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,

Novi
Shermans
Twelve Oaks Mall
Sibley's Shoes
Twelve Oaks Mall

Okemos
Sibley's Shoes
Meridian Mall

Pontiac
Sibley's Shoes
Summit Place Mall

Rochester
J.C. Burr's Bootery
433 Main St.
Osmuns
Meadowbrook Mall
Sibley's Shoes
Meadowbrook Village Mall

Roseville
Sibley's Shoes
Macomb Mall

Royal Oak
Redden & Rawlinson Shoes
Northwood Center

Saginaw
Sibley's Shoes
Fashion Square Mall

Southfield
Osmuns
Tel-Twelve Mall
Phillips Shoes
Northland Center
Sibley's Shoes
Tel-Twelve Mall

Sterling Hgts.
Shermans
Lakeside Center
Sibley's Shoes
Lakeside Mall

Taylor
Phillips Shoes
Southland Center

Troy
Osmuns
Oakland Mall
Shermans
Somerset Mall
Sibley's Shoes
Oakland Mall

Warren
Sibley's Shoes
Universal Mall

Westland
Phillips Shoes
Westland Center

Wyandotte
Armstrong's
Downtown Wyandotte

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

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

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

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."

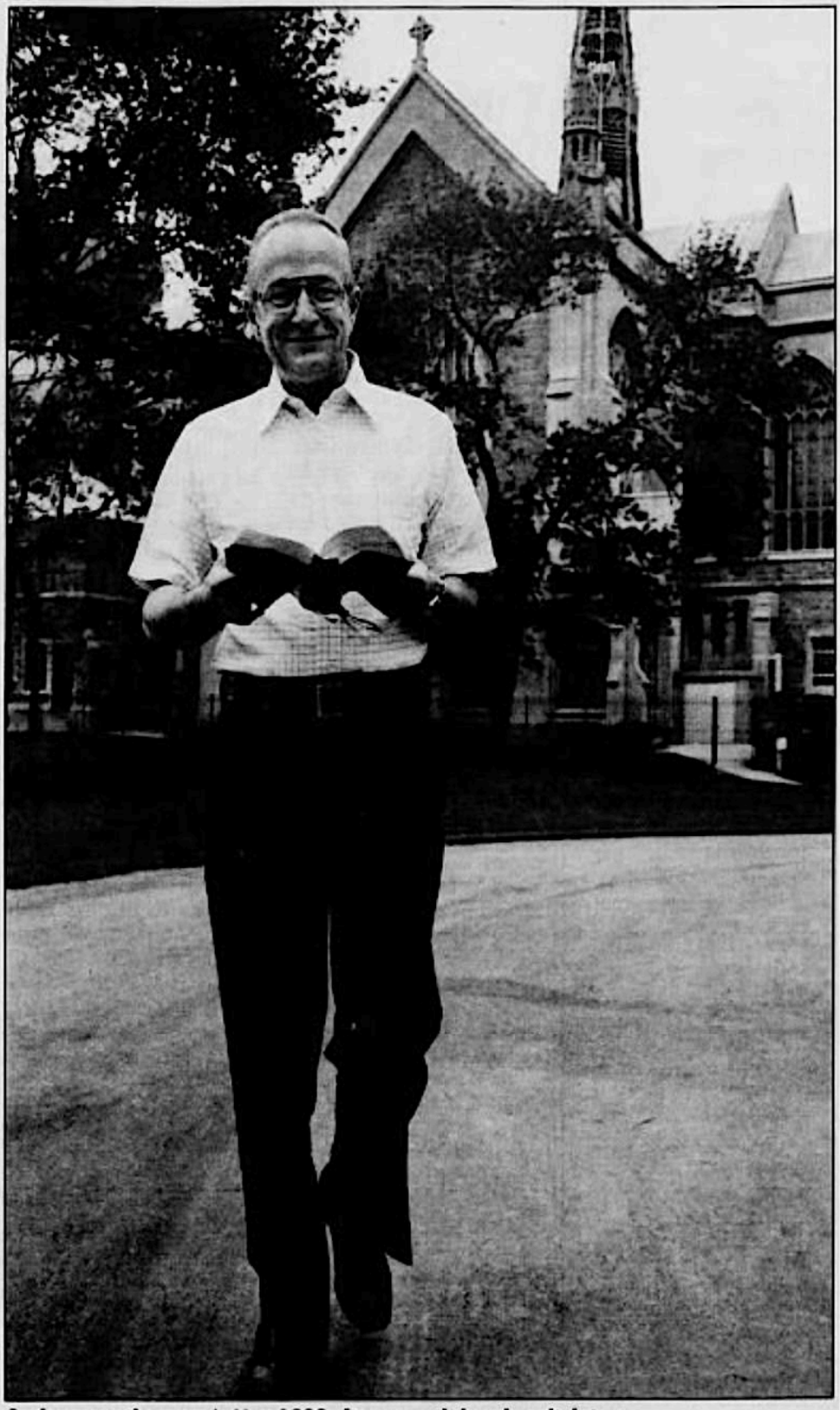
Many priests and lay people protested, writing letters to Szoka. Some never got an answer.

