



Archbishop Edmund Szoka lives by hard rules: "The whole thing that inspires my life is our Lord Jesus Christ," he says. "I have to be

like Him. The priests didn't like Him, and there were times when even some people turned away from Him."

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

BY SUSAN AGER/PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY SPINA

Archbishop Edmund Szoka lives beyond the call of duty. He says his prayers on his knees, celebrates mass daily even on Caribbean vacations, on Fridays still eats no meat and during Lent gives up movies and his evening popcorn

— simple pleasures since his youth.

In his life he is proudest of this: that he upholds the rules of the Catholic Church to the letter, that he never doubts them, and that he is unafraid to enforce them. He will have nothing of which to be ashamed when the pope spends the night at the archbishop's home this week, sleeping on a new mattress Szoka bought just for His Holiness.

The pope's visit to Szoka's turf will be the pinnacle of the archbishop's life, a blessed event he has been negotiating and praying for since 1984. Yet Szoka says he's worried about only one thing: the weather.

It is safe to predict they will have no arguments: They believe exactly the same things, at least about the church. When they converse, it is usually in Polish, the language both learned as boys growing up in Polish households. If Szoka were suddenly to discover over breakfast a new nuance in the pope's thinking, he would immediately bring his own thoughts in line.

He is, above all, a good general: loyal to his superiors (and there are only two, God in His heaven and the pope on earth) and inspired by an almost military zeal. It is almost as hard for the average non-Catholic to appreciate his rigid devotion to the church and its precepts as it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

Szoka's job, in these troubled times, is to keep a sometimes headstrong crew of 821 Detroit-area priests in line, and to inspire to obedience, devotion and financial generosity another 1.5 million Catholics who, in large part, would rather make up their own minds and their own rules.

Ask Szoka if running General Motors Corp. would be easier, and he laughs heartily. "Without any question!" he says, rocking softly in an easy chair in a front parlor of his home. "GM is a business, and you got people in executive positions whose job is dependent on their performance. If they don't perform, they're gone.

"You can't fire a priest," he says, raising his eyebrows and smiling enough to let you know that he sometimes wishes he could. "Can you imagine Roger Smith making an important decision and all of his middle-management people criticizing him?" At least,

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Lakeside Center
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Lakeside Mall

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Southland Center

Troy
Osmuns
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Shermans
Somerset Mall
Sibley's Shoes
Oakland Mall

Warren
Sibley's Shoes
Universal Mall

Westland
Phillips Shoes
Westland Center

Wyandotte
Armstrong's
Downtown Wyandotte

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Szoka says, they wouldn't do it in public, as some of his priests have done.

Public criticism makes him angry, especially when he thinks it isn't fair. On the day of a recent 4½-hour interview, he was worked up over a short article that appeared in the previous day's Free Press. It quoted a few parishioners from St. Andrew's Church in Detroit, complaining that their school was being closed while so much money was being spent on the papal visit. It was the second article to appear about the St. Andrew's situation in as many months. Szoka had had enough.

He began to rant. Those who know him say he becomes loud and aggressive when he feels personally attacked, or when the church is being besmirched. He jabs his right index finger toward his listener like a sword; he has been known to poke priests in the chest with the same pointed finger so hard that it hurts.

"It's *one* school," he exclaimed, "and it's *three* people in one parish. And yesterday was the *second* time the Free Press published practically the *identical* story. They're beating that story to death!"

Over the last five years, he guesses he has poured a half million dollars into the school — loans, "but I don't know if we'll ever get it paid back. . . . Even if the pope's visit — I don't know what it'll cost — but even if it's two million, we've put one-fourth of that into *one* school! And they never mention that! Absolutely unfair!"

Then he starts in on the parishioners. "I'm really disturbed when a few people like that give us such bad publicity. After a while, why should we just sit back and let 'em keep kicking us?"

"So I asked (my staff) today

. . . to look up those women who are doing all the yapping publicly, to look up and see what they've given to our CSA (Catholic Services Appeal, the annual fund-raising drive for the archdiocese) over the last couple years, what they've personally given, OK?"

"I'm not saying I'm gonna use that (publicly), but I'd like to know that."

He'd like to know, he says, because "talk is cheap," and he suspects that the women may not have given much to the CSA, which is separate from contributions Catholics are expected to make weekly to their own parishes. "Sometimes," he says, "these people who do all the talking are people who do the least supporting."

In his six years as archbishop of Detroit, Szoka has each year raised at least four times more money — millions of dollars more — than any bishop who preceded him. He also has raised more controversy and, some say, more ill will.

