

Father Robert T. Costello

A Resurgence of Christian Life Community

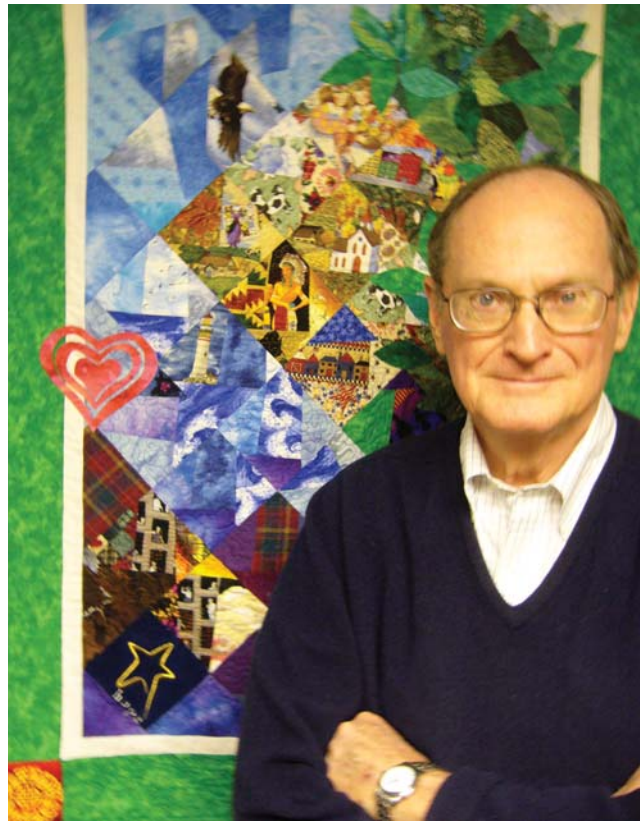
by Robert Burns

For nearly five years in England, and since 2003 in the Missouri Province, Father Robert Costello has been responsible for nurturing Christian Life Community (CLC). Readers of a certain age will remember their participation in sodalities, the predecessor CLC's, as young people and possibly even as adults. St. Louis was historically at the heart of the sodality movement, with The Queen's Work, under the direction of Father Daniel Lord, promoting these groups around the country, especially through summer schools for Catholic Action.

"Vatican II called for religious orders to reassess their apostolates in the light of their traditions," Costello says. "And when the Society began to do this, they realized that over time the sodalities gradually had become detached from their Ignatian foundation, and they were called to reclaim their roots in the Spiritual Exercises. The change of name to Christian Life Community, which took place in 1967, recognizes this." Today the small prayer group of six to ten people is the core CLC activity. According to Costello, as groups mature they often feel a need to do something more, to reach out and help others, to find a mission that reaches out to the larger community.

Working from Jesuit Hall in St. Louis, officially as ecclesial assistant for Christian Life Community in the province, Costello provides support and encouragement to CLC groups and their leaders; he connects with the CLC national and international organizations; and he sends out a newsletter to group leaders filled with general news, helpful suggestions, and information on other groups. He also gives retreats at the White House Retreat and offers individual spiritual direction.

Costello shares a Spartan one-desk office, but he does much of his business from his private office in the corner suite where he lives on the ninth floor. The room is dominated by his desk, and is filled with memorabilia and photographs. Tall and slim, he is easy to spot in most of the pictures. You can see him lifting an occasional string of fish, or placing his foot on the carcass of a four-legged animal, but most of the photos are of childhood, family, friends, and Jesuit life.



Costello with CLC quilt made for the 2003 World Assembly in Nairobi.

In 1999, Costello was studying in Guelph, Ontario, with John English, the famed spiritual director and CLC supporter, when he received a call from David Smolira, the provincial of Britain. The two knew each other from the time Smolira did graduate work at Saint Louis University, and he invited Costello to come to England and lead its national CLC program.

CLC was ripe for growth in England at the time, and Costello looked forward to a new challenge. He noted that there were a number of Cambridge University graduates who were active in CLC groups as students, and they were eager

to continue their commitment after leaving the university. "They became very influential in the movement," he says.

From Manchester and then from London, he traveled about the country starting groups and offering support. He discovered that training for prayer group leaders was a key element in sustaining these groups, and he helped develop training models that are still being used. "Leaders also need some experience with Ignatian prayer," he says, "whether in retreats, individual spiritual direction, or in prayer groups." He brought back a wealth of experience when he returned to the province to do this work in 2003.