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 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!

"*He* didn't call 'em back and say, 'Now, wait a minute, you know, let's dialogue about this. You misunderstood me.' He didn't do that. In fact, He turned to the apostles and He said, '*You* wanna go, too?'

"*He* didn't back down on doctrine. And that's when the apostles said, 'Lord, to whom should we go? *You* have the words of eternal life.'

"They didn't leave."

Szoka smiles, his point made, then adds a second thought that he finds personally reassuring: "But even with His apostles, His closest associates, He had all kinds of problems with them."

One must understand these things about the Catholic Church:

It has never believed in democracy. It takes its directions from the teaching of Jesus Christ, and *He* never took a vote before making pronouncements. The pope is Jesus' spokesman on earth, according to church doctrine, and traditionalists believe he owes nothing — not even attention — to the opinions of the masses in interpreting doctrine.

Throughout church history there have been doubters, dissenters, challengers of old ways of thinking. In the past, dissent was done rather . . . *reverently*. One would never criticize one's bishop or, God forbid, one's *pope* in public.

But times change. For the past 20 years American Catholics, empowered by the liberalizing elements of Vatican II, have been asking "why?" to a Catholic hierarchy that, like a weary parent, responds "because." Those Catholics have been speaking out, not only to the press and to pollsters, but in their behavior. A wide majority of American Catholics practice artificial birth control and/or consider it a morally correct option; a wide majority do not think premarital sex is immoral.

About such opinion surveys, Szoka is dubious. "There's a lot of mythology in this," he says of the polls, adding that "sometimes I think they're out to prove a point before they start."

Most "church-going Catholics in the pew," he says, accept the church's teachings. But, he concedes, "living up to it is a different thing. . . . So, OK, birth control is a problem for some of them. We're not denying Catholics practice birth control.

"But that isn't to say they deny the church's right to teach this, or they say the church is wrong. . . . I think the proof is that it (their behavior) still bothers their consciences."

In the public eye, Szoka is a personable man, popular with lay Catholics, one who likes to hear a funny story and loves to tell one.

He is small in stature; his high forehead and ear-to-ear smile make him resemble, of all people, the late comedian George Jessel. He looks like the kind of guy who wants to be your pal, and wants you to be his.

His weekly column in the diocesan newspaper, the Michigan Catholic, opens with the words "My Dear Friends" and closes with "God Bless You." It is rambling and homespun. A few columns are almost homilies, but most are personal accounts of such things as how he quit smoking (10 cigarets the first day, nine the next, etc; he hasn't had a puff since August 1977) or a Christmas shopping trip to a mall, where a beautician who recognizes him wants to shake his hand but can't because her own hands are greasy with hair goo.

"Prayer is like food," he wrote in one column. "We can't live without it." Later, he would say of his daily hour or more of prayer: "A bishop has a very heavy responsibility to pray, to pray a great deal. I sometimes think the time that I spend praying helps the people more than some of the activities I have to go through."

He sees his column as one way to inspire Catholics to a richer spiritual life, in part by his own example of admitting failures but never succumbing to despair. "It's like a letter I might write to one of my friends . . . just a simple letter," he says of the column, which he writes in longhand on a white lined pad. "There's no attempt to be literary or profound."

"The word 'control' has a bad connotation," says Szoka. "I would rather say that I like to stay on top of things and I like to see that things are in order. I think that's my job."

Says Michigan Catholic editor Margaret Cronyn: "People write in and say they feel he's writing to *them*."

Some in the archdiocese, however, say the column is too self-centered and at times embarrassing. One passage mentioned by several priests and lay people as particularly discomforting is from a column Szoka wrote in May 1985 about his visit to a Catholic mission in Recife, Brazil: "Even though the people are so poor and running water is simply not available in many parts of the . . . parish, the people are remarkably clean. Their clothes are clean and they are clean. Even in the crowded little house that night of the mass, there were no offensive odors."

People who know him well say he is at his best, and happiest, having coffee and doughnuts after mass with people at parishes he visits. He laughs easily, and while the conversations are rarely deep, he finds them enriching.

His style is a striking contrast to the more reserved, more regal manner of his predecessor.

"I sat next to Cardinal Dearden at meetings I helped chair for over a year, and he never called me by name," says the Rev. Ed Haggerty of Shrine of the Little Flower in Royal Oak. "The archbishop will remember you the next time he sees you; I've seen him do that with people in the parishes. . . .

"If Dearden had the gregarious qualities of Szoka, he'd already be canonized."

"Many people perceived Dearden as aloof and lofty," says the Rev. Joe Tobin, pastor of Holy Redeemer Parish in Detroit. "His homilies were theological masterpieces, but unless you were interested in theology, you might say, 'So what?' A lot of people perceive Szoka as much more warm and open.

"If Dearden was a very fine chablis, Szoka is dago red."

