

NOVA Celebrates Its First Birthday

by Charles E. Mahon

NOVA had a birthday party—its first—last Sunday in Arlington.

This NOVA isn't a particular style of automobile, or a celestial body. It's a community of Northern Virginia Catholics that formed a year ago to develop, in its own words, "a relevant, living contemporary liturgy offering both reverent, active shared worship of God and spiritual instruction, inspiration and nourishment for all the participants."

Not 'Underground'

In other parts of the country that might translate as "the underground Church," or "non-geographical parish." NOVA, however, is neither. It isn't underground because it operates in liaison with the Richmond Diocesan Liturgical Commission. It may be non-geographical, but it isn't a parish in the canonical sense.

But whatever it isn't, NOVA is a community and, to hear its members tell it, a sense of community in the bigness of suburban sprawl is what was sought.

(NOVA is a contraction of Northern Virginia that also is the Latin feminine for "new". In astronomy, a nova is a star that suddenly increases its light output tremendously and then fades to its former obscurity in a few months or years.) Since its formation in January 1968, NOVA has grown to a community of approximately 200 adults, including priests, religious, lay, men and women, and about 150 children.

For the first eight months of its existence NOVA celebrated Mass in different parish churches, one in Northern Virginia. This usually meant Mass in mid-afternoon because of the regular schedule of parish Masses. For the past four months, however, NOVA has been anchored at the chapel of Marymount College in Arlington, where Msgr. Carroll T. Dozier, chairman of the Diocesan Liturgy Commission, celebrated the NOVA anniversary Mass last Sunday night.

Membership in NOVA is established by participation in its activities, which are carried on through a dozen committees covering such aspects as Current Liturgy, Liturgical Research, Children's Liturgy, Education, Adult Theological Formation, Social Action, Evaluation and several housekeeping units. Major policy questions are decided through meetings of the Steering Committee open to the entire community. It also has general membership meetings, one of which is scheduled for Jan. 19 when NOVA plans a thorough review of where it has been in the past year and where it might be going. The Steering Committee consists of eight married couples, three single lay people and two priests, all of whom are active in the community.

Leaders If NOVA has a leader, It is Mike Timpane, an executive with the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Joseph S. Wholey, with the Urban Institute in Washington, is secretary. They have been active in the community since Its formal inception a year ago, and for several months prior to that when the idea of the community was taking shape.

Originally NOVA was known as the Concerned Christians of Northern Virginia. Concerned Christians were concerned that people, especially younger people, were turning from the Church or maintaining only formal ties to it because they could not find in their own parishes what they regarded as needs—fulfillment, community or meaning.

A group of the Concerned Christians submitted a proposal to the Liturgical Commission In November 1967. They asked for permission to worship together as a community "while we study how the liturgy and our Lives can be more fully directed to the worship of God and to Christ's service of God in the world." They agreed to keep the commission informed of their activities through several members of the community who were also members of the commission and to provide a progress report and evaluation every six months. Soon after the community began worshipping last January, it changed its name from Concerned Christians to NOVA Community. Before the first six months was up, NOVA obtained permission through the Liturgical Commission for a separate Liturgy of the Word for children. Wholey counts -this as one of NOVA's, most significant early contributions," Under the direction of deacons, who come from nearby seminaries in the Washington area, the children listen to the readings of the day's Mass in terms they can understand. They then discuss it in a dialogue homily as do their parents at the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. The children rejoin their elders at the Offertory for the remainder of the celebration.

The dialogue homily, Wholey said, has now spread to a point where a "wide variety of viewpoints are voiced and shared among the congregation on a particular Sunday." Wholey pointed out that another feature of the NOVA

liturgy has been the “intensive and successful effort to select a single theme from each Sunday's liturgy and to focus the entire Eucharistic celebration—homily, songs, supplementary readings—upon the presentation of that theme.” One member of the community, or one family, is given the responsibility each week to prepare for the Liturgy by developing the theme.

