

THE CONTROVERSIAL MASSES OF CHRIST THE KING

by Ralph Keyes



Photography by Robert and Nancy Black

■ Jesus has no hands on the statue before Christ the King Church. Vandals knocked them off years ago. His face is daubed black.

The church sits on a barren hill barely a hundred yards from a junk heap. At times the acrid odor of garbage floats through the parish. Stray dogs howl in a pack nearby.

Running only steps behind the church are railroad tracks. Every morning at 9:15 the San Diego, Arizona and Eastern roars through Mass.

For months I had been hearing that something was alive at this church in Southeast San Diego, a feeling of community, a religious feeling hard to find these days. A friend went to Christ the King's Mass last summer and was moved to tears. Another friend, a new-to-La Jolla divorcée, kept telling us there was a real community alive at Christ the King, a community which had taken her in. She said we would be welcome also.

Colorful posters reached out from among the statues and candles as we peeked into Christ the King's chapel that first Sunday morning. JOY! HE IS HERE. VIVA SU VIDA. LIVE! BE

KIND TO ONE ANOTHER. BEHOLD I MAKE ALL THINGS NEW.

People of every age, color and state of dress milled in and around the church. Though we had arrived several minutes before Mass was to begin, the pews were already filled, as was the balcony. People were starting to seat themselves behind the altar and in the aisles. The congregants were mostly white, and liberally sprinkled with longhairs. Kids ran among the pews making noise, but no one shushed them.

As worshipers spilled into the vestibule and began hanging out the doors, Father Bernie Cassidy started the Mass. A good rock band played hymns and we all sang. There were some mercifully brief readings. Then the microphone got out among the people.

A debate erupted about how evangelical a Christian should be. A lot of the longhairs there were ready to hit the streets pushing Jesus like Mr. Dependable selling TV sets. Some older parishioners and the priests argued with them. Don't lay your trip on anyone. Be a Christian by example more than word. Be gentle.

The debate ended and the music picked up—and up—and up. It rose in crescendo like Ravel's "Bolero." People held hands and swayed together. Some danced in place. Others embraced. And finally all fingers shot up in "V's." "Peace. Peace! PEACE!"

My fingers were up too. Me, the agnostic. Then holding hands with the bouncing old lady next to me. Swaying. Shuffling my feet. Singing as best I could. And—dare I say? moved.

"I know the question is coming, is all this 'new worship' an emotional binge, something the Pentecostals do better?"

The words are those of Father Joseph T. Nolan, a nationally recognized expert on Catholic liturgy. He visited Christ the King last year after hearing about it for two years on both coasts. He answered his own question in the pages of the *U.S. Catholic*.

"No. Even with all this acoustic overlay, there is a significant continuity established by the Eucharistic symbols of book, bread and wine. There is also an altar, cross, candles and vestments.... When a rite is enlivened with a genuine spirit—and I am speaking of the one

Left: The music begins and picks up—and up—and up. Above: Father Jim Gallas resembles very much a librarian and very little a religious agitator.



Rumors began to circulate that the priests were about to get the axe.

Father Randy Roche and longtime parishioner Cliff Faulk listen as congregants exchange thoughts with the microphone.

Spirit, Who is Holy—and this is done in a Eucharistic setting, with the remembered but not slavish traditions of the Catholic Mass, you have continuity and creativity—both of them.”

In a yellowed ledger book entitled, *History of the Parish: Christ the King Church for Colored People*, it is recorded that the parish held its first Mass on Christmas Eve, 1938. At the time, it was housed in a storefront on Imperial Avenue. In 1941, then-Bishop Charles Buddy invited the Society of Jesus to staff Christ the King in its new hall at 32nd and “L.”

But some months after my visit, rumors began to circulate that Christ the King’s Jesuits were about to get the axe. By the time I jammed into Christ the King Hall for a protest rally last April 30, the parishioners had already held two meetings. Committees had been formed.

“CHRIST FOUGHT ANGRY, AND WHY SHOULDN’T WE?”