Even out of town last winter, the archbishop's more open manner was apparent when he gave his favorite rosary, one with special links between the beads that won't break even with heavy use, to a New York City cabbie who asked if he had one on him. "I kinda hated to part with it," he admits, but he gave it to the cabbie with a classic Szoka exhortion: "As long as you promise to use it."

Szoka's critics are those who would rather see a Vatican II-style visionary in that office than the financial dynamo and policeman Szoka is. They call him an autocrat of the old style, a man who makes his own decisions in a Catholic Church that for a couple of decades had *encouraged* collegiality — not democracy, but open discussion. Priests say that, while he meets regularly with advisory groups, he does not listen to them.

"For him," says one veteran priest, "consultation is just a process by which, if people agree with you, you can use them to back up your decision, and if they don't, you can run right over them."

Szoka disagrees: "If you don't do what they want you to do, then they say you don't listen."

"I don't think he minds being confronted," says the Rev. Gerald Martin, rector of Sacred Heart Seminary and a friend of Szoka's. "But he's not gonna back down. Stubborn is a word, I suppose, but forceful is more diplomatic."

It is an inside standing joke in the archdiocese that Szoka is so convinced of his absolute authority that he repeatedly uses the phrase: "I am your archbishop." Some priests have edited his annual Lenten and Advent taped messages, played in all the parishes, so the final tape is a litany they play for their own amusement: "I am your archbishop . . . I am your archbishop . . . I *am* your archbishop."

According to his critics and his friends, Szoka values control over vision and experimentation. "I don't know what his vision for the church in Detroit is; I don't know that anyone does," says Blanche Barber, who retired in October as a department head after 17 years working for the archdiocese.

"The word 'control' has a bad connotation," says Szoka. "I would rather say that I like to stay on top of things and I like to see that things are in order. I think that's my job."

But keeping order also means that no rule is too small for him to take seriously, and there are no exceptions.

He will not allow female altar servers at masses he celebrates. That means, for example, that at the funeral of the beloved Detroit Msgr. Clement Kern in 1983, two nuns who worked closely with Kern and who were scheduled to serve at the altar were replaced at the last minute with men.

For another example, Szoka says he would never suggest to a hypothetical 17-year-old he knew was planning to have premarital sex that the teenager use a condom to avoid AIDS. In a Feb-

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

ruary column, he wrote that AIDS "is spread precisely because people were engaged in sinful sexual activity." That even a single sexual sin could have a fatal outcome is not enough reason to ignore the church's ban on artificial contraception, he wrote. "A sin is a sin, and sin is bound to have serious, harmful and evil effects."

One suburban priest compared Szoka to an IRS agent who, woe to the taxpayer, sticks to the exact letter of the tax law. But, he added, "A lot of lay Catholics think this is great. Did you watch Oliver North? You know that kind of mentality — charge up the hill! Give me the flag!"

"We support him totally," said Marilyn Lundy, president of the League of Catholic Women, which operates social service agencies independent of the archdiocese. "He's a fine man. Sometimes it's difficult to come in after you've had a rather dominant figure like Cardinal Dearden. . . . He's done a great job of gradually moving into his style without upsetting too many people."

In the recent Gallup poll, almost 60 percent of lay Catholics surveyed gave Szoka high marks, although only a third were pleased with his views on women's issues. Three-quarters disagreed with him on general absolution, saying it ought to be allowed.

Without exception, parish priests say it matters little who sits in the archbishop's chair, that they perform their daily duties and minister to their people with little thought of him. They are, they say, more independent than most folks think.

"It doesn't inhibit you," said one, of Szoka's management style. "But you lose something. It's a loss rather than an evil — that there isn't a drawing together, and a drawing forth of energies and talents that could make the whole diocese more active, more energetic, more alive." Instead, this priest said, "It tends to break down to 348 separate parishes. There is no common vision drawing people together."

Others shrug and figure greatness comes slowly. Says the Rev. Frank Skalski of St. Hyacinth's in Detroit: "Dearden knew how to handle things without showing his force. Szoka, too, is going to develop, but it takes time. You don't just make a great man by putting him in the oven and turning the heat up."

Edmund Casimir Szoka, a poor boy, grew up in the '30s in Muskegon in a Catholic Church of incense and Latin and mystery and rules of self-denial.

To receive Holy Communion with a clean heart on Sunday morning, one had to fast from midnight on, without even water. During Lent, good Catholics ate no meat on Wednesdays or Fridays, no more than one full meal any day except Sunday, little butter, little cream, no snacks between meals. Movies and weddings were taboo.

"We had many detailed rules," Szoka wrote recently in his column. "I sort of miss those days."

His first Holy Communion photo shows him with the same direct gaze he has now, his high forehead, his thin hair, as now, combed back. He attended St. Michael's School in a Polish parish, learning his lessons in both English and Polish.

His family was so poor, he wrote in one column, "I never knew what a steak was." His mother, Mary, raised chickens and vegetables in the yard, got lard and flour from a social welfare agency, said the rosary three times a day, loved to go to parties and was, by all accounts, a loving, generous woman. She insisted af-

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

ter his ordination on calling him "Father Ed."

