you don't have a priesthood of your own. You only share in Christ's priesthood." You can say to me, "Neither do you have a priesthood of your own. You only share in the priesthood of Christ." It's a beautiful concept because it brings us closer together. We exercise that sharing in the priesthood of Christ, you and I together, whenever we administer any of the sacraments. If you were to baptize a child, you would be exercising your sharing in the priesthood of Christ through the administration of that sacrament. And, par excellence, you and I both exercise our sharing in the priesthood of Christ, in terms of the liturgy, when we participate in the Mass.

Like I said, there are certain parts of the Mass, certain prayers, certain responses that are yours that should not be taken from you. It's there that you exercise your sharing in the priesthood of Christ. It's a beautiful concept because it brings the ordained priest and the lay people closer together, so that when we gather to celebrate, we are all exercising our sharing in the priesthood of Christ.

I repeat that to make it clear. There is only one priesthood. Vatican II has emphasized that concept. Some would not want to accept that, but I think I'm right on target. There is only one priesthood. That's the priesthood of Christ. You share in that through the sacrament of Baptism and Confirmation. I share in it in a little deeper way. . . through the sacrament of Holy Orders. There is a unique sharing in the priesthood of Christ that I have that you do not . . . ; in so far as I can say Mass and I can consecrate. You cannot. So, there is a deeper sharing, but it's a sharing in the same priesthood.

So, if you want to emphasize what Vatican II has done for us, it has emphasized the importance of the priesthood of the laity.

D: Are there any other changes that you can think of that also may have come out of Vatican II, that may have been a break with the past?

O: We are getting back to the liturgy again. For instance: prior to Vatican II, in the celebration of the Mass, the priest did everything. We had to do all the readings. We had to distribute communion. Everything that was done was done by the priest. In fact, the communion rail is not just there for people to kneel before. Do you remember the communion rail, or is that before your time?

D: Yes, I remember.

O: The communion rail was there, not just so you could kneel down when you were to receive communion, but it was to there to say, "You stay out in the body of the church. Don't come up any further. Only the priest is allowed up here." The altar boys were there because it was necessary that they assist the priest. They were there by way of concession, you might say. I do not mean to be sarcastic, but I wish to emphasize the rationale for the set up in the past. Because of that, when Mass was said, the people just sat out there. Your grandmother would say her rosary. She wouldn't participate in the Mass. She had nothing to do. She was an observer. If there were any readings, the priest would have to read. If communion was distributed, the priest would have to distribute.

Now, the laity take part in the liturgy, although they sit out in the body of the church. We don't have the laity sit in the sanctuary with us. It's not because we're saying, "You don't deserve to be up here." But because, when you walk up from the congregation and read, implicitly, that is saying, "The congregation is celebrating this liturgy, not just the priest." You represent the congregation.

At first, we seated the lay people in the sanctuary, but that was a mistake. The concept is, "that you represent the congregation and, when you come into the sanctuary area and read, that says the congregation, not just the priest, is celebrating the Mass. Now, the lay people, women as well as men--even help distribute communion.

D: What are some of the negative things, if any, that you've seen over your years of service in the diocese? Have you seen a decline in the priesthood, with nuns entering religious life?

O: The whole society has undergone a change, and the Church is not an isolated island. As a result, a woman

can leave the convent today, if she feels that that is not her vocation, and if she has the necessary education, she can support herself. She can have an apartment, a car. Let's go back fifty years or more. . . . A nun leaving the convent had no place to go but home. The change in society has had its effect upon the church.

In the past, the church and the whole of society we have taken advantage of the position of women. We have not recognized their rights as persons. Too much was demanded of the nuns. You are wondering why some of them have left. Well, I think in the past, . . . the influence was great for the girl to enter the convent and the boy to enter the seminar. The influence was in the home. The influence was in the church. The influence was in the school--even [in] society. I think the pressure was there, not necessarily in the wrong way, but the pressure was there. We had the finest parochial school system in the United States because of the teaching nun who sacrificed her life for Catholic education. That condition no longer exists. The nuns are recognizing their rights, and we should honor those rights. I'm getting back to the liturgy, but in terms of the liturgy, I never thought I'd see the day when women would be in the sanctuary area with me distributing communion or proclaiming the Word. Someday, they may be able to participate in a more meaningful way.

D: What are some of the changes, that you would like to see in the future?

O: Fifty years ago, they people were not ready to accept married clergy. Today, I think they are ready. The average Catholic, even an older Catholic, would be willing, today, to accept a married clergy.

D: Is there anything that you think I may have missed, of importance, in the history of the diocese, in your opinion, that we may have skipped over?

O: Actually, what I've shared with you is more the result of the work of the Vatican II Council than the split in the diocese. Personally, I never felt there was that great a division between the two. We were still operating under the same directives as before the split.

D: That's what I understand. Okay. Thank you very much.

O: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW