

**R**ELIGION

# Catholics on the march

**L**ast March, Fabian Bruskewitz, the Roman Catholic bishop of Lincoln, Neb., excommunicated all Catholics within his jurisdiction who belong to the lay organization Call to Action (CTA), claiming its positions are "perilous to the Catholic faith." The action caused a national stir, since hundreds of priests, nuns and church employees, at least six bishops and thousands of very active laypeople are among the 18,000 members of this organization devoted to progressive reform of the Roman Catholic Church.

*Call to Action  
takes on the  
church—  
and faces the  
consequences.*

By Robert McClory

Bruskewitz excommunicated members of 11 other groups as well, including the Freemasons, Eastern Star and Planned Parenthood, but Call to Action was unquestionably the real object of his wrath. A CTA affiliate (one of 33 around the country) had just been established in Lincoln, and the members

sent the bishop a letter informing him of their new chapter. He wrote back that the difference between a dissenting Catholic and a Protestant is that the "Protestant has integrity." He gave the group a canonical warning, threatened them with excommunication if they did not repent and then followed through on the threat by imposing the church's harshest penalty, a kind of spiritual death sentence.

No other bishop has yet followed Bruskewitz's lead. But several have refused to allow CTA groups to meet on church property, and others have urged their flocks to have nothing to do with the organization.

The Chicago-based CTA represents the liberal, reformist wing of American Catholicism and stands publicly in favor of opening many questions that Pope John Paul II considers settled and closed. CTA calls for incorporating women at all levels of ministry including the priesthood; for opening the priesthood to married men; for "extensive consultation with Catholic people in developing teaching on human sexuality," including contraception; and for participation of the full church in the selection of bishops. If the church hopes to retain its moral authority, says the organization, it must reform its internal structures and abandon the trappings of a medieval autocracy.

That stance drives many church authorities, not to mention the Catholic right wing, into spasms of apoplexy. The church is not a democracy, they insist, and its medieval structure reflects its timeless essence and its fidelity to Jesus, who, in their view, placed obedience to authority over all other considerations.

If polls have any validity, the majority of U.S. Catholics support CTA positions, though most are probably unaware of the organization itself. A Gallup poll on the subject last May found that 69 percent of Catholics favor a married priesthood; 65 percent support the ordination of women; and 65 percent support laity and clergy choosing their own bishops. For more than 30 years, polls have repeatedly shown that over 85 percent of Catholics reject the official position on birth control. Given these figures, CTA can reasonably claim to be a voice for the increasingly discontented, but still largely silent, majority of the church.

The current organization is the stepchild of a Call to Action conference held in Detroit 20 years ago, during the nation's bicentennial celebration. U.S. bishops assembled some 1,400 delegates and 1,500 observers from practically every part of the country and asked them, in the open spirit of the 1963-1965 Second Vatican Council, to determine the church's major projects for the next 100 years.

The assembly declared that the church has an obligation to become a more forceful presence in the world. It said the

church must use its enormous resources and moral authority for the good of society, and stand up to the chronic racism, poverty, sexism, militarism and rootlessness of modern society. But, said the delegates, amid considerable debate, the church's prophetic voice will fall on deaf ears unless it undertakes an internal reorganization. Accordingly, the delegates approved a sizable body of resolutions calling for major reconsideration of church positions on birth control, celibacy for priests, homosexuality and the involvement of laypeople in important decisions.

Fearing the revolutionary implications of these proposals, the bishops went home, did nothing and hoped the storm would blow over. The strategy worked: Call to Action died of neglect almost everywhere. In Chicago, however, where many Catholics chafed under Cardinal John Cody's despotic regime, several independent organizations of priests, nuns, Catholic school teachers and concerned laity urged an ongoing follow-up to the Detroit conference.

Dan Daley, a former priest in Chicago's inner city, was among the small group of Chicagoans who formed the nucleus of the group. "I had seen how the church could make a difference in people's lives," Daley says. "Here was this huge institution that crossed political, national and ethnic barriers. If we were ever going to make a dent in creating a better world for people, the church was a good place to start."

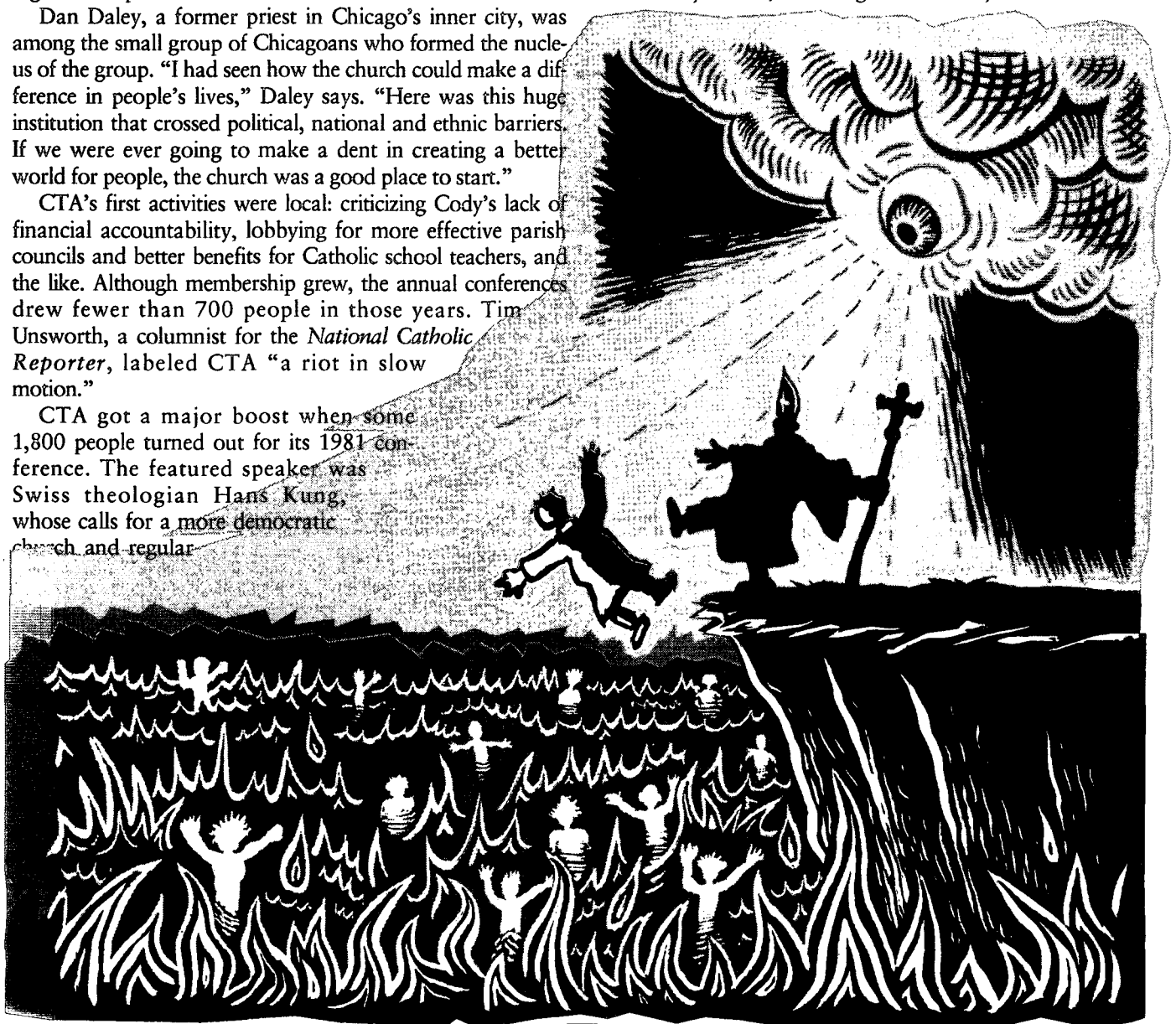
CTA's first activities were local: criticizing Cody's lack of financial accountability, lobbying for more effective parish councils and better benefits for Catholic school teachers, and the like. Although membership grew, the annual conferences drew fewer than 700 people in those years. Tim Unsworth, a columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter*, labeled CTA "a riot in slow motion."

CTA got a major boost when some 1,800 people turned out for its 1981 conference. The featured speaker was Swiss theologian Hans Kung, whose calls for a more democratic church and regular

skirmishes with Vatican authorities had made him a folk hero for many Catholics. Local Catholic progressives still recall the 1981 conference as a kind of Woodstock.