The last line of a Mother's Day column he wrote about her in 1984 read: "I loved her when she was alive and I love her now. She wasn't perfect. She was my mother."

His father, Casimir, immigrated to America from Poland when he was 17 and worked for a time unloading coal from railroad cars. He became a finisher of fine furniture. Szoka described him in a Father's Day column as "a quiet man, undemonstrative," who found out he had lung cancer just 11 days before he died.

The last line of that column: "He died very peacefully at the age of 65, a quiet, dedicated man who said his prayers, worked hard and paid his bills."

During 4½ hours of conversation in his home, and another hour and a half of phone interviews later, the only topic Szoka would not discuss was his parents' divorce when he was 2½. "If I weren't archbishop, nobody would even care," he said.

His mother, who filed for the divorce, continued to live in Muskegon, working in a laundry, caring for Eddie and his older half-sister, Irene, whose mother — Casimir's first wife — died when she was about four. Their father lived in Grand Rapids and both children say they remained close to him.

Friends believe the divorce probably made it difficult for Szoka to enter the seminary and required that he be ordained outside his own diocese, in Marquette.

"The church in those days was so ridiculous over absolutely insignificant things," said his friend and fellow seminarian Bill Zuidema.

Eddie Szoka was an altar boy and, like other Catholic boys of that era, fantasized about the priesthood. His calling was irregular, however, until in the eighth grade his pastor took a few boys to St. Joseph's Seminary in Grand Rapids for a field day of track and other sports events.

"I can't tell you how impressed I was," he recounted in a column. "I had thought of the seminary as a very solemn place where the seminarians spent the whole day praying and studying. In fact, I guess I thought mostly praying. How pleasantly sur-

prised I was to find this large group of healthy boys engaged in track events, running around, competing and having a lot of fun just like any normal group of people."

That same evening he told his mother he was entering the seminary; he did, in September 1942.

"I was the wild one, he was the tame one," said Zuidema. They were an odd duo: one Dutch, one Polish; one a jock, one a brain; one jolly, one reserved. "Come on, Eddie! Get with it," friends remember Zuidema chiding his buddy.

"He played the accordion, played at dances, and he was a great singer," Zuidema remembers. "He and I used to harmonize a lot. We'd sing all the old stuff: 'When you wore a tulip, a big yellow tulip.' All those songs famous in the '20s, we sang 'em in the '40s."

In 1947, the pair drove a 1937 Studebaker with four bad tires and five bad spares to Miami and New Orleans and back. They drove the Studebaker triumphantly into the seminary yard after the trip, where it immediately came coughing to a stop, never to start again.

Both boys worked summers, starting "the first day we got home, working until the day we went back to school and making enough money for the next year," said Zuidema. Szoka worked one summer at the laundry where his mother earned a modest living. His job was picking up bags of dirty laundry and tossing them into the back of a truck he drove around town. He also took construction jobs because, he says now, "they were the hardest physically, but they paid the most money."

"We were great pinochle players, Edziu and I," says Zuidema, referring to Szoka by his Polish nickname, which is pronounced Ed-ju. "He was an outstanding, super-loyal friend, always. And we had great times together."

They would remain close for 11 years through the seminary, until they were about 26 and ordination split them up. The Rev. Ed Szoka began climbing into the church hierarchy; the Rev. Bill Zuidema taught at St. Joseph's Seminary, then went into social work, then was sent overseas as a Green Beret chaplain.

When Zuidema left the priesthood in 1968, he didn't consult his old friend Edziu. "We always believed if you didn't believe 100 percent, you gotta leave. So I left." He laughs. "But now the church isn't the same 100 percent it used to be." When

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

Szoka was named archbishop of Detroit, Zuidema wrote to congratulate him. "He wrote me a beautiful letter back. . . . He told me I was fully accepted, and that I was his friend forever, no problem."

Another former priest, James Kavanaugh, remembers Eddie Szoka as "kind of a wounded rabbit." Kavanaugh, who left the priesthood after writing "A Modern Priest Looks at His Outdated Church," has become a clinical psychologist and has written several novels about the church, including one called "A Coward for Them All," in which Ed Szoka is the rough model for a character named Skorski, "a kind of hand-up sort of guy: 'I know the answer! Please love me cuz I'm smart.' "

Recalled Kavanaugh: "He was real skinny, and in my memories of him he was always shivering. He probably weighed about 130 pounds wringing wet, and we had to spend so much time outside for our health every day, I can see him shivering and his body all wrapped around itself, and sneezing and coughing and wheezing. . . .

"He had a nice laugh, a big hearty belly laugh which kind of belied his physical being. . . . He had a good heart. And he tried hard to be one of the boys. I always had the impression he was standing outside the circle and wanting to get in.

"You gotta admire that."

