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PHYSICIANS IN SERRA

FRANK R. HANRAHAN, Jr., M.D.

SERRA INTERNATIONAL, a Catholic lay organization devoted to encouraging vocations to the priesthood, counts some ten per cent of its membership among physicians and dentists. Activity in Serra Club requires not only regular attendance at meetings but committee work, speaking engagements, and other extra curricular demands. It is surprising to find so many physicians willing to make this sacrifice of hours and energy for an endeavor quite apart from medicine. It is apparent that membership must offer some reward.

The Serra movement began in 1934 in Seattle, Washington when four Catholic laymen, who had been meeting informally to discuss the relationship between their religion and the problems of daily living, decided that there was need for an association which would advance the cause of Catholicism through lasting friendship among Catholic men. Father Junipero Serra, the Franciscan missionary to the West Coast who developed the wonderful missions extending from San Francisco to San Diego in the seventeenth century, was chosen their patron and they adopted as their primary purpose the encouraging of vocations to the Roman Catholic priesthood. They received formal permission from the Bishop of the diocese to

begin an arm of Catholic Action, setting a precedent for all organizing groups to follow.

In 1938 five clubs had been developed on the West Coast and they united to form Serra International, an ambitious but not unjustified title. It is interesting that the first president of Serra International was Dr. T. V. Sheehan of Seattle. During the next eight years new clubs following the format and purpose of the original club were founded, and in 1946 the Board of Trustees of Serra International considered it advisable to open a central office in Chicago with full-time personnel to act as a point of focus in the management of affairs. At this time the late Samuel Cardinal Stritch, then Archbishop of Chicago, accepted the invitation to serve as Episcopal Advisor, a position he held until his death last year.

During the next five years Serra clubs were founded in numerous locations in the United States and activity developed in several cities outside of the United States. In 1951 it was aggregated into the Pontifical Work for Priestly Vocations by Pope Pius XII. At present there are 185 clubs, including groups in Canada, England, Mexico, Puerto Rico, with others in the process of formation in Genoa, Italy and several major cities in South America. The over-

all membership is almost 8000 and the annual international convention is attended by 8000.

Serra Clubs are organized with the sanction of the bishop of the diocese. A minimum membership is required before a club is chartered. Membership is by application only, and prospective members are carefully screened to make sure they are ardent and loyal Catholics and have the necessary qualities. Since membership in the club requires active participation in its program, no member or officer eligible for a local organization or Serra International is reimbursed for expenses incurred in attending the club. The men chosen must be laymen and professional people who have some command of their own

The clubs must have regular meetings, at least at bi-weekly intervals and in many areas, the meetings are weekly, with a luncheon or dinner session, whichever time is most convenient to membership. The programs of Serra clubs are a most important aspect of their purpose and it is required that each one be entirely Catholic in thought and content, to serve as a means of increasing the members knowledge and understanding of the teachings of the Church—to become, as the late Cardinal Stritch reminded the organization, a “university of Catholic thinking.” The programs, of course, cover a wide variety within the framework. An effort is made to increase the spiritual life of the members by discourses on the Saints and on sanctity. Frequent-

ly the programs are presented by the members themselves, including civic and cultural attitudes in the light of Catholic teaching. In every club an effort is made to enlarge upon the members' appreciation of the priesthood and the source and development of vocations. The ultimate goal of such an educational program, of course, is to indoctrinate each member so thoroughly in the spirit of Catholic dogma that he not only lives a more Catholic life each day but also that he may be, both by precept and example, an influence on his community which will counteract to some extent the materialistic culture which threatens to stifle the growth of vocations planted in the souls of young boys.

Concomitantly, each club conducts projects to interest children, and their parents, in the consideration of the priesthood as a way of life. Among the more popular are sponsoring essay contests among school children on subjects related to religious life; showing movies on the subject and speaking on vocations to parent-teacher groups, Holy Name Societies, and groups of students; assisting in organization and promotion of parish nocturnal adoration services for the intention of vocations. Because altar boys associate closely with priests and are privileged to assist at the Altar for Mass, these youngsters are particularly worthy of encouragement to consider a religious vocation. Recognizing this potential, the Serra club of Memphis, Tennessee recently brought together altar boys from every parish in the diocese for a

ceremony of installation as acolytes. It was conducted by the Bishop of the diocese who emphasized the opportunity afforded altar boys to consider the priesthood. Members of Serra in Toledo have visited every parochial school in the diocese, showing films and discussing convent and seminary life with the children. They also distributed bookmarks on which is included a prayer for vocations.

The Serra club of Pittsfield, Massachusetts organized a Vocations Exhibit in which some thirty orders of Priests, Brothers, and Sisters participated. Booths were constructed and manned by representatives of the communities; the garb of the respective orders was explained; the requirements for joining and life of the members was discussed. Solemn Benediction offered by the Bishop concluded the occasion. The Exhibit was instrumental in disseminating much information on religious vocations and most enlightening to the several thousand children and their parents who had attended. This will be an annual event, for with each passing year there is a greater need for more religious vocations.

The shortage here is a fact not commonly recognized by Catholics, particularly in the United States. In this country one priest serves a thousand Catholics. This is like saying there is one doctor for every thousand population—it fails to take into account distribution. In many areas there are parishes with large numbers of Catholics living miles apart with-

out a resident priest. In South America there is one priest for every twenty-thousand Catholics. These figures, of course, relate to the ministry of priests to Catholics. Needless to say there is tremendous necessity for apostolic work among the pagan population of the world.

Has the work of the Serra clubs been effective? No Serran would even attempt a count of the number of vocations which have resulted from the labors of the organization; this would be audacious if not presumptuous. What effectiveness has been recorded will be revealed at the end of our days. However, Serrans do take some pride in the fact that many Bishops have lauded the Serra clubs of their dioceses as a major factor in stimulating religious vocations.

In one diocese in which there are three Serra clubs the Ordinary has stated that in his opinion he would have no need for the seminary he is now building if it had not been for the work of his Serrans. In another area where there had been no vocations for twenty years, there were six men in the major seminary four years after a Serra club was initiated.

There can, however, be no question about the effectiveness of Serra clubs in advancing the Catholicism of members. Not only does membership provide them with increasing knowledge of their Faith but the spiritual benefits are rich and numerous. Each is encouraged to frequent the Sacraments, particularly to assist at Mass as often as possible for the cause of

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vocations. The aggregation of Serra International to the Medical Work for Priestly Vocations has resulted in the privilege of receiving a Plenary Indulgence on fifty-four days of each year. The late Cardinal Stritch stated that Serra membership constituted in a way, a vocation in itself. He quoted Pope Pius XI who said: "In no way better than this work for an increase in the ranks of the secular and regular clergy, can the Catholic really participate in the high dignity of the Kingly Priesthood."

From the above, a number of reasons can be deduced for the

interest of a physician in Serra. One, when asked, stated that his attendance at meetings for one year had taught him more than the decade that had preceded. Another stated that Serra work gave him opportunity to express his gratitude to the Church for the benefits he had received as a Catholic. Another felt that the problem of shortage of vocations arises in the home and that through this means, families could be reminded of their obligation in this regard and be shown the way to help.

Dr. Hanrahan is President of Serra International and a member of the Catholic Physicians' Guild of Cleveland, Ohio.

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