In its six-months report to the Liturgical Commission last June, NOVA reported that it had “found a sense of community.” The past six months have seen the emergence of a group identity and cohesion. To a remarkable degree people who were strangers or bare acquaintances six months ago are close friends today. The members have realized that the community depends on them and they have responded by working and worshipping together.

Differences of Opinion

“At the same time there are, beyond the common bond of a love for contemporary Liturgy, many differences of opinion among the members of the Community. The exploration of these differences must be undertaken for greater understanding and community.”

In an effort to find out just who NOVA is, the community conducted a survey among its regular members. Most responded. Preliminary findings indicated that (1) NOVAnS are young—88 per cent under age 40 (2) most enjoy relatively large incomes— 75 per cent earn \$10,000 or more a year and (3) nearly 90 per cent of the membership is from Northern Virginia, distributed mostly among 15 parishes. Following the six-month trial period, NOVA asked for several additional permissions for the community—including one that its existence be recognized in the community at large in Northern Virginia.

Special Permissions

On recommendation of the Liturgical Commission, Bishop John J. Russell granted NOVA members permission to have their children baptized in the community, at Marymount Chapel, provided the baptism is recorded in the appropriate parish; to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance, have their children make their First Communion in the community at Marymount Chapel and have Mass celebrated in the homes of members, with permission from the local pastor or the Chancery Office. The Bishop appointed Father Robert French of St. Luke's, McLean, to maintain liaison between the Liturgical Commission and NOVA and also wrote the pastors in Northern Virginia advising them of NOVA's “cooperation with the Diocese” and the permissions extended to the community.

NOVA's formation and growth was bound to raise a number of questions, and probably some eyebrows, among established parishes. NOVAnS themselves say they're asking some of—and trying to answer—the questions themselves—and that's part of what they hoped to accomplish in the community.

Is it Elitism?

One question that has come up frequently goes like this: Isn't NOVA fostering “elitism” that contradicts its stated aim of seeking community? If these 200 or 300 people are so concerned about developing community, friendship, love and involving themselves in social action why don't they give their geographical parishes the benefit of their effort? Timpane, NOVA's chairman, addressed himself to the questions. “The truth is,” he said “many people in NOVA simply would not be active in their parishes. In fact, some would have left the Church if it were not for NOVA. They just can't find their needs met in their parishes.” “But it's also true,” Timpane said, “that many in NOVA—our survey shows 54 per cent—are active in parish and diocesan activities. And many continue to support their parishes financially, although the level of support has undoubtedly dropped.”

Some of the reduction, he said, is due to the fact that NOVAnS are contributing money that formerly went to their parishes to charities. NOVA passes the collection basket at its Sunday Mass and for 19 weeks during the first part of 1968 averaged \$75.92, per week in contributions. Out of this total of \$1442.42, NOVA gave \$405.95 in contributions to charities and the rest for expenses. More recently, however, NOVA has been giving approximately 50 per cent of its income to charity. Several NOVAnS have figured prominently in established church activities. Timpane and Wholey have been active in the Diocesan Council of Catholic Men and supervised the 1968 DCCM convention in Arlington. Another member, Paul Heise, is secretary of the DCCM. Timpane said he intends to resume teaching CCD in his parish when his term as NOVA chairman expires.

Along with its interest in liturgy, NOVA set out with aims to involve itself as a community in social action. At present, social action in which NOVAnS are involved is brought to the attention of the community through the members expressing needs to the Steering Committee or the Social Action Committee. Members of the community then respond to the need. They have participated in Project Commitment, the Poor People's Campaign, and Project SHARE.

Where is NOVA headed? No one in this pilgrim community of a Pilgrim Church has the answer. Probably Timpane speaks the feelings of most NOVAnS when he says: “The thing about NOVA is that its members make it happen. If we weren't around, there wouldn't be any NOVA.”