The pair, Kavanaugh and Szoka, were the brightest kids in the class; Szoka frequently tutored slower classmates. Their senior year, Kavanaugh was valedictorian; Szoka was second, salutatorian.

The seminary newspaper published this doggerel about Szoka in that year, 1948: "A student, Ed has read his weight in books — Yes, tall, thin, studious is how he looks."

Even then, a young seminarian in his 20s, Szoka had what one classmate called "a whim of iron: Every little wish he had was not a wish, it was a command."

Another classmate remembers him scoring 99.5 percent on a philosophy exam and consuming two class periods to publicly challenge the professor on the half-point he missed. The classmate can't remember who won.

He was ordained in June 1954 in Marquette and celebrated his first mass in Muskegon. His mother and sister were there.

"We both wanted to be simple parish priests," Zuidema says. It was clear in the seminary that Szoka was marked for leadership, says Zuidema, although the friends never talked about it.

Within 15 months of his ordination, Szoka was transferred from the Manistique parish where he was assistant pastor to a parish in Marquette, and was named secretary to the bishop of Marquette, his old mentor and seminary rector, Thomas Noa. Two years later, Noa sent Szoka to Rome to study canon law, the law of the church, a clear signal to anyone who didn't already know it that Szoka would never be only "a simple parish priest."

Over the next 15 years he would become chancellor, or administrator, of the Marquette diocese under Bishop Noa, while commuting to parishes in Ishpeming and Marquette to say mass, hear confessions and be a pastor.

They were, he says now, the best years of his life, when he felt most a part of the workaday lives of the people. "I really loved that," he says simply.

In 1971, Pope Paul VI realigned 21 northern counties of the Saginaw and Grand Rapids dioceses and created a new one: the diocese of Gaylord. He named Edmund Szoka to run it.

"I came with myself, my car, my books and my clothes," he has said. "We had the big celebration of my installation as bishop, and then everybody went home. And here I was."

The new diocese had a staff of two: Szoka and his assistant, the Rev. Ron Gronowski, who wrote in 1976 of the first few months of the new diocese: "My office consisted of a small library table, a few legal pads, a Bic pen and a wooden chair. . . . Yes, we had a phone, one phone between us, and it seemed every time I was on it, the bishop needed it and the opposite was also true."

Szoka created for himself a five-foot-square office he shared with the St. Mary High School athletic director and the athletic director's equipment. Later, he would have built for himself a home looking out on a woods, and would raise $1.5 million to build a new St. Mary's Cathedral, rectory and parish hall.

Even then, he recalls, some folks claimed the money for the cathedral ought to be spent for the poor. But, Szoka says, when he gave those challengers the option of pledging money for the poor rather than for the cathedral, none did.

The same thing happens now, he says. "They say, 'Don't spend that money on the pope; spend it on a school.' . . . They're talking *fantasy*. I say to them, *What* money? Whatever money there is we spend on the pope is money we're gonna *raise* for that purpose."

Or people want to raise money for the poor instead of a new church. "But even if we said, 'OK, we're gonna forego our new church, now we're gonna have a campaign to raise money for the poor' — do you think we would raise an equal amount of money, realistically?"

He doesn't hesitate. "No," he says.

When Pope John Paul II named Szoka the archbishop of Detroit in 1981 to succeed the retiring Cardinal Dearden, he moved him from a religiously conservative north-woods resort area to a complicated, willful archdiocese with many more poor than Gaylord, many more progressive Catholics and 10 times as many priests.

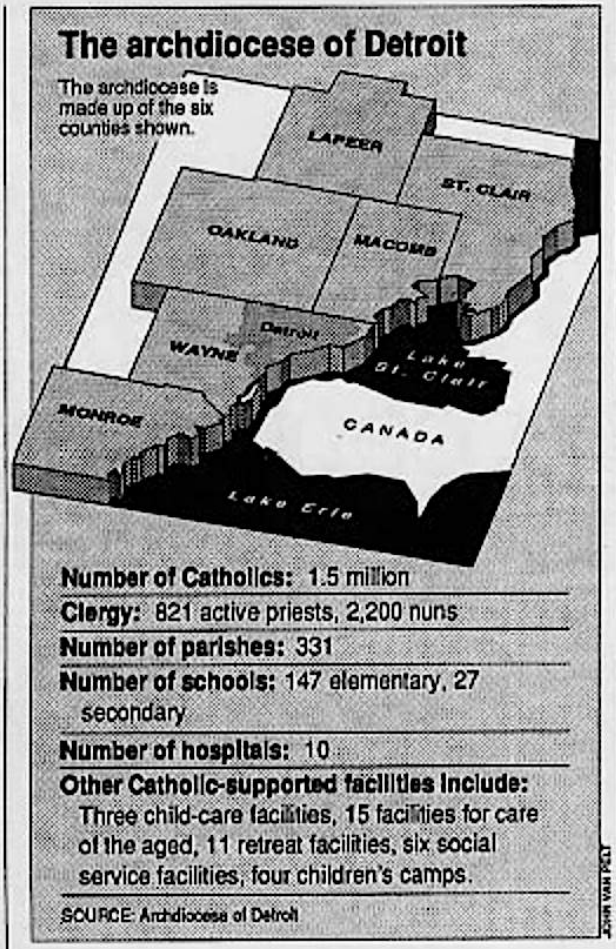
"This is a very, very fast track," says Martin, the rector of Sacred Heart Seminary. "He's dealing with more people of his own caliber than he would have been in Gaylord. At least a third of the priests of this archdiocese, if they were quite a ways west of here or south of here, would almost be sure to be shoo-ins for bishop. If they were in Oklahoma or Missouri or Kentucky, they'd stand out like beacons."

