



UNCLE JOE

A Trailblazer in Sociological Study

By Fr. Stephen Joseph Fichter

June 10, 2008, marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of Fr. Joseph Fichter, S.J., one of the better known American Jesuits of the past century, and one about whom initially there was some doubt as to his qualifications to even enter the Company. Two Jesuit historians have recently praised his life and work in glowing terms, and even before his death, in 1994, many social scientists of great distinction lauded his innumerable and long-lasting contributions to the sociological study of religion. Some of his conservative critics—a group that would definitely include my traditionalist mother, to whom he was related by marriage—found fault with his opinions concerning, among other things, the ordination of women.

Progressive and provocative theological positions aside, he surprised many by becoming an indefatigable researcher who authored more than 30 books. Often amidst criticism from both civil and ecclesiastical authorities, he confronted some of the

most controversial issues of his era, from racial desegregation and optional celibacy during the 1950s and 60s, to clergy alcoholism and the Reverend Moon’s Unification Church during the 1970s and 80s. He taught at Loyola University New Orleans for almost 40 years and held a prestigious chair at Harvard Divinity School for five. He was my Uncle Joe.

My siblings and I used the term “uncle” for him when in fact he was our granduncle, the younger brother of our grandfather. Uncle Joe and grandpa were close to each other in both age and interests. Born in Union City, New Jersey, of immigrant German stock, they worked together in construction and were avid baseball players; both wanted to become Jesuits. When they were in their early twenties, they sought admittance to the New York Province. Both were turned away. The Jesuit in charge of vocation discernment told my grandfather that due to his auditory handicap (he was 90 percent deaf after a childhood bout with scarlet fever), he would never be ordained as a priest for

he was incapable of hearing confessions. Not feeling called to serve as a lay brother, grandpa opted for marriage, naming his first son, my father, after the brother he admired so deeply. Twenty-seven years later, I inherited Joseph as my middle name.

Getting back to Uncle Joe, the New York Province superiors judged that he did not possess the intellectual acumen to join them. They pointed to his mediocre grades in high school Latin and Greek as objective evidence. Considering his earnest desire to enter the Society and yet not willing to lower the bar for him, however, they suggested that he petition the relatively young New Orleans Province, as it was in need of recruits. Not one to be thwarted by roadblocks and humble enough to acknowledge his shortcomings, Joe headed south.

In those days, young Joe Fichter was a “late vocation,” entering the novitiate at 22 years of age. Cycling through the classical *ratio studiorum* of Jesuit training, which must have included some remedial Latin and

Greek classes for him, he obtained his M.A. in Sociology and Philosophy from Saint Louis University in 1939. Still three years away from ordination, he published his first book, *Roots of Change*, at age 31.

Not only is the opening paragraph of his premier publication maturely crafted for such a young author, it is also a prophetic autobiography of who Joseph Henry Fichter was to become over the next 50 years. He wrote to his reader:

"For every thousand persons who are influenced by their own age, and shaped according to its mold, there is one person who harbors the dream of contri-

azing Jesuit st of Religion

buting his little share in reshaping the mold somewhat closer to his ideal. It is to this one person in every thousand that I have directed the thoughts and criticisms contained in these fourteen chapters on modern social, economic, and political change. It is for this one person who feels a divine dissatisfaction with things as they are; who is determined that his own life and striving must not go down the vortex of popular and hysterical movements; who believes that he can bend ever so slightly by his own efforts the onrush of a chaotic civilization; it is for his perusal that this book has been written."

Five more books, three hagiographical and two theological, rolled off his typewriter before his sociological career began. It was during this period, shortly after the American entry into World War II, that Uncle Joe was ordained to the priesthood in 1942. Just as the war ended in 1945, his superiors sent him back north for two years to study for a doctorate in Sociology at Harvard. This was a major turning point in his life. From that

time onward, he viewed everything through a sociological lens. In his first autobiography (yes, he wrote two of them, compulsive writer that he was), he mentions how impressed he was by Professor Clyde Kluckhohn's remark that "the Roman Catholic church, with its integrated system of values and its high quality of organizational competence could potentially restore a sense of balance to Western civilization." After thoroughly searching through the existent literature, Uncle Joe realized that "American Catholicism was virtually an untouched field of sociological research." He knew then that he had found his specialized niche.

Returning to New Orleans as a newly-minted professor for Loyola University, Dr. Fichter started a research project that not only gave him national notoriety almost overnight but also established a paradigm that would repeat itself throughout the rest of his career. The paradigm was simple: 1) he would investigate an issue that everyone knew was important but no one wanted to discuss; 2) he would then report his findings as clearly as possible, not afraid of publishing controversial results; and 3) he would inevitably get in trouble with those who were responsible for managing



the public image of the Church and for preventing "damage" to its reputation.