By the early '80s, Cardinal Cody was dead, and the style of his successor, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, was such a welcome contrast that there seemed comparatively little to fret about in the local church. Around this time, CTA began to address broader social issues more directly. Members participated in the nuclear disarmament movement. CTA campaigned against U.S. policy in Central America and shipped tons of clothing, furniture and other supplies to the poor of Nicaragua. Political candidates were scrutinized regarding their positions on nuclear war, race relations, the environment and welfare policy. CTA even collaborated with the institutional church, sponsoring musical productions based on the U.S. bishops' hard-hitting, but rarely-read, pastoral letters on peace and economics.

At this juncture, CTA might well have joined forces with



secular and other religious organizations of the left working for civil and human rights in a variety of societal settings. But that shift did not occur then, and, to the distress of some CTA supporters, it has not happened since. The person most responsible for keeping CTA focused primarily on internal church reform is Pope John Paul II. To the world, the pope eloquently endorses human rights, condemns political repression and calls for openness and toleration. To the church, however, he is adamant that there will be no adaptation of doctrine, no openness and no toleration, especially on those issues which energized the original Call to Action meeting.

The pope has tried to shore up his social conservatism in the next generation by appointing as bishops only those who explicitly share his opposition to contraception and the ordination of women. Meanwhile, through various Vatican offices, he has cracked down on Catholic universities, religious orders, nuns, priests and theologians. (He has, for example, forbidden Hans Kung to present himself as a Catholic theologian.) He demands strict literal adherence to his directives. He has condemned liberation theology and silenced its proponents. The new, universal catechism of the Catholic Church, published in 1994, ignores long-accepted developments in scripture study and other areas of theology as if Vatican II never happened.

**I**n 1990, CTA prepared a Call for Reform pastoral letter, expressing the organization's conviction that calls for justice in the world must be accompanied by a movement for justice within the church itself. When Hans Kung read the statement at a national church meeting in New York City, CTA was swamped with requests for copies and inquiries from around the country about these unknown Chicago reformers. On Ash Wednesday, in March 1990, the statement was printed as a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, signed by 4,500 Catholics. Within a few months, the Call for Reform attracted 25,000 more signers, and CTA had become a national organization.

CTA has steadily grown and assumed an increasingly visible national presence since then. CTA regional affiliates have sprung up in New Jersey, Florida, Minnesota, Michigan and elsewhere. Bishop Bruskewitz's highly publicized pre-emptive strike at the tiny affiliate in Nebraska had an unintended result: Some 4,000 new members joined CTA this year, and its national conference in Detroit in November drew 5,000 people, the largest attendance ever.

Mary Ann Savard, who has been CTA's board president for 10 years, does not believe the surge of support is the result of the organization's own recruiting efforts. "There are forces at work that we don't control," she says, "like the forces in society that created social activism, the civil rights movement, the women's movement. Just as people are not content anymore to let the old boys in the smoky back room control their lives, Catholics today aren't content to let a few men run the church and send up a little smoke to tell us

when they've picked the next pope."

CTA has been a major supporter of the growing number of "small faith communities" across the country: groups as small as six and as large as 200 which meet regularly in homes or other locales for prayer and scripture discussion because they don't feel they're getting adequately "fed" at the local church. "People are beginning to realize this is where the grass-roots church is today," says Linda Pieczynski, the current CTA president. "This is where the base is building."

**C**TA wrestles continually with the urge to become more involved in the world "out there." At the 1996 CTA conference in Detroit, Hans Kung suggested that life in this world has become so precarious that the world's religions must concentrate cooperatively on developing a global ethic. French Bishop Jacques Gaillot, deposed by the Vatican from his diocese for his liberal views, told conference attendees that today church reform is less important than concern for the poor and the marginalized. And Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit urged the organization to see social action and church reform as two sides of the same coin.

CTA will likely explore a more activist social agenda in the year ahead. But church reform will not take a back seat. One reason is that CTA's membership is predominantly female, and the Vatican's intransigence on the issue of women priests has been particularly galling to hundreds of thousands of Catholic women. Many contend that nothing will be right within Roman Catholicism until it ceases to be one of the few remaining institutions of Western society that discriminates against women as a matter of principle.