When he left Gaylord, his priests bought him a gold, jeweled pectoral cross that he wears on his chest at ceremonial occasions. On the back is inscribed a Polish phrase that roughly translates to "He's ours," or "He's one of us."

Many priests in Detroit don't feel that way about Szoka, at least not yet. Combine that with the administrative headaches of such a huge diocese and its $15.7 million annual central services budget, and it's easy to understand why Szoka wrote wistfully this year of an outing to a Tigers game, where a ticket taker shook his hand, an usher recognized him and smiled,

Oct. 12, 1962: Archbishop Dearden (center) visits St. Peter's

Square at the Vatican with a group of Michigan priests and bishops; at far right is Szoka.



Even as a young seminarian, Szoka had what one classmate called "a whim of iron: Every little wish he had was not a wish, it was a command."

and a peanut vendor having a hard day asked him for a blessing.

"It was really a wonderful experience for me to be asked for a blessing right there in the ballpark," he wrote. "It was another reminder that every person there is a human being. Every person there has his or her own life story."

There is widespread consensus that the following are Szoka's finest achievements:

• Far more money is collected each year from Catholics for the archdiocese than ever was before, money that has gone to support inner-city schools and parishes, beef up religious education programs and buy high-tech telecommunications equipment, among other things.

Pre-Szoka, priests delivered annual homilies about the need to contribute to the Archdiocesan Development Fund (ADF). Some folks opened their wallets; others didn't. Szoka replaced the ADF with a new campaign called the Catholic Services Appeal (CSA), in which each parish is bound to turn over a certain amount of money; if it collects less from its people, it must dip into its own coffers. If it collects more, it can keep the bonus.

In its first year, 1982, the CSA collected $8.2 million, or four times what the previous year's ADF had raised. Since then, more than $60 million has been collected, including about $10 million pledged this year, or $6.60 for every man, woman and child in the diocese.

"We now have the best annual appeal in the United States for operating funds," Szoka says. That means it raises more money than any other diocese, even though the Detroit archdiocese ranks fifth in the nation in population.

Priests were at first edgy about the plan. One told his congregation, in asking for contributions, "Even if you don't like the archbishop, please don't hold it against *me*." It has required the organization of teams of lay volunteers who go so far as to knock on their neighbors' doors and ask for donations. It is clear that it's easier to silently say no to a priest in the pulpit than to one's neighbor's smiling face at the door.

• The archdiocese's Marriage Tribunal, the court through which all requests for marriage annulments must pass, has been computerized and its staff doubled so that an enormous backlog of cases is gone and annulments in this diocese are swift. Divorced Catholics whose marriages are annulled by the tribunal can, in good conscience, remarry in the church and remain members in good standing.

Says Tobin, who works part-time on the tribunal: "When he came, there was a backlog of 2,000 cases. If you could get an annulment through in 18 months, it was a first-class miracle. He made a commitment of money and

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

personnel and now there's effectively no backlog. If I brought in a case today, they would start working on it today or at least this week." Annulments occur in six to nine months these days.

"That's not the church doing somebody a favor," said Tobin. "It's doing them justice." Szoka also eliminated a $300 annulment fee, so the tribunal is now as accessible to those on welfare as to those in BMWs.

Szoka says saving the Catholic family was a big reason for fixing the tribunal. He believes the main loss of membership from the church is from dispirited divorced people, tired of waiting for annulments, who go ahead and marry outside the church. The loss to the church, he says, is not only "that couple, but their children and their children's children and so forth."

Vatican visitors to Detroit were so impressed with the computerized tribunal that they tried to computerize the Roman Rota, the church's Supreme Court. When Vatican finances wouldn't permit it, Szoka pledged $200,000 for the Rota computers, then quickly persuaded Tigers owner Tom Monaghan and his personal friend, car dealer Hoot McInerney, to each chip in $100,000.

• He has spent $1.8 million to create a telecommunications network, including an entire floor of studios in the chancery building and 27 teleconferencing sites throughout the archdiocese. The aim: to spread the gospel via TV, which evangelistic Christians have done so successfully, and to allow easier, more efficient communication of information to the parishes. Annual operating expenses: $500,000.

Among the most popular shows produced by the Catholic Television Network of Detroit, broadcast over 15 local cable systems, is "Funny Fathers," in which priests swap real-life stories about their lives and their ministries, most of which are funny.

