From the Ranks of the Ordinary People:

Father Cox and Pittsburgh in the 1940s

by Sally Witt

BEING IN TOUCH with the ordinary people of the Pittsburgh area was a joy to Father James R. Cox. Pastor of St. Patrick Roman Catholic Parish in the Strip District from 1923 to 1951, Father Cox liked to recall he had gone to St. Patrick’s as the youngest pastor of the oldest parish in the diocese. By the time of his death, he had provided many more reasons for “Old St. Patrick’s” to have a unique place in the history of Catholic life in Pittsburgh.

The story of Father Cox provides a window on those Western Pennsylvanians who experienced life in an industrial city at mid-century. Their concerns were his. So were their daily interests and life patterns. Yet written sources on Father Cox and his activities are sparse. Some 25 years ago Father John D. Petrarulo and Thomas H. Coode published a scholarly account, “The Odyssey of Pittsburgh’s Father Cox,” in this publication’s predeces-
Much of Father Cox's Pittsburgh ministry took place in The Strip (top, between Penn and Liberty avenues, July 1950), an old immigrant neighborhood near Downtown that by mid-century had become the railroad district of the city. Good Samaritan Chapel, left (also visible in the top photo, at Penn Avenue and 14th Street), had been empty for years when it was leveled to expand a parking lot in early 1997. St. Patrick's Church, however, still stands at 17th Street and Liberty Avenue.
At a time when devotion to Mary the mother of Jesus was paramount in Catholic life, Father Cox was fervent in his dedication. Pilgrimages to the shrines of Our Lady of Lourdes and Saint Anne de Beaupre in Canada were hallmarks of his devotional life. He explained his devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes by describing the cure of his eyes when he was a boy.

His interest in Lourdes is personal. As a boy it was decided by the doctors that due to bad eyes my vocation to the priesthood was impossible of fulfillment. For three years the best doctors at Mercy Hospital, Pittsburgh, had attended me. It was necessary to have the right eye almost constantly bandaged and to wear smoked glasses. All hope of cure was abandoned by everybody except myself and I knew Our Lady would help me. Lourdes water was procured and used. Two hours later the bandages and glasses were removed and have never again been used. My eyes were cured.

In 1924, he began Lourdes devotions at Old St. Patrick's. Later he wrote that they became “the best attended, most consistent and popular devotion in Pittsburgh.” He established the monastery garden surrounding the church and called it an oasis of beauty in downtown Pittsburgh. It contained a well, stations of the cross, and a replica of the grotto at Lourdes.

Every Sunday, Father Cox held the miraculous rose novena at Good Samaritan Chapel at Penn Avenue and 14th Street. He explained that roses grew in the crevices of the mountain at Lourdes and particles of their leaves were placed in medallions. One of those medallions would be venerated at the miraculous rose novena, an evening service lasting about 40 minutes, with choir singing, a talk by Father Cox, and a procession of children dressed in white.

Dangerous traveling conditions during World War II interrupted Father Cox’s frequent pilgrimages. At the time, he spoke of having taken over 700 pilgrims to Lourdes and more than 5,000 to the shrine of Saint Anne. He said some people wondered if he profited financially from the trips, and his response was that he was usually in debt afterwards. On each trip, he included some people who needed the possibility of healing that could occur at the shrines but could not afford to travel.

In a booklet, Father Cox listed “Necessary Conditions for Making the Novena in Honor of Our Lady of Lourdes and Saint Bernadette for Catholics.” The conditions included the use of Lourdes water: “A drop or two of which should be put in every glass of water and in every bath — also upon your food.” These conditions are followed by “Conditions for Non-Catholics.” Instead of praying the rosary, which is required for Catholics, non-Catholics are advised to say their own prayers; weekly confession and Communion are not on their list, but they are asked to abstain from meat on Fridays.