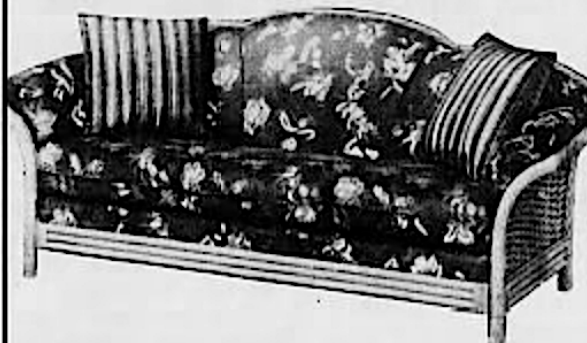
Only months after he arrived, a Sister of Mercy named Agnes Mansour took a job as head of the Michigan Department of Social Services, which, among other things, administers abortions for poor women. He waffled, or seemed to: At first he thought it was OK, then it wasn't, then she'd have to resign, then she wouldn't if she'd only speak out against Medicaid abortions. Rome intervened; she kept the job but left the sisterhood.

In that same year, he removed the Rev. Anthony Kosnick, a theologian, from a teaching job at an Orchard Lake seminary after Kosnick wrote a book about human sexuality that the Vatican thought went too far. Kosnick became a professor at Marygrove College.

Two years later, in 1984, he suspended a young priest who insisted on attending the Democratic National Convention as a delegate. Szoka had a right to do so, under

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church law requiring a bishop's permission for any cleric to hold a political office, even for just a few days. But other bishops have granted that permission, including Archbishop John Roach of Minneapolis, who in the same year allowed a St. Paul priest to be a delegate.

Last fall, Szoka alienated many priests and Catholic lay people by abolishing general absolution, a form of group confession favored in suburbia. There, a new generation of Catholics had come to think of the old way of whispering their sins in a dark confessional as akin to visiting the dentist. So, many didn't go, until in the late 1970s a new form of the sacrament was made available whereby everyone with sins gathered in church for some readings, a homily, a few minutes of silence to recite their sins to themselves and a group absolution from the priest up front.

Not only did many Catholic lay people find Szoka's ban unpalatable — other dioceses in the nation still allow general absolution under some circumstances — but the way he did it left a bad taste, too. Szoka called a day-long meeting of all priests to discuss the issue, but it was apparent from the start he'd already made up his mind; every expert invited by Szoka to speak favored the ban.

"It was an ambush," said one priest who asked that his name not be used. Szoka hadn't consulted them and then, they said, misled them into thinking they would have a say. Many finally did, standing up at the end of the long day to protest the decision and the process in an angry free-for-all.

"It was like a meeting in a union hall," Szoka now says ruefully. He admits he ought to have consulted them, yet he makes it clear that they wouldn't have changed his

mind. Rules are rules.

"It was the decision with the most far-reaching effects," says the Rev. Kevin O'Brien, pastor of Holy Family Church in Novi and a former classmate of Szoka's. "Morale was hurt. It divided the diocese. The people knew how many priests talked about it, then they began to question authority, question everything. This one had such public effects, and some priests went ahead and did their own thing anyway."