John Dorsey of the committee to visit the Chancellor, Monsignor I. Brent Egan, reported on their two hour visit. They found the Monsignor sympathetic, very attentive (“he wrote, and wrote and wrote”) but basically legalistic in his approach: abuses were occurring at Christ the King in their liturgy, political activity and the offering of Communion to non-Catholics. If such abuses continued, well, the Bishop owned the property.

“We told him that the parish was not going to take this lying down,” reported Dorsey who has been active with the Farmworkers. “We were veterans of other struggles. We realized that our only weapons were our bodies, and we were willing to use them.”

At one point in the meeting with the Monsignor, a longtime parishioner had pounded the desk and told him in tears



how her parish had been slighted for so long and now they finally had priests who cared and they weren’t going to let them go.

“Our devotion to Christ the King, our feelings, poured out and you couldn’t help but feel them, no matter how callous the person,” explained Dorsey.

Other committees reported, one to encourage “nice” letters to the Chancery, another which had set up a “telephone tree” assigning each person four others to call so information could get out quickly, especially to people living outside the parish.

The Monsignor had said that the number of people who came to Christ the King from outside the parish boundaries was of concern to the Chancery. That got a bitter laugh from some of the old-timers who said the boundaries hadn’t seemed to matter when Christ the King was intended for blacks.

There was talk of direct action, like picketing the Bishop at the airport as he returned from a Bishop’s meeting in Detroit. One woman shook her fist in frustration and shouted, “By God, Christ fought angry, and why shouldn’t we?” A calmer local man agreed. “I’m for fighting these people. They sit up in their offices and they don’t know what’s going on.”

But the fear of losing their pastor, Father James Gallas, prevailed. That and his spirit. “I would really like to hate,” said a bald-headed man with glasses, “but I remember what Father Gallas says: that we’ve got to have a deep and abiding respect for every person we’re dealing with.”

The group then approved a statement



saying they would abide by "the just decisions of the Bishop of San Diego," but that "if the staff is removed from Christ the King, we will be prepared to give perpetual public witness as a testimonial to all they mean to us."

The Reverend James R. Gallas, S.J., is a slight, be-spectacled man who resembles very much a librarian and very little a religious agitator. He and his associate pastor, Father Bernie Cassidy were very preoccupied the day I went to see them because one of their young parishioners had just been arrested—unjustly, in their opinion.

We crowded into Father Cassidy's tiny office, strewn with books, papers and posters. Cassidy, 53, is a garrulous but unflappable native of San Diego who was an electrical engineer for 15 years before he decided to become a priest. He and Father Gallas, who is 39, went through the same seminary together at the time of Vatican II. Though they both went into teaching upon graduation, as do most Jesuits, Father Gallas was assigned to Christ the King as associate pastor after only one semester. He came reluctantly because he liked teaching.

Gallas says that when he arrived in 1965, Christ the King was doing very little work in the community, and offered only the most conventional kind of liturgy at poorly attended Masses. But this didn't bother him much, Gallas admits, for he too was quite conventional at the time.

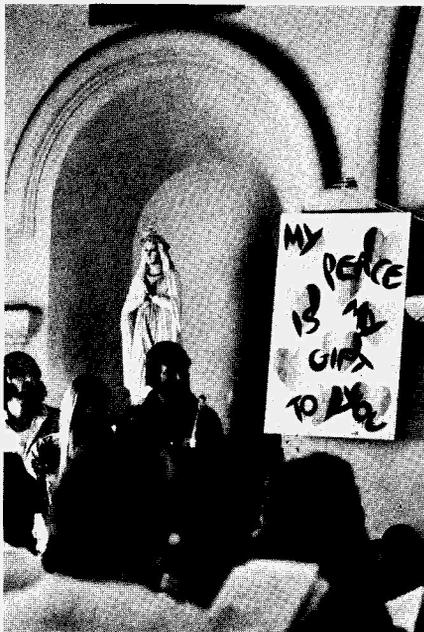
Above: Jesus has no hands on the statue before Christ the King Church. *Right:* Children often buzz about the pews during Mass, but no one quiets them.





**Complaints reached the Bishop's office:
Wild goings on at Christ the King!**

At the "quiet" early morning Mass, colorful posters reach out from among the statues and candles.



