

# Miracle on 49th Street

By HELEN DUDAR

**F**OR 50 CENTS last month, 175 of the elderly poor of Times Square sat down to Thanksgiving dinner and home-grown entertainment in the brightly lit basement of St. Malachy's Church. The pastor sang, George W. Moore sings loud and from the heart. Nobody found it at all strange that a Catholic priest whose ancestry is Irish down to the last corpse would stand there trumpeting "If I Were A Rich Man" as if to the *shtetl* born. He is, after all, Broadway's man for all seasons. He is also the priest who saved the church.

The choice of the song was at least ironic commentary on the state of St. Malachy's finances. Moore doesn't get pennies from heaven and he has turned down dollars in large denominations from at least one friendly neighborhood pornographer. St. Malachy's is nearly always broke, but broke out of fevered overactivity. This is a great improvement over the state of affairs only a few years back when the church was not only deeply in debt, but almost moribund.

Although he is inclined to give all the credit to God, what has visibly wrought the transformation has been the presence of Moore, 54, tender, subtle, magnetic, effervescent, hard-driving, food-loving and a trifle overweight although he never seems to stop moving.

Moore's church sits on 49th St. surrounded on all sides by dirty movies, brothels and the full fallout of the drug trade. It is the famed Actors Chapel, 78 years old, a relic of better days when Times Square was home to battalions of entertainers who worked a more prosperous theater district.

By the mid-'70s, the new Broadway blight had almost engulfed St. Malachy's. "A very, very dead place," says one longtime resident who worshipped there. The church was crumbling, the roof leaked and no one could remember the last time the green soot-corroded walls had been painted. There were no longer enough of the faithful to assemble a Sunday choir. Unpaid bills totalled \$60,000, and some of Cardinal Cooke's advisors were suggesting the place be closed and the property sold.

Reluctant to see St. Malachy's vanish, the Cardinal offered it to the Rev. George Moore, who had come late and suddenly to the priesthood after a preliminary run at ophthalmology, who had enjoyed a series of relatively serene middle-class ministries that carried him to Wappinger Falls, to Pelham Bay, and finally to Riverdale, where he was growing restless.

**A**MONG MOORE'S qualifications was some familiarity with the people of show business; he had spent 10 years as chaplain of the Catholic Actors Guild. In this post-Vatican II age, a cardinal's assignment is not an order. Moore "prayed for the grace to make the right decision."

Then he came downtown to live in a rectory with two cats and one American pitbull; to festoon the halls with theatrical photographs; and to assemble a remarkably disparate religious community. He calls it his "family," three nuns and two other priests who help make the decisions in consensus meetings and who celebrate birthdays and important an-



The Rev. George W. Moore: the priest who saved St. Malachy's.

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niversaries in the big tidy kitchen with its telephone wall console.

Moore spent his first three months in Times Square "walking the streets, trying to find out where this community was, what were its people's needs. I talked to shopkeepers, I talked to the rabbi, I talked to the ministers."

The district, he discovered, has the largest number of elderly poor in the five boroughs. Many of them are former theater people, retired actors and usherettes and backstage workers with emotional ties to the neighborhood. An unusually large number had never married, had no families and lived alone in decaying hotels.

The church applied for federal funds for a nutrition program and, to qualify, secularized its big lower chapel. The baptistry became a library, the grotto an indoor garden with a non-denominational tiki figure sitting serenely amid the plants. Everything in the room was begged: the furniture, the cage of warbling parakeets, the tank of goldfish, the piano.

The place is called Encore, and it is a full-time social and nutrition center for something like 1,000 men and women, nearly half of them Jewish. They all go home at 5 p.m. and don't come out again. The neighborhood is rotten for old people, although slightly better than it used to be, and Moore is certain it can only continue to improve. Toward that end, he is an active member of Community Board 5 and vice president of the new Eighth Avenue Community Assn. and is regularly involved in efforts, sometimes successful, to help

the authorities harass the massage parlors out of business.