As a final legacy to the church just three months before his death, Chicago's Cardinal Bernardin asked Catholics at various places along the spectrum of belief to search for common ground—to gather together, to speak the truth as they know it and to listen in good faith to each other. CTA welcomed the cardinal's initiative as a first step toward building a bridge over troubled waters. On some issues, there may indeed be common ground; on others, such as women priests and sexual morality, the differences are extreme.

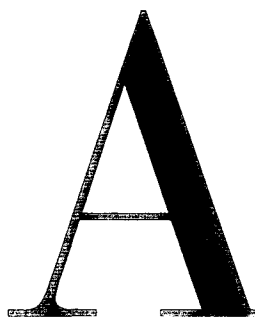
Simultaneous with CTA's November conference in Detroit, a counter-conference of Catholic conservatives was held a few miles away in a Detroit suburb. The leading speaker was Mother Angelica, whose Eternal Word Television Network continually beams a pre-Vatican II theology and spirituality to viewers across the nation. Organizers of the counter-event pledged to vehemently oppose any liberalization in the church. Though the prospects for compromise are obviously not bright at this moment, CTA supporters agree the effort must be made if the Catholic Church is to be a healthy and significant organization in the 21st century. ◀

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## ENVIRONMENT

# Moving the mountain



*Residents of a  
Florida town in  
the shadow of  
"Mt. Dioxin"  
win a  
rare victory  
over the EPA.*

By Gary Barlow

As I drive through the Pensacola, Fla., neighborhood of Rosewood Terrace with longtime resident Frank Pickett, two things catch my eye. First are the small white, homemade crosses in the front yards of home after home. The crosses stand out sharply in what otherwise appears to be a typically modest middle-class community of neat wood and brick homes. "Each cross means somebody who lived there has died of cancer," Pickett remarks. Some homes are marked with more than one.

The second feature, visible from all over the town, is the Escambia Treating Company's toxic-waste site, known locally as Mt. Dioxin. It is a huge pile of contaminated soil, 260,000 cubic yards, covered by a black piece of plastic that resembles a trash bag. The cover looks both ominous and insubstantial, as if it was put there to hold back

a danger it can't possibly contain.

The dirt pile covers a pit 40 feet deep—the source of the poison—which may hold another 200,000 cubic yards of dioxin-riddled soil. Nobody knows for sure. For decades, Escambia, like many other companies in the south, treated wood with creosote, a common preservative. Many homes in Rosewood Terrace were paid for with wages earned at Escambia before the company went bankrupt in early 1991.

We continue through the neighborhood, an African-American community nestled in an old industrial section of Pensacola, until Pickett tells me to pull up and park next to the train tracks where a freight train sits idled. Peering between the freight cars, he points out the Agrico Chemical site, described by one environmental scientist as "probably more contaminated by a broad range of carcinogenic chemicals that threaten people living immediately next door ... than any other contaminated site in the country."

The site, an area half a mile wide, is busy with bulldozers digging and piling up dirt. "They're supposed to keep it all sprayed with water to keep the dust down," Pickett says, "but they don't spray it much, unless people start calling." Agrico, which also closed down in the early '90s, manufactured agricultural fertilizers and pesticides.

Local leaders estimate that more than 50 people have died of dioxin-related cancer in this community of just over 350 families. While the EPA discounts other health risks from dioxin exposure, environmental studies show that dioxin exposure at levels 10 to 100 times lower than the official EPA risk standard of 1 part per billion can cause serious learning disabilities and other birth defects in children, dysfunctional immune systems in adults and children, and serious fertility disorders in both women and men.

The EPA's policy on cleaning up dioxin-contaminated sites is driven not by science, but by a combination of political factors and budgetary constraints. Lois Gibbs of the Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes argues that the EPA has no comprehensive system for determining where dioxin-contaminated sites are and cleaning them up. "Nobody knows how many there are," she says. "There may be hundreds, there may be thousands. The EPA hasn't done a survey on the question. Sites get attention only when affected communities like Rosewood Terrace demand it."

When people began noticing a disproportionate incidence of cancer and other health problems in Rosewood Terrace in the late '80s, the EPA tested the site. Those tests showed dioxin-contamination levels exceeding the EPA's trigger of 1 part per billion. In 1991, the EPA appeared without warning and began digging up the dirt at the Escambia site. The EPA had chosen to make the site an "emergency removal" location rather than placing it on the National Priorities List