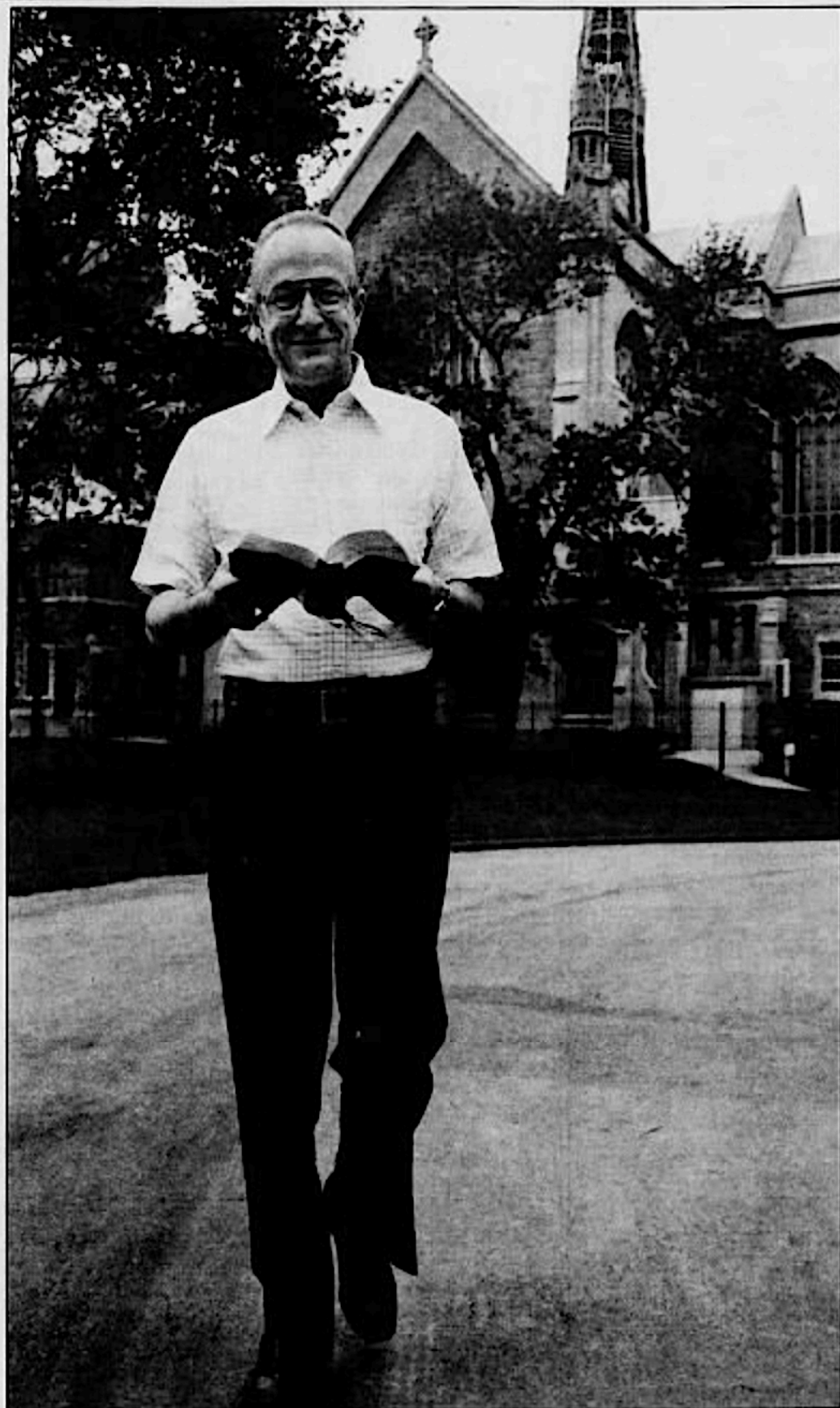
Many priests and lay people protested, writing letters to Szoka. Some never got an answer.

The result of such episodes is a dispirited clergy, by the accounts of dozens of priests interviewed for this profile. Many asked that they not be quoted by name. Some said they were afraid of Szoka. Others did not want to seem as if they were standing in public with a chisel, brazenly chipping away at the church they love. Still others declined to be interviewed.

According to a mail survey conducted by Gallup and commissioned by the Free Press, archdiocesan priests were asked to rate Szoka's overall effectiveness using standard letter grades. Of the 345 who responded, 32.8 percent gave the archbishop either an A or a B, 33.9 percent gave him a C, and 29.5 percent gave him a D or an F. On some specific issues, half the respondents gave him high marks on his commitment to the poor and to education, but more than half gave him low marks on women's issues. Two-thirds said general absolution ought to be allowed.

Said the mother superior of a large religious order, who asked that her name not be used: "If there's a theme I hear from our own sisters, it's a growing concern with the morale of the priests. There's a kind of malaise, which can be very unhealthy for everybody concerned."

"The biggest problem is the authoritarianism," said O'Brien. "We're not used to it, and I don't think we want to buy it back."



Szoka meets the press in May 1982 after a month-long hospital stay.

Szoka is dismayed that some priests criticize him, even *dislike* him, for being the good general he feels compelled to be.

"What I have to do is in faith fulfill my responsibilities, whether I'm gonna be liked or disliked," he says. In a short soliloquy, delivered in

a milk-and-honey cadence, he captures his own calling: "I'm not giving you a homily, but the whole thing that inspires my life is our Lord Jesus Christ. I have to be like Him. And He gave some hard sayings. The priests didn't like Him, and there were times when even some *people* turned away from Him. When

He fed the people in the desert with the loaves and the fishes, He said, 'I will give you another bread which will be my body, and my blood to drink.'

"And if you remember the gospel, a lot of the people got to murmuring and they started walking away. They left him!