As a result, Moore's daily schedule of clerical and secular activities would daunt a ward boss. Since coming to St. Malachy's, he has developed high blood pressure and a tricky heart, stress afflictions cushioned by the intense affection his friends of the parish bear him.

**M**OORE, OF COURSE, is not without his flaws. Everywhere but at the altar, he smokes non-stop. He also has an unseemly fondness for modern jargon and insists on "interfacing" with people he might otherwise just sit down and talk to.

The church staff runs the full range of contemporary Catholicism, starting with the pastoral associate who would have the title of assistant pastor were she not barred from administering the sacraments. "I do everything else," says Sister Elizabeth Hasselt, lighting another cigarette. "Counseling, organizing parish programs, working with personnel, visiting the homebound, bringing them communion."

She is a Dominican, a robust, smiling woman of 40 who taught school for many years and came to St. Malachy's three years ago in quest of "a complete change." Women get to be pastoral associates nowadays because there is a shortage of priests; when the shortage grows especially acute, the sister says calmly, the church will begin to ordain women.

The other two sisters on the staff, Peggy Kellaher and Lillian McNam-

ara, run the Encore program. The senior member of the house, the Rev. John Grace, is like a figure out of a J.F. Powers story, 69 years old, small, bald, gentle and perhaps the last man in Times Square to refer to a sex parlor as "a house of ill repute."

The other priest, the Rev. Jim Quinn, is at St. Malachy's because Moore felt a gap no one else could fill. Quinn, in search of a synthesis of Eastern and Western spirituality, was on his way back to his Indian ashram when Moore persuaded him to join the staff.

**W**HAT HAD BECOME essential to Moore was to have someone who could communicate with the people he kept meeting, particularly people in the arts, who were seriously exploring Eastern mysticism. "If they started to talk to the rest of us," Moore says, "they drew a blank. I don't even understand the terminology: *karma*, *energy forces*, *spaces*."

Quinn's presence is in keeping with the special attention Moore feels St. Malachy's owes "its Times Square community"—the theater and the untested talents aspiring to join it. Young Catholics fresh to the city usually find their way to the church fast. "It was a place to get lunch money or borrow \$5 until Friday," says Maryanne Tatum, a featured singer in "Barnum." A few years ago, alone, workless and just up from Texas, "I was sleeping in the living room of a friend's apartment. The church gave me a place to be home."

In theory and in practice, the church is home to all Broadway. It has sponsored or rented space for half a dozen productions which displayed the gifts of newcomers. Moore's unrealized dream is a center that would provide a support system for the kids who come to New York and need all kinds of help. He figures it would take roughly \$100,000 a year.

Oh money. The church now gets its bills paid but it pains the pastor that the checks are always late. Funds come from the conventional sources: the mass collections, raffles, flea markets. But not bingo. "I hate bingo," Moore says. "Don't ask me why. I don't like it."

He will solicit the rich, but he is sensitive about the process and fastidious about the sources. The other day, in a seizure of generosity, a friend of two of Moore's friends sent around a check for \$5,000. In no time at all, three men were covering the old grimy green walls of the church with a soft bright cream.

On the other hand, a while back, a visitor representing a successful Eighth Ave. entrepreneur said the man wanted to give the church \$25,000 "to use any way you want."

"Use it!" Moore exclaimed. "My God, I could spend it in an hour." The donor, who owned a string of pornography palaces, promised money with no strings attached. "There are always strings attached," said Moore. "I'd let the church fall down before I took that money."

The offers increase as Moore's fame spreads. So far, two businessmen, assuming that he could probably hustle consumer goods as well as he hustles for the church, have come up with executive sales jobs at \$70,000 and \$100,000 a year. Moore's refusals are always polite. There's not much point in getting worked up about people who, he says, "basically don't understand a life of commitment." ■