Motivated by a desire to help the Church come to a greater understanding of how effectively she was carrying out her mission on the parish level, Uncle Joe launched his first post-doctoral research project: a study of a "successful" New Orleans parish. With the help of 10 research assistants from Loyola, he conducted a two-year investigation and discovered (to his surprise), that the parish was not flourishing as well as had been believed. Although the University of Chicago Press had accepted his work, and he had obtained the three levels of ecclesiastical permission necessary for publication, the pastor of the "not-so-successful" parish pressured Archbishop Rummel and Fr. Joe's superior to suppress the series. Though he fought the censorship, in the end he was obedient to the Church authorities and moved on to other projects.

This paradigm of "getting in trouble for telling the truth" framed his many other research projects. He covered such diverse topics over the years as the effectiveness of the Jesuit educational system and the ills of racial profiling.





found it and so it is only fitting that the closing pages of his second autobiography, titled *The Sociology of Good Works*, were devoted to explaining his cooperation in (and enthusiasm for) the beatification process of Sister Henriette Delille, a “free woman of color” who founded the Sisters of the Holy Family in Louisiana. This turned out to be Joe Fichter’s last hurrah. His desire to promote her cause is a poignant summary of his entire life. Truly, Uncle Joe was a man

who felt “a divine dissatisfaction with things as they are” and bent “ever so slightly by his own efforts the onrush of a chaotic civilization.” It is in his memory and for his honor that I have written this article. Happy 100th birthday, Uncle Joe. Your family, your Jesuit brothers, and all your sociological friends are very proud of your many good works.

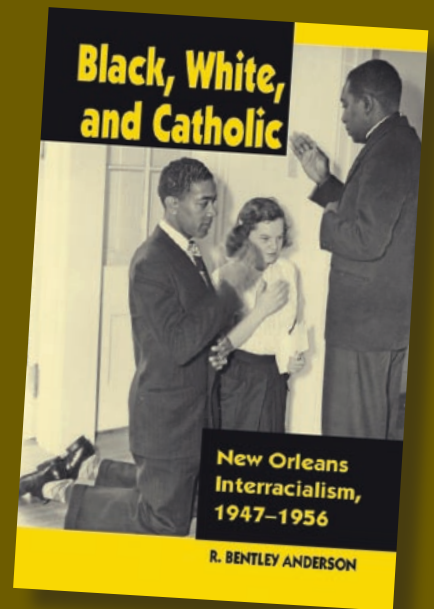
Fr. Stephen Joseph Fichter is the pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Haworth, New Jersey.

He was also concerned about the health of American clergy and investigated the spiritual dimensions of health care. A bit of a lone ranger and very much a workaholic, he preferred to toil on his own. On average, he produced a book every 18 months, and published more than 200 scholarly articles during his career.

Writing was not his only passion. He also worked hard to eliminate injustice wherever he found it, “reshaping the mold somewhat closer to his ideal.” Even prior to the Civil Rights Movement, he fought against the deeply ingrained system of segregation in New Orleans and soon came to be known as a Northern agitator, as Bentley Anderson, S.J., explains in detail in his recent book *Black, White, and Catholic*. When I met Lindy Boggs in Rome during her tenure as the American ambassador to the Vatican and asked if she had known my granduncle, she replied in her charming southern belle manner, “Oh, yes! I knew Fr. Fichter. He was one of those Red Jesuits.” Apparently being in favor of desegregation made him a Communist as well!

Such labels never bothered him; perhaps he even relished them, so convinced was he of the righteousness of his causes. Besides racism, he also railed against sexism wherever he

In 1952 the New Orleans Province of the Society of Jesus officially ended the practice of racial discrimination within their various apostolic ministries including secondary schools, parishes, retreat houses, and institutions of higher learning as well as the province itself. The decision to address the race question came two years before the United States Supreme Court ruled in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case that racial segregation within the American school system was unconstitutional and three years before the modern civil rights movement began with the Montgomery bus boycott.



– From a talk given by Saint Louis University history professor, Fr. R. Bentley Anderson, S.J., in June of 2008 during the Centennial Celebration of the founding of the New Orleans Province. Visit www.norprov.org/news/andersononrace.htm for the full text of Fr. Anderson’s talk. Fr. Anderson is the author of the book *Black, White, and Catholic — New Orleans Interracialism, 1947-1956*, (Vanderbilt University Press, 2008) which covers Fr. Joseph Fichter’s role in the Civil Rights Movement and that of the New Orleans Province.

The SOUTHERN Jesuit

Fall 2008