Back in this country, Costello learned that Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles had established itself as a leader in the movement on the university level. The school had strongly supported CLC groups for over fifteen years, and had over five hundred students involved in small CLC prayer groups. Much of their success was due to their leadership program, called *Cura Personalis*, which was offered during the summer to leaders or poten-

tial leaders, and evolved into a program that is now offered to people throughout the country. At Costello's suggestion, the universities in the Missouri Province sent students and adult leaders to the workshop. LMU subsidized transportation, lodging, and workshop expenses, and asked participants to pay only a fraction of the cost. He attributes the resurgence of interest in CLC in the province to this encouragement and support.

Irish and Catholic

Costello grew up in St. Roch's parish in the Central West End of St. Louis. He is the youngest of five children, with two brothers and two sisters, and he enjoys being uncle to an abundance of nieces and nephews. His father, a lawyer at Mercantile Bank, and his mother were both children of Irish immigrants. Costello has a small Irish flag displayed in his rooms, a sign of the dual Irish citizenship he was able to claim because his grandparents were born in Ireland.

After graduating from St. Louis University High School he went on to Saint Louis University. "It was



On right, at age ten, with a friend.

very easy to get in then," he said. "We just rode to SLU on our bikes, signed some forms; they gave us a nice T-shirt, and then they sent us home."

The call to the priesthood was there for Costello even in high school. At the university, he was helped in his discernment by the mentoring of Father Jim Sunderland, who was a scholastic at the time, and through retreats at the White House. He entered St. Stanislaus novitiate after receiving his undergraduate degree, and was ordained a priest in 1963.

Counselor

Costello's undergraduate work and his advanced professional degrees were in the field of counseling. He received his doctorate in 1970, and his skills served him well in his early involvement with juvenile delinquents and prisoners. He first became involved with an incarcerated population during his theologate studies at St. Marys, Kansas. He did counseling every Thursday at the Boys Industrial School in nearby Topeka as part of an apostolate to the poor. "They were a rough bunch," he says, "all from an impoverished background."



In the land of his Irish grandparents.

He went on to teach at Rockhurst University, then a college, while earning his doctorate at the University of Missouri Kansas City. He learned that there were plans to build a new prison in North Carolina based on a rehabilitative therapeutic model that might reduce recidivism among prisoners, and he decided to apply for the program. He found he needed more experience in prison work, so in 1976 he took a leave of absence from Rockhurst to spend eighteen months counseling prisoners at the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas.

Lauren Daggett, the warden at Leavenworth, had presided over the federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut, when Daniel Berrigan was serving a sentence for his anti-war activities. When Costello was first brought into the warden's office, Daggett growled at him, "Take off that Roman collar! I have bad memories of Dan Berrigan and I don't want any trouble from you." By the time Costello had the experience he needed to work at the new prison in North Carolina, the program had been dropped, but he felt he had gained a lot of experience and had done some good with his counseling.

As he left to return to teaching, a group of prisoners he worked with had carved and framed a tiny pair of oars as a sign of his "escape." This memento is hanging on the wall of his rooms. Costello took it down and slipped out a card in the back where prisoners had signed their names. "This man was a cold-blooded murderer, and these four were members of the Mafia," he says as he points to the card.

When he returned to Rockhurst, Costello worked with people at the other end of the law enforcement



Oars from prisoners at Leavenworth; an honorary badge from the Kansas City police department.

spectrum. He taught criminal justice classes to police officers and others enrolled in the university's law enforcement program, and he was chaplain to the Kansas City police department, where he gained many friends.

The province valued Costello's maturity, his experience as a counselor and listener, and his capacity to work with many different kinds of people, and he was called to other work in the province. He left Rockhurst to become rector for two years at the Philosophate at Fusz Hall in St. Louis, and in 1985 he was appointed to a six-year term as provincial. Beginning in 1992, he served five years as president of St. Louis University High School, his alma mater.

One feature of the "CLC Midwest Newsletter" that I noticed, as I looked through its most recent issue, were thumbnail reports from differ-

ent groups — a welcoming of new members, new prayer materials being used, good works performed, recoveries from illness, vacations — quotidian events that mark the life of any small community. Some are made up of students, and others are of adults with common interests. They meet in people's homes and in churches, in dorms and university meeting rooms. News comes from the Oklahoma City group, from John XXIII, from No Name Yet group, from Philippine Duchesne, from Denver, from Regis University, from Saint Louis University — their accounts of their life and prayer are like little flames that glow on the page.

"Make sure you let people know how they can contact me if they are interested in starting a group," Father Costello tells me. The Missouri CLC website address is: www.clc-usa-mo.org. Father Costello's e-mail address is: cosrobert@gmail.com. **J**