People of every age, color and state of dress fill the pews, altar and balcony at the 12:30 rock Mass.

As Father Gallas struggles to express his feelings, he paces, sighs, exhales, grinds his teeth—anything to get out what's inside. Words are obviously not his best mode of communication. A broad smile is.

By 1967, when he became pastor, Father Gallas was going through changes along with his parish. A lively young priest came in for the Summer and

opened the rectory to community "rap groups." Gallas himself joined other priests in social action projects. And he became part of a group of 13 clergymen who were studying experimental forms of liturgy.

Slowly, tentatively, he began to try new things in the Mass: letting parishioners choose their own hymns, do some of the readings, touch each other. And Father Gallas talks of his own liberation in the process: "I was a lot freer. I didn't let doors and walls wall me off from people as I had in the past. That spirit kind of shot through the liturgy and the way I was with people."

In the Summer of 1968, the first folk Mass was given at Christ the King by Father Charles Dollen. Now librarian at the University of San Diego, Father Dollen had for three years given what was probably the first regular folk Mass in the West while he was the parish priest of Crest.

Father Dollen brought his own band with him to Christ the King. This made some of the local young musicians unhappy, so they teamed up with Father Cassidy, who had just arrived, to do their own thing at one of the other Masses. They groped around for a long time before finally developing what today is the 12:30 rock Mass. (Another group—the East Brothers—split off to play at 10:30.) "At first," says Father

Cassidy, "I didn't understand the true meaning of this Mass. I'd do my thing and the musicians would do theirs. But then we began to work together. I'd feel them. They'd feel me."

And Christ the King began to live more dangerously. They allowed Black Panthers to serve breakfast to local children in their hall. They helped organize lively outdoor ecumenical services. They protested when the police harrassed local people. They held Masses on the beach. They let their meeting hall be used by parishioners and other community members for a meeting about Angela Davis. Associate Pastor John Crillo let his hair grow long.

But it's hard to be pioneers within a settled community. Trail-blazers are fine so long as they stay off in the mountains. But when wild-eyed men come down from the hills to tempt the settler's children—something must be done.

Complaints began pouring into the Chancery: Wild goings-on at Christ the King! Dancing in the aisles! Sno-cones in the rectory! Priests called by their first name! Irreverence and sacrilege! Holy Rollerism and Pentecostalism! Ecumenism and Communism.

The Chancery was on the spot. Bishop Maher had been to Christ the King for Confirmation the year before and was given a sample of their liturgy, rock 'n

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roll and all. He pronounced it loud for his taste, but acceptable.

Maher had only been here since October of 1969, coming from Santa Rosa where he was Bishop for seven years. His reputation was that of a conservative by conviction but a pragmatist in action who tried to keep the lid on controversy and build lots of new churches. Since arriving here his most unusual act has been to release a full financial report for the Diocese, a rather unprecedented thing for a Bishop to do.

Bishops resemble corporation executives, and corporation executives tend to get rewarded for running tight ships. As complaints mounted about Christ the King, the smooth hum of the Diocese was threatened. By early March of this year the rumors hit Southeast San Diego that the lid was about to blow at Christ the King. Father Gallas and his associates began trudging back and forth from the Chancery explaining their program to the Chancellor, the Auxiliary Bishop and finally Bishop Maher himself.

In an April 6 meeting, Father Gallas and Bishop Maher reviewed the problem areas: a loud liturgy which many

viewed as irreverent; the allegation that Communion was being given to non-Catholics at Christ the King, and in an unorthodox manner; the many worshippers who came to Christ the King from outside the parish; and especially the meeting held in Christ the King Hall about Angela Davis. Aside from being a staunch anti-Communist, Bishop Maher was personally acquainted with the Marin judge murdered by guns registered in Angela Davis' name. His feelings on the issue are known to run deep.

Their meeting ended with Father Gallas agreeing to write Bishop Maher a letter explaining all the circumstances leading up to the Angela Davis meeting. He left thinking the situation was resolved. But according to Monsignor Egan, "Christ the King's priests just did not seem to understand the problem with regard to the Angela Davis rally and liturgical experimentation."