In the first half of this century, such attention to those who were not Catholic was unusual in the context of Catholic prayer, but it was quite ordinary for Father Cox. It was natural for him to speak to people about attending their church or Sunday school or synagogue, or to remark about the importance of people of every race, color, and religion.
He constantly urged his listeners not to be afraid to speak of their troubles to him or to other clergy. They did not have to fear that their problems might seem trivial. "Anything which causes pain or trouble to the least of God's little ones is never silly or trivial to me," he assured them.18

Father Cox believed that 90 percent of the people were good and he saw their ordinary lives as holy. After all, in choosing the tax collector Matthew for a friend, Jesus showed that he wanted ordinary people around him. "When you come down, for instance, from the altar rail after a worthy reception of Holy Communion, for all practical purposes you are a saint," he told his listeners. They could also be saints in facing countless petty problems. He urged them to take their goodness to their places of work and to let others know about God through their example.19

Jesus, he said, trusted the ordinary people whom he picked up from the streets, the beach, or the counting houses.20 In fact, the priests at St. Patrick's wanted to help listeners do their best, be kind to the poor, and be "square in business dealings."21

He told listeners that God looked on them with mercy and love. In a 1945 broadcast, Father Cox said:

Why this idea has come into the human minds that almighty God is hard and will not understand our human nature is something that I cannot understand. And I say it's pitiable how much we misunderstand almighty God. How many of us, when reminded of God's will, think only of the Ten Commandments, forbidding us to do this or to do that. ... Now almighty God knows us better than we know ourselves. And he knows our weakness and he knows our frailty. And he knew it all so well that he sent his only divine Son into this world who lived and died amongst us, and during his entire life he was the epitome of kindness. He was never hard to anyone; he was good to saint and to sinner. Now certainly the Son of God, God himself, who came into this world out of love for us, to redeem fallen man — if he, the God of heaven and earth, gave an example of the relationship between God and human beings, and that relationship was a relationship of kindness and mercy, why then do we have the notion that no matter what we do we're going to go to hell and there's no hope for us? ... You know, it seems to me that maybe those who talked about God and who taught the things of God in the long ago thought it was much easier to scare people into being good than to treat them kindly and have them willingly do the right thing. ... And I think those that have preached hell, fire and damnation as the only solution for our salvation wanted to follow the easy road in life. You know, hell was really not made for us. Hell was made for Lucifer and his fallen angels. It was made for creatures who were all intellect and who understood very clearly and definitely their relationship to almighty God and were not obscured in their intelligence and were not weak in their will. Hell was made for them. But we're just poor human beings who ... suffer from darkness of intellect and weakness of will. And we're thoroughly and 100 percent human, and we need the mercy and the love of God.

He reminded people about the beatitudes, "those beautiful thoughts of mercy and of love." He told listeners that God loved us so much, he chose to make his Son a man rather than an angel, and, "God would have us abound in joy!"22
Father Cox easily blended patriotism with his care for all people throughout the world. This was America, and he never hesitated in championing its superiority. He was chaplain of the Pennsylvania State Guard (a volunteer corps for those not qualified for active military service), which fought for everyone: for the right to hold town meetings and high school debates, for open doors in churches and synagogues, "for schools built on a foundation of books, not bayonets," for rights of laborers and employees to organize, and "for the high privilege... of throwing pop bottles at the umpire."23

According to Father Cox, America had a grand past and a glorious future to share with the world. He was proud of the men and women in industry and unions, in agriculture and transportation, who were helping in the war effort. He called the men of the Pennsylvania State Guard part of the grand tradition of Lexington, Valley Forge, Corregidor, and Normandy, "who will carry the blessings of democracy to the uttermost parts of the earth."24 In one Thanksgiving broadcast, he spoke of military personnel having their holiday meal:

From the time of that first Thanksgiving banquet until the present day, whenever Americans assemble, no matter how difficult it may seem to arrange things, they will always have a Thanksgiving Day feast to thank God that they are Americans and that America still lives and that America is going forward in giving to all the world a reason why they should thank God for the material benefits that he showers upon mankind.25

Yet he also called it scandalous that abundance in some parts of the world left misery in others. He believed the world of the future had to provide for everyone. All people would be better off if knowledge and inventions were used for their happiness rather than for the profits of a few. "When men are killing one another, everybody's working," he said.26 He predicted that when the war ended, mills would be idle because financial profit from production would be lacking. Yet people all over the world could use the benefits of production from idle mills:

Oh, let me take a simple little, silly example: what they need in Africa — a climate where they live with intense heat all the time — they need refrigerators. Now if they made enough refrigerators to take care of all the natives in Central Africa, all the mills would be busy producing for the next 500 years. And there'd be plenty of work for everybody everywhere. Will they do it? The Africans have no money to give for it, so there'll be no refrigerators for them.27

