

Understanding groups

By SYLVIA HART
Press Register Reporter

Liberal Christians and Jews, while disagreeing with political approaches of the so-called "new Christian right," should try to understand groups on the right, according to a Catholic educator.

Monsignor George Higgins, adjunct lecturer at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., discussed his views of conservative Christian groups, particularly the Moral Majority led by the Rev. Jerry Falwell of Lynchburg, Va., during an address to participants of the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue.

In the dialogue at Little Flower Catholic Church, Higgins said, "We shouldn't exaggerate the fear that they (Christians on the right) raise, shouldn't stereotype them, but should treat them the same way we would want to be treated on the other side."

The Moral Majority and other Christians on the right have been a subject of controversy particularly since national elections in the United States in 1980, when so-called ultra-conservative Christians became politically involved. Traditionally they had spurned politics.

Higgins began his address by saying, "I do not question the right of any organization, secular or religious, left or right or middle of the road politically, to speak out on

matters of public policy on the basis of its own moral and ethical standards and to try to persuade its own constituents or its members or the general public to think and to act and even to vote accordingly.

"On the contrary, I believe our nation is enriched as its citizens and social groups, including religious groups, approach public affairs from positions grounded in strong moral convictions."

Higgins further said that he did not wish "to engage in polemics on theological grounds" with Christians on the right.

"But theology aside, now that these organizations have moved over publicly full-force into the political arena, they cannot reasonably object, it seems to me, on religious grounds if others, including other Christians, disagree with their philosophy or with their political strategy tactics."

Higgins said he disagrees with Christians on the right in their approach to political activism on several grounds.

For example, "I'm disturbed and would have good reason to be even more disturbed if I were not a Christian — if I were Jewish, for example — by their repeated and in some instances not very subtle emphasis on getting out what they indiscriminantly call 'the Christian vote,' or

more ominously, creating in this country 'a Christian republic.'"

Further, said Higgins, "I find their highly partisan approach, at least in some cases, to be somewhat selective and simplistic — simplistic in the sense that it makes little if any allowance for the complexity of most of these issues and for the complexity of the political process itself."

The speaker listed some points in which he disagrees with Falwell, "based on a careful reading of his popular book 'Listen, America,' which in effect is the official manifesto of the Moral Majority."

Higgins noted, however, that Falwell has written a second book that is "considerably more moderate on almost every point taken up in the original book."

One point of disagreement the priest listed with Falwell was national defense.

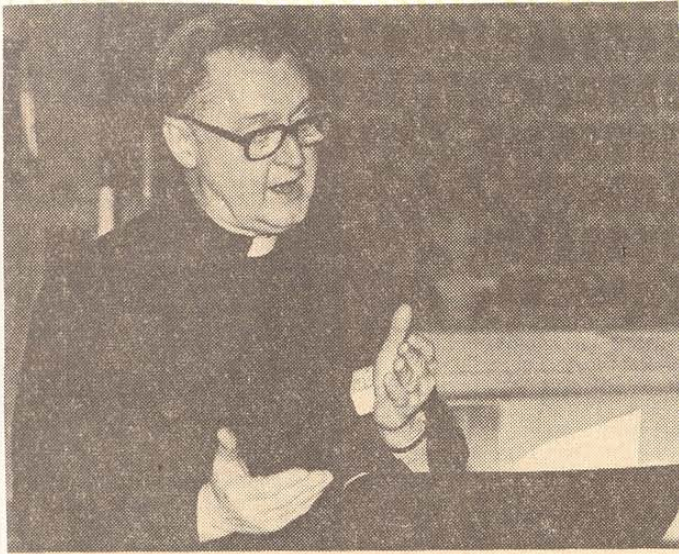
Higgins quoted Falwell: "Ten years ago we could have destroyed much of the population of the Soviet Union had we desired to fire our missiles. The sad fact is that today the United States would kill only 3 to 5 percent of the Soviets because of their anti-ballistic missiles in their civil defense."

Said Higgins, "To lament in the name of biblical religion our real or alleged inability to kill many Soviet civilians in the case of war seems to me to turn the message of the gospel completely upside down."

Falwell's "militarism," according to Higgins, "is coupled in his original manifesto with an extreme form of jingoism or super patriotism which he explicitly rejects in the second book."

Falwell "repeatedly says, 'God promoted America to a greatness no other nation ever enjoyed because her heritage is one of a republic governed by laws predicated on the Bible.'"

on right said important in dialogue



Mobile Press Register photo by Dave Hamby

Monsignor George Higgins

Said Higgins, "I should think a decent respect for the opinion of the rest of mankind would have restrained him from putting such a view into cold print."

When Falwell and others, including Democratic and Republican presidents of the United States, talk about this nation as the "last best hope of the world," said Higgins, "I can't help but think what the rest of the world — the people in France, Germany, Great Britain or whatever — must think when it hears this."

Discussing further disagreements with Falwell, the speaker said that according to Falwell's manifesto, "the Bible has settled almost every conceivable issue in public policy. He maintains, for example, the free enterprise system is clearly outlined in the book of Proverbs."

If, indeed, Proverbs outlines the free enterprise system, Higgins said he questions the inclusion of the book in the Catholic canon, or law.

While disagreeing in many ways with the philosophy and political approaches of Christians on the right, Higgins said, "It seems to me that one of the major failures of liberal critics of the so-called Christian right is that we have to some extent done what we accuse the Christian right of doing. That is, we have attacked 'the enemy' in a stereotyped form, have not taken the trouble to get inside their mind, let alone to dialogue with them in a structured way, and have set up a contestation in which no one can win and in which all will lose."

Higgins said liberals should acknowledge that Christians on the right "did not invent single-issue politics." Hundreds of organiza-

tions in Washington at times engage in single-issue politics. "That goes for Catholic organizations. That goes for Protestant organizations. It goes for Jewish organizations."

Abortion is a matter that liberals have viewed as a single-issue cause of conservatives.

Higgins said that "an ecumenical-liberal-conservative dialogue on this (abortion) and other controversial issues is overdue and would be extremely helpful."

Such dialogues should have conditions. Both sides should "enter the dialogue with an open mind, with no hidden agenda, with genuine respect for each other's deeply held convictions, with a willingness to listen as well as to talk and with a realistic understanding of the complexities and limitations of the political process in a pluralistic society."

Said Higgins, "Since Catholics have long been closely identified with some segments of the pro-life movement in the United States, I think they can rightly be expected to play an active role in this hoped-for dialogue."

Higgins said some dialogues including conservative Christians might focus on views of Israel.

While Jews might recognize the support of Israel by Christians on the right, and while Catholics might recognize the opposition to abortion by Christians on the right, dialogue participants should frankly discuss that even though there are points of agreement, there are many other points of disagreement that must be addressed, Higgins said.