The Rev. Thomas Reese, an editor of America magazine who is writing a book on archdiocesan administration throughout the nation, says Detroit's "extremely sophisticated" telecommunications system is "right up there with the best." He said, however, that it's not clear how successful such projects will be. "Chicago cut back on theirs. It's a tough thing; it's expensive and takes trained personnel, and some people aren't sure whether that's the right direction to go."

Some people believe the successes Szoka has had, while laudable, are not the sort that matter the most.

"Ask him," one nun said who works with the poor, "whether power or people are more important. . . . I'm sure he does a very good job financially, but that's not what a lot of us think we're all about."

"I really don't think he understands the problems of the inner city," complains an inner-city pastor whose parish is in a neighborhood rife with drug use and violence. Szoka has never visited his parish.

"I don't think he understands the fear, the hopelessness, the frustration," said the pastor, who has spent more than a decade in his parish. "But he thinks he does. I've heard him say, 'I live in the city, too.' Ha! He lives in a fortress."

The archbishop has not been immune to crime. In his first year in Detroit, his car was stolen in broad daylight from a downtown parking garage. When it was recovered, a miter (bishop's hat), crozier (bishop's staff) and vestments were missing. Another time, during an outdoor reception at his home, a guest's car was

stolen from the street in front of the house.

He says he has never felt fear in the city, but admits he has become "streetwise," knows where not to go and will not walk in his neighborhood at night, although he jogs during the day between his home (on Boston Boulevard at Woodward) and the Lodge Freeway to the west.

Although Szoka collects only $13,000 in salary, he lives well, and the archdiocese, as he likes to say, goes first-class.

"When I read Jim and Tammy Bakker's quote in the paper — 'We wanted it first-class' — I thought, 'I've heard *that* before,'" said Barber, the retired archdiocesan department head. "If you're going to have a luncheon, you don't have a carry-in luncheon. You have it somewhere where it's served. If you put out a brochure, you don't have Joe down the block do it. You have it professionally done.

"I don't think it's a bad thing, but . . . I think you can go first-class in moderation. People have to become the bottom line and not dollars," she said. "Jesus came to serve, and not be served."

Said one veteran priest: "His lifestyle is not one of gospel simplicity."

Szoka drives a black 1987 Lincoln Town Car equipped with everything, including a telephone. The car was loaned to him by McInerney, who gives him a new one every year and takes the old one back. Actually, he doesn't often drive the car. Usually he rides, working on papers or saying the rosary, while Britt, his appointments secretary, drives.

Britt and a second secretary, the Rev. John Zenz, both live with Szoka, along with a Polish couple who act as caretakers, in a mansion in the shadow of Blessed Sacrament Cathedral. The home, built in 1906 for the Dodge family, was refurbished for Szoka; Cardinal Dearden lives elsewhere. The archdiocese has owned it since 1940; its value has plummeted along with all other property values in the neighborhood. Estimates are that now it is valued at about $150,000, if that.

Among the items purchased by the archdiocese to refurbish the house were large amounts of Waterford crystal, dinnerware and accessories, which raised some priests' eyebrows when they were invited in groups of 10 for get-acquainted dinners.

Others think the archbishop's lifestyle is his own business. He agrees.

Asked about the Waterford crystal, he said, "Why is that important to your article?" Then he said the crystal is not his, but will "be there for the next 50 or 70 or 80 years, for whoever the bishop is after me."

About the car, he said, "What should I do, say to them, 'No, don't give it to me'?"

About the house, he said, "When I came here, I had to have a place to live. It was here. It was not in very good shape. It was empty, and no one had lived in it for a while; it was dirty, and there wasn't a stick of furniture in it. It was a question of tearing it down or fixing it up. So we fixed it up."

Plus, he said, he conducts a lot of business from the home, whose interior, while not plush, is quite comfortable.

"I don't know that you can judge a person's spirit . . . by those externals alone," he says, adding that he gives a "good chunk" of his modest salary away to charity each year.

He has vacationed each winter for the past four years in Barbados and Florida, traveling with an old priest buddy from the Upper Peninsula, staying in Barbados in one of several beachfront condos owned by his friend, Troy automotive engineering executive Francis Sehn. In Florida he stays at McInerney's place in Ft. Lauderdale; last year he caught a swordfish which McInerney had mounted for him.

But he spends most of his time golfing, jogging, reading (he read a Ford biography this year, Iacocca's autobiography last year), walking the beach, sitting on the sand talking world events with his friends and dining with British islanders who, Sehn says, find Szoka delightful.

Among the dinner partners impressed with him is Richard Perry, chairman of Rolls Royce Motor Cars Ltd. of London. Szoka once teased Perry that his friend Hoot

Szoka dresses appropriately as grand marshal of Detroit's St. Patrick's Day parade in 1982.

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

McInerney in Detroit sells more cars in a week than Perry does in a year.

"We had, one day, the most wonderful repartee at a dinner party," Perry said of Szoka in a telephone interview. "I found him a lovely man. . . . He probably knew more about the motor industry than the motor industry men themselves. . . . He was terrific in his knowledge of cash flow problems and profits."