He saw scientific development as important, but also felt a lack of the love needed to use it well. Science, Father Cox believed, could be an instrument of liberation, allowing people more leisure and a higher standard of living. He appealed to both workers and owners to understand this and to become "sowers... of charity and not gatherers of a lot of gold that perishes." The world was living through a tragic period. "We are witnessing almost a cosmic revolution," he said. The nationalistic period was giving way to a universal time which would make use of transportation, radio, and television, "and all this preparatory to a day of an all-embracing humanity, a period when all men will learn the greatest lesson that can be learned anywhere: that lesson of love and that lesson of cooperation for all."28

Father Cox spoke fondly of his education, beginning with his elementary school years at Hatfield Street School and then at St. Mary's on 46th Street. He attended Holy Ghost College (now Duquesne University), and, as a seminarian, studied at Saint Francis College in Loretto and Saint Vincent Seminary in Latrobe. After serving as a chaplain in World War I, he attended the University of Pittsburgh, where he received a master's degree in education. He saw great opportunities for education to render improvements in this country. There were schools available for everyone to learn, and thus to become able to help others. Newspapers and magazines were accessible for education, and, he added, "there's a university on the radio."29

Right after World War II, Father Cox spoke to returning GIs and their families concerning education:

If the boys and girls who served their country in World War Number II express any desire whatever to go and take advantage of the educational opportunities that are offered by the United States Government, let them go and encourage them to go, even if you have to make some sacrifices. The reason we do not get farther in this world...is because we do not keep up with things.30

He was glad the government was providing the opportunity for schooling, and he had a plan to make education possible for those returning from the service. He noted that schools weren't able to handle the increase in students because of returning soldiers, sailors, Marines, and nurses. Father Cox was familiar with Indiantown Gap and similar army camps, and thought they would become problems for the government and local citizens if they remained vacant. His solution was to use the army camps as schools for returning service people. He considered the barracks sanitary and comfortable, in better condition than many homes.

Father Cox knew where to find the teachers, too. They could come from among the ranks of the returning service men and women who were educated and were finding it hard to get jobs. The officers had made America's soldiers the greatest in the world. Could they not now educate them for peace? The United States could become the new Athens. The skills veterans could learn would not only help them but would also increase the happiness of all the people in the world.

With education in agriculture, for example, the tanks of war
could be made into farming machines, and there would never again be starving people. It would not be difficult in the age of speedy transportation, radio, and television for colleges and universities to sponsor branch schools. "Why, the professor standing in Philadelphia could teach them at Indiantown Gap, and the boys in the classrooms could be supervised by a good old sergeant or lieutenant or captain." There were too many idle hands. Work, as well as education and vocational training in government schools, could win the real victory for the republic.

Father Cox did not dwell only on topics as serious as education. He extolled good times. Once he said that even while the Benedictine Order had accomplished wonders, he thought its maxim "pray and work" could be improved by the addition of "play." "We must have recreation," Father Cox said. The same attitude was present in his love of pilgrimages. Although he led people to the shrines because he wanted them to pray and because he had the constant memory of the cure of his eyes, he also thought travel in itself was important.

"[W]e've urged you to go to distant places because we firmly believe that by association with people from other climes and other lands we get a better appreciation of just what our neighbors do in their daily life. We gain respect for those of other places by associating with them and finding that people in all parts of the world are wonderful and good people.

Father Cox pointed out that people needed the inclination to travel. Some never wanted to leave "their own front stoop" or their street, but he knew people who had overcome that feeling and made many journeys. Money was another factor; Father Cox could tell them how much the basic travel costs would be, but he could not predict what their interests, desires, and spirit would require when they got to Europe. And, of course, they needed time off work to take the trip and they had to obtain their passport. But there were always friendships formed on the trip, and some of those friendships had led to marriages or business deals. Besides, he explained, just the train and boat trips were enjoyable.

For young people, he realized that socials and supervised recreation were available in cities as well as at high schools and colleges. In the old days, Father Cox and his childhood friends had played "like gentlemen" on the playgrounds at Hatfield Street and St. Mary's schools. His parents had considered it more important to provide piano and violin lessons for the children than to obtain things for themselves. By singing in one another's homes, young people would meet their friends' families. That was the right way to meet, Father Cox insisted, and it never involved "passing of a little snort," drinking beer, or "getting high." Music was important, Father Cox also believed, because he knew from being in military camps and on ships how a musician could change the atmosphere.

