Remembering a great and true friend of the laity

By JAMES V. CUNNINGHAM

A few months ago, the Pittsburgh Catholic proudly announced that Rita Ferko Joyce, counsel for the diocese, will become the first lay person to head the Canon Law Society of America. Her election highlights a trend in the church as lay people fill important positions. It is a movement that supplies talent for building a stronger church.

We remember a Notre Dame priest, Louis Putz, who did Herculean work to get this going. Only 14, he emigrated from Bavaria to enroll in the University of Notre Dame seminary. A brilliant student, he found seminary life lonely. His academic achievements sent him to France where life was not. He found the French church pressed by theologians and joined them in efforts to build a new movement called “Catholic Action,” seeking to restore laity to the esteemed roles they played in ancient times.

Putz gained experience helping develop an enlivened French church with recitative Masses bringing back voices from the pew as well as the clergy and laity. Putz worked with small groups of students, and workers and farmers seeking to make their vocations more spiritual and themselves more fruitful and helpful.

After finishing his studies, Putz was ordained a Holy Cross priest in Paris and put to work expanding French CA programs. When World War II broke out, he was called home to Notre Dame bringing new knowledge and dreams of strengthening the American church. Using the French model of group prayer and activist “see-judge-act” cells to purify American society, his first years back tested opportunities to start a CA program making priest contacts in other cities and finding the interest and enthusiasm he required with Notre Dame students as his base.

CA programs, such as Young Christian Students (YCS) and Young Christian Workers (YCW), began with national conferences that attracted both teaching nuns and secular faculty. Putz and others produced workbooks for training courses. Keeping with the French model, clergy were limited to training and chaplaincy, with cells led by elected lay leaders.

While YCW took hold in a few places like Chicago, YCS flourished. YCS worked with small cells of Catholic children and youth scattered across the nation whose efforts were felt in small, but significant community service with children and senior citizens.

Growing with YCS was Fides Publishers, a small press Putz and his followers founded. It supplied an array of materials including European books, especially those by Putz’s French friends. A leading Catholic publisher reaching a million people, Fides operated without sufficient working capital. Putz was running the organization but lacked the business savvy to steer it out of fiscal troubles. When Catholic schools began closing, sales fell and debt-ridden Fides closed.

Putz continued an information service helping American Catholic Action launch its largest program: The Christian Family Movement (CFM) with married couples throughout the country seeking information and a few cells being established. Chicago lawyer, Patrick Crowley, and activist wife, Patty, were elected the president couple of a new central organization housed within the Archdiocese of Chicago. Membership grew to 50,000 and was described by CA organizers as “The first generation of American Catholics to rise out of the lower class with no intention of falling back.”

Cell meetings of six or seven couples followed the “see-judge-act” formula within an emerging liturgical environment, with each group choosing its own lay leaders. The international organization was held together by a program book compiled by a committee representing U.S., Canada and Mexico membership. From state to state, the CFM enjoyed successes, such as a treatment center for mentally challenged children, and programs aiding exploited migrant worker families. Many people experienced the lay role of working with a closeness to Christ and a serious love of neighbor. Many found new careers with non-profit organizations and other movements, such as Catholic Worker, Sodality Catholic Action, the Peace Corps, the Catechist movement and the Grail. A few CA veterans became influential consultants with the church.

While Putz was influential, he did not control the organization and moved on to seminary education reform, co-authoring a book on needed changes. Notre Dame made him rector of its seminary, allowing him to produce a working seminar model and within five years, nearly all major seminaries adopted it. This model helped new priests understand the importance of lay people and how to open up lay leadership in parishes.

Suffering from painful arthritis, which gradually immobilized him, he visited St. Joseph’s Oratory in Montreal and the shrine of Holy Cross brother, André Bessette, formerly a candidate for sainthood. Father Putz entered a period of intense prayer for healing and found his pain much abated. Within a year, it had disappeared. This healing became one of the official miracles supporting André’s beatification. Pope Benedict XVI canonized Brother André in Rome on Oct. 15, 2010.

Father Putz died on June 28, 1998, while collaborating on a “last book.” In his writing was this declaration:

“The emphasis in the church should be on community, the equality of fellowship between lay and ordained all doing their job to Christianize the world.”

(From this article draws on the biography “You Are Church,” by Bob Ghezardi, Father Putz’s writing partner, as well as the experience of myself as a Notre Dame student. The biography is available through the University of Notre Dame bookstore.)

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