At minimum, Father Gallas and the Bishop were working on different time tables. Two weeks after meeting with Bishop Maher, still not having written him the promised letter, Father Gallas got a phone call from the Jesuit Provincial in Los Gatos. The Provincial had just received a long letter from Bishop Maher outlining his grievances about

Christ the King and suggesting alternative solutions. One alternative was the transfer of Father Gallas and at least some of his associates.

But such a step would have rocked the ship and probably not been worth the furor. Weighing much more heavily on the Bishop's mind are things like financial crises, right-wing pressure against sex education in parochial schools, conflicting pressures about the Farmworkers, long hair among the clergy, and a Priest's Senate vigilant about "due process" in any personnel shifts. For the moment Bishop Maher simply requested that the Provincial arrange for a "visitation" of the San Diego parish to investigate his concern about the rock Mass and other aspects of Christ the King's program.

Fathers Gallas and Cassidy constantly stress how small a part of their total picture is the well-publicized rock Mass. There are three other, more conventional, Masses on Sunday, as well as others during the week. Sister Agatha Faimon oversees a comprehensive curriculum of religious education. An annual Mardi Gras parade was initiated by a parishioner from New Orleans. The staff counsels married couples as well as the sick and afflicted. They hold retreats, and cooperate in ecumenical activities with local Protestant churches.

When I asked the fathers whether they regard their liturgy as sacrilegious or "underground" in any way, they looked at each other, aghast. "No," they shook their heads. "No." "We consider everything we're doing very much above-ground and founded in the roots of liturgical renewal," said Father Cassidy. He explained that although in years past, "underground" Masses might have been closer to the liturgical forms recommended by the Vatican II, "in my opinion they were an impatient, spasmodic renewal of liturgy—overdone. Ours has been more gradual."

Father Gallas gets in one word for every 50 from Father Cassidy, and after a while you begin to wonder who's in charge. But when Gallas has to leave, to go down to the jail and check on their young parishioner, Father Cassidy falls silent for a few moments, then points to the door through which his young superior has just left. "He's the heart of this place. He's deeply, deeply loved because he's so open and available to any of the people in the parish. The phenomenon, the celebration here deeply rooted in community—people who care about each other in a quiet way—is the spirit of Father Gallas. Not the loud, boisterous,

Barnum and Bailey type as some people accuse me of being."

Father Gallas says the 7:30 Mass every Sunday, and he looks quite at home before the half-filled church of mostly black and mostly old parishioners who sit quietly as the Pastor reads softly through the liturgy.

The reading that Sunday had to do with a group of Antioch Christians who had been told by an unauthorized group from Judea that unless they were circumcised they could not be saved. Paul and Barnabas traveled from Antioch to see the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, returning with an agreement "not to lay on you any burden beyond that which is strictly necessary."

Father Gallas interpreted the reading: we must value tradition but not be bound by it. "Today's church faces disaster if a division continues between people who see it as closed and unchanging, and those who want it alive and growing."

Saying "Julie's got the best voice here," Gallas motioned to an older black woman in a cream suit and lace veil who came to the front and led the congregation in closing hymns. They held hands in final prayer, then whispering "peace" to each other on the way, quietly filed out.

The 9:00 Mass was conducted by Father Randy Roche, a handsome young graduate student in counseling at San Diego State. The church was nearly filled for this one, about half blacks, half whites. Many children dotted the pews, and their constant whispering was sometimes punctuated by the cry of a baby.

Father Roche referred frequently to "community" in his remarks, "this community that Christ is struggling to form in us." When he asked the congregation to spread around "the Peace of Christ," a few people hugged. Most shook hands. A stooped, white-haired man went up and down the aisle grinning and grabbing hands. "Peace. Peace be with you brother. May the peace of Christ be with you."

The music for the 9:00 Mass is directed by Laura Darley, a parishioner for over 20 years. A group of worshipers meets with her and Father Gallas every Monday morning to choose and practice hymns for the following Sunday. Accompanied by a young organist, the hymns have a heavy spiritual flavor.