He recalled one memorable diversion he initiated during his first assignment, at Epiphany Parish in the Uptown section of Pittsburgh from 1911 to 1917. He obtained the use of a "funeral car" to carry 50 people. He organized families of different nationalities and ethnicities to dress in their native costumes, then he transported other parishioners around the streets from Grant to Miltenberger to homes in the neighborhood, where they stopped for food or drink.

He believed that clergy of all faiths should arrange activities for youth — not to bring money into the church, but because people might come to church if they were better acquainted with one another (and consequently the collections would improve). But the only purpose for the socials should be for people to get together:

"I feel there's no use of holding these social affairs unless the priests are interested in them. And I say that in small communities where they do not have a wonderful hall in which to hold their affairs, I say it's more than important, it's tragically important, that they get together under the auspices of their church and have these affairs.

Even though he loved being busy and active, Father Cox realized the importance of rest, and compared it once to rests in the performance of music. Going to late Mass or service on Sunday could be part of a balance of activity and rest that would help to preserve a calm life. "Taking it easy does not mean wasting time," Father Cox said.

Parish boundaries were not important to Father Cox: he addressed everyone who could hear him through the WJAS signal. In 1945, the station operated from Greentree Hill at 5,000 watts — tied with another station as the city's second largest. During the 1940s, there were fewer stations on the air, and many people had large console radios. Some had outdoor antennas, to receive signals from far away.

Father Cox said he was criticized when he began using radio. Some people charged that his broadcasts went to "strange places." Father Cox answered that "Christ went everywhere." He believed that Saint Paul would have taken his message on the air if it had been possible. But for the Pittsburgh area, Saint Paul left that bit of pioneering to Father Cox. The pastor of Old St. Patrick's used it to express his own intensity of devotion in the height of the church's devotional period. Any religious person would pray for those who were sick. Father Cox took them to Lourdes. He used his radio talks to tell about the pilgrimages. Most of the people he addressed were not prone to travel, and maybe no one else could have convinced them of its value. But Father Cox's formula consisted of a mixture of the miraculous with the need for recreation, and the extolling of America's virtues with the need to appreciate the goodness of people everywhere. "And if we could all get together in loving friendship instead of at the point of bayonets, what a different world it would be."
He envisioned transportation, radio, and television as instruments of universal love and cooperation. A reader may chuckle at his example of refrigerators for Africa, but it is obvious that Father Cox embraced the advances of science and technology as a means to help all people. He also knew that technological advancement geared to immediate profit would lead to exclusion for some.

One way that Father Cox was ahead of the structure of church and social matters in 1940s Pittsburgh was in ecumenical relations. The late 20th century might not recognize the singularity of his ecumenism because it fits so well in this time. But Father Cox died in 1951, more than a decade before Catholics began the broader outreach resulting from Vatican Council II. He never used the term ecumenical in these broadcasts. Yet he was easily cordial in accepting all people of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It was natural for him to urge people to pray as they learned in their church or Sunday school or synagogue. And who else ever named a place of prayer for the reason that Father Cox named the Good Samaritan Chapel? The extension to Jews and all Christians might seem limited to those who seek inter-faith relations today, but Father Cox advanced them to the place where they could appear limited. He was probably not aware of doing so, nor was he aware of giving an example of faithfulness to the ordinary people of an industrial city. Yet those are the people Father Cox addressed. He spoke for those people. He lived among them, prayed with them, listened to their sorrows, and offered them joy in their daily lives.

The communications world is not the same today. Airwaves carry many messages of religion, sometimes couched specific political agendas. Father Cox used radio when it was still uncommon, and he made his way by communicating the tenderness of God’s care to the people whose everyday lives most American considered unremarkable in the first half of the century.

The Age of Information has its blindspots, as well. Who will invite the people of a new century to reflect on their need for prayer, education, and recreation to sustain and nourish them? How will the world’s inhabitants find encouragement to envision a world with good things for everyone and ties of friendship among all people? Father Cox gave an example of such ministry to the people of Pittsburgh.

Notes
1. From a journal titled, Clothes Room Journal, December 10, 1930 - January 5, 1935, Saint Patrick Church, Pittsburgh.
4. Ibid.
6. Cox, America’s Shrine, 3.
7. Cox, America’s Shrine, 15.