

Church Membership

By DAVID Q. LIPTAK

Richard T. Nolan, Ph.D., pastor of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Bantam, and Associate Professor of Philosophy and Social Sciences at Mattatuck Community College, Waterbury, has written me an interesting letter about "an ecumenical problem we're ducking"; namely, the definition of what a church member really is. His note was prompted by a Transcript headline stating that only about 50 per cent of Catholics attend Mass on a given Sunday.



HOW MANY times, Father Nolan asks, has a Catholic or Episcopalian priest heard this expression: "Father, you may not remember me, but I'm a good Episcopalian (Catholic) even though I don't go to church." He suggests that the basic problem of church membership — Catholic or Episcopalian — is implicit in this question. And he feels strongly that this problem is one upon which Catholics and Episcopalians can meet meaningfully in ecumenical dialogue.

Martyrs

WHAT MAKES an Episcopalian an Episcopalian? Dr. Nolan does not advocate the development of "a cold, legalistic, unpastoral exclusive-country-club approach" to this query. At the same time, however, he insists that "the very heart of the people of God is corporate worship around the Lord's Table." The centrality of the Eucharist, he adds, is undeniable; "one cannot be a Roman Catholic or Episcopalian unless one is regularly a participant in worship. The term 'inactive' is a cop-out. 'Lapsed' is more accurate."

THE CANONS of the Episcopal Church, Dr. Nolan observes, support corporate worship as a norm for membership. Thus, Canon 1 of Title II on worship and the 1928 Prayer Book stipulate that "all persons within this Church shall celebrate and keep the Lord's Day, commonly called Sunday, by regular participation in the public worship of the Church, by hearing the Word of God read and taught, and by other acts of devotion and works of charity, using all godly and sober conversation."

CATHOLIC LAW includes a comparable clause; to attend Mass on Sunday and days of precept is a precept of the Church.

AGAIN, no one desires to emphasize the letter of the law. But how is it possible for one to remain a Catholic without the Sunday Eucharist? How can one continue to maintain membership in the Church without the Sunday Eucharist?

THE MARTYRS of Abitinia in the early Church used to say, "Without the (Sunday) Eucharist, we are dead."

THE REASON should be clear. Just as the elements of bread and wine, representing all creation, are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ, so we, through the Eucharist, are changed into more Christ-like persons and energized to help change our families, our neighborhoods, our small worlds.

FATHER NOLAN offers a valuable subject for fruitful Episcopalian-Catholic dialogue. Personally, I see it as a subject that can be used among the laity as well as among theologians and churchmen. In fact, I see it as a topic that could bring Episcopalians and Catholics together to discuss other issues. The question, "What is a Catholic?" or "What is an Episcopalian?" does relate directly to participation in Sunday worship.