Glory, glory, hallelujah

Since I laid my burden down

No more trials, no more troubles

Since I laid my burden down

Mrs. Darley waved her hand and boomed out the words as the crowd slowly filed out, some people pausing to give each other quick hugs.

One heavy, white-haired lady with a cane limped hurriedly down the aisle to be sure to catch the priest. "I gotta say hello to Father Roche," she said as she hobbled along. "Boy, he's a sweetheart!" She finally got to him, gave him a big grin and a hug, and got one back.

Between Masses, coffee and donuts are served in the church hall. Sheila Austin, 17, was selling them that morning, so she missed her usual 9:00 Mass. Wearing glasses under pulled-back hair, Sheila lives in Encanto but has always come to Christ the King where she was baptized and had her first Communion. She has watched the parish slowly change, and likes the changes. "Now you can converse with your friends and with the priests. Before you'd just come to Mass and go right home again. I know a woman at St. Rita's who says she's been going there for 35 years and the priest still doesn't know her name."

James Chinchillas, who was sweeping up the hall before taking his place as an usher overheard the conversation and added, "That's the way it is at most places. Here they make a point to know your name and they'll come to your house for supper if you just ask them."

The 10:30 Mass is all Father Dollen and the East Brothers. The silver-haired

Dollen wears a flowered olive and cream robe with gold sleeves, and is flanked by two altar boys in white. Ray East chants beautifully sometimes, and sometimes sings—always directing the audience with his rising and falling hand. Father Dollen's sermon—an historical interpretation of Papal social encyclicals—is delivered with flair and his audience applauds at the end. Young adults, on the whole, mostly white, the men tended to longish hair but styled, the women wore dresses, and many brought older children.

"Isn't his voice fantastic!" said Linda Mendro of Ray East as she walked her 4 and 6 year olds to the car. "And Father Dollen, his voice is so, so," she groped for a word. "So Eastern!"

Linda and Wayne Mendro, a 30 year-old El Cajon school-teacher raised in the Covenant Church, went to Christ the King's rock Mass once—"the long-hairy one"—but found it too chaotic. "I like the tight format of this," said Wayne of Father Dollen's folk Mass. "Never a wasted moment."

I was late arriving to the 12:30 Mass, walking in at 12:15 to find everything filled except the stage where I found space on a bench. On the stage with me were mostly young people in Levi's and

long dresses with starry eyes and faraway looks on their faces.

Just below us were the East Brothers who this Sunday were also playing the 12:30 Mass. Their goateed pianist wore a black leather jacket with a rip below one pocket. Surrounding his piano were a group of modishly dressed young girls, some sporting outrageous Afros.

It's quite a view from behind the altar at 12:30. The people before you are a very mixed bag. Old ladies with peace-symbol necklaces. Young couples holding babies. Some greyhaired longhairs. One guy in a polo shirt up in the balcony looked just like Mickey Mantle. With a child on either side, he stood just over two posters reading: OH MY LORD and I REALLY WANT TO KNOW YOU.

We all rose as the priest entered, not Father Cassidy who was leading a retreat, but Father William Cain—a tall curly-haired graduate student in chemistry.

Father Cain said we should get to know one another early this time. Immediately the bearded guy next to me grabbed my hand in a "movement" (thumb-lock) handshake saying, "Peace, brother." Others did the same. "Peace and Christ be with you." Young girls

hugged me and stared deeply into my eyes. "Peace be with you." "Peace." "How are you?"

Nervous.

Father Cain read to us of Paul and Barnabas, then explained that it had to do with "a lot of the Jews getting uptight. They were laying their thing on the Gentiles. It was a sign of their openness, their real caring for one another that they were able to transcend their differences. Which comes down to where Christ the King is at—that we've had to care about each other despite our differences. Many times in the past few weeks people have talked about Christ the King as 'open space.' We have to stay open. We can't become sealed off, feel that we've got such a good thing that we don't have to care what the Bishop feels and so on. That we don't love him. What do you think about that?"

The microphone went out into the crowd. An older black woman in a fur-trimmed suit started to say how much she loved the people of Christ the King—"my home"—but she burst out crying and passed on the microphone. An older Mexican woman rose to say in a crackling, accented voice how happy she felt at Christ the King, how warm and understood. A young girl ventured that in her

opinion the community had grown up in the past month, was not so isolated, and was making changes for the better. But a white-haired woman took the mike to argue. She had lost her faith for five years, she explained, and only regained it when her longhaired son brought her to Christ the King. "Now I have got my faith back, and I'm gonna fight for it in any way. If you don't like longhairs, if you don't like what we do here—don't come!"

A couple of people told the young priest that the rock Mass seemed toned down, and they worried that this was a sign of things to come "That's got nothing to do with what's happened," replied Father Cain. "That's me." People laughed. "That's me and there's just all different kinds of ways of doing things. Bernie's away this week."

"Well, I think you're groovy," said a radiantly smiling young mother from the second row. That got a lot of laughter and applause. "We're too used to coming here and having the same old thing, the band and everything," she continued. "It used to be that I'd come to Mass and I'd go home and feel nothing. Now I find that the feeling stays with me all week and I can transmit it to my family and friends."

We went to responsive prayers, including one "for Bishops Leo and John (Quinn) that they might come celebrate with us some day." The basket came around; the kids around me dug into their Levi's for spare change, the music picked up and we sang hymns together, sometimes holding hands as we sang. One little kid in the front aisle stuck his fingers in his ears. But this wasn't the regular 12:30 band so things didn't reach their usual crescendo. Some members of the congregation put their fingers up in "V's," but only a few danced over the crowd.

The Mass ended quietly at 2, half an hour earlier than usual.

For the moment things seem to be resolved at Christ the King. Two Jesuits came from Los Gatos and made a nine-page report to the Provincial. One of the two, Father Michael Buckley, who is Rector of Berkeley's Jesuit School of Theology, says he found Christ the King "more deeply Christian, more genuinely concerned than even I imagined." Father Buckley says their liturgy is "very reverent." Overall he found Christ the King to be "one of the finest parishes I've seen."

On May 10, Fathers Gallas and Cassidy met with Bishop Maher and hammered out a four-point agreement suggesting

greater professional consultation on their music, prior consultation with the Chancery before holding meetings not dealing with immediate Parish concerns, and the formation of a Parish Council. The final point read: "The Bishop is not asking for the removal of any priest of the parish at this time. However, he feels that the work to be done in the parish does not require more than three full-time priests."

As a basis for their meeting, Bishop Maher had written Father Gallas a letter in which he reiterated his displeasure at the Angela Davis meeting "instigated by members of the Communist Party," and said of Christ the King's liturgy: "you should be apprised of the fact that you cannot lead men back to authentic religious life without elevating them from purely the humanistic.... The very dignity of Sacred Liturgy forbids the desire for novelty which leads to mere humanism."

I wanted to discuss these concerns with Bishop Maher since I feel that would have helped my own understanding of the situation, and that of whoever reads this. I'm told the Bishop is quite an interesting person to talk to, a "man's man" who loves a good argument. I wish we could have met, but he told me through his secretary that he regards the matter as closed and wants no further publicity.

I did meet for an hour and a half with Monsignor I. Brent Egan in his spacious, red-carpeted office. Monsignor Egan, a distinguished-looking man wearing gold cuff links and a ready smile underneath his grey pompadour, laid out the Chancery's position for me: Christ the King has a beautiful spirit and a great pastor. But abuses took place there. The priests have agreed to correct the abuses. Presumably there will be no cause for further controversy.

The mood today among Christ the King's parishioners is one of relief that Father Gallas and his associates will remain, coupled with concern that this may be just a reprieve. The chart for the "telephone tree" has been saved.

Father Cassidy says they are not toning down, but that new directions are beginning independent of the recent crisis. The leader of 12:30's band recently left to join a church in Chula Vista. The East Brothers are gone for the summer. Father Charlie Dollen says he is worried that a "personality cult" may grow up about him and wonders whether it's time to move on. "Something new is going to happen here," says Father Cassidy, "though I have no idea what that will be." #