Then Perry paid Szoka the sort of compliment that would truly please the archbishop: "I'm not a Catholic, but he's one of the guys who might have made me one."

Szoka likes to be liked; he wants to be loved. But, while lovable in many ways, he is the sort of man who makes it difficult for people to warm to him.

For many people, however, it is enough to touch his hand, see him smile and compliment his sermon after mass. "We had the archbishop here for a confirmation a year and a half ago, and it would be impossible to be more gracious than he was with the people and the kids," said O'Brien in Novi. "He would pose for pictures. He shook hands with them. He stayed around an adequate amount of time.

"He makes efforts. . . . (But) he doesn't come across that warmly, although he would like to. He can't couch authority and friendliness."

Even McInerney, who calls Szoka "a very humble, loving man," says: "I gotta know him as well as anybody in Detroit, and I don't even know him that well."

Those who work with him, especially his priests, say that Szoka, while a wonderful host and a charming conversationalist, is so personally sensitive to challenge or criticism that he has been known to fly off the handle, cuss in language he wasn't taught in the seminary and be unpleasantly bossy.

Among his favorite phrases used during high-pitched arguments: "I mean it!" and "Now, I'm serious!" — the same phrases an angry parent might use with a difficult child.

That hypersensitivity to criticism, says Holy Redeemer pastor Tobin, can be a deficit for a leader. "It's been said," recounts Tobin, "that the farther the monkey climbs up the tree, the more his a-- shows.

"He wants to be liked, very much," Tobin says. How can he tell? "By his reaction to criticism. He takes it so personally. At first he doesn't wanna believe it. He thinks most people believe everything he says, and he likes that." When he realizes they don't, he may explode.

Tobin remembers a meeting in 1984 at which he challenged Szoka's decision to spend close to $2 million on telecommunications. "I compared it to a man building a video room on the back of his house while his living room is on fire. I didn't mean it as a personal attack on the archbishop, but he stood up and looked down on me and I knew it was coming. There, in front of 26 other vicars and all the department heads, he said, 'Tobin, you're full of s—!'

"I said, 'I didn't think you knew me that well.' "

No one laughed.

There is no dispute about his commitment to his priests. He counsels those who need help, gives study leaves to those who need a break and awards good assignments to those who've been battered by personal problems but seem to be recovering. While he hasn't raised the pension of retired priests, he has said publicly that if any find it hard to live on their $650 a month stipend, "I'll take care of it."

"Many priests resent that" as paternalistic, said Shrine of the Little Flower's Haggerty, a former president of the Priests' Senate.

"He'll do anything to save a priest," said another well-respected cleric, "if that means sitting there and talking three or four hours, bailing him out of jail or picking him up out of the gutter. "But how much is his need to be needed and how much is altruism? When you give to a panhandler, is it because you have a profound respect for that person or an attitude of 'I'm better than that person and I'll give them something'?"

In mundane daily interactions, he sometimes embarrasses his priests: patting them on the head or the cheek, poking them in the chest with his forefinger, reminding them that they "ought to know better."

Said Martin, who admires and respects Szoka: "I think you'll find that sometimes he puts his worst foot forward. . . . People who don't know him and see only that brusque front, don't understand that there is a sensitive person underneath."

The Rev. David Gemund, who for nine years worked as chancellor of the Gaylord diocese under Szoka, thinks the archbishop is forever caught in a struggle he can't win. He describes it like this:

"I, the man, and I, the archbishop, would want A, B and C in terms of love, affection and fond memories. As archbishop, I am called on to do X, Y and Z, all of which may prevent A, B and C. But with my commitment to X, Y and Z, and to the church, I am cutting myself off from satisfying my personal needs. That leads to denial of suffering: 'No, I'm not suffering; I'm doing my duty.' Even though I spell it suffering, and you spell it suffering, he spells it duty. It is always his commitment to the church that wins out."

Mayor Young confers with Szoka during Game Four of the 1984 World Series.

There are days when he feels misunderstood. "You feel that you're trying and you get a lot of criticism, and you begin to wonder if you've got any friends left . . ."

He will turn 60 years old tomorrow, and he says he is more at peace now with his life, and with criticism, than he has ever been. "I keep thinking I'm 25," he says. "That's the way I think; that's the way I feel."

Nonetheless, he takes pains to maintain his health. His diet is rigid, following a heart problem in 1982 that kept him in the hospital for 29 days. For breakfast he has half a grapefruit, sometimes a bowl of corn flakes or raisin bran, a glass of orange juice from concentrate, two pieces of whole wheat toast with margarine and black coffee. Lunch is a sandwich of 95 percent fat-free lunchmeat or, if it's Friday, tuna, with a diet Vernors to drink. Dinner is a bowl of homemade soup, an entree of chicken or veal or fish, a vegetable and salad at the end. Usually he has a glass of wine with dinner.

He tries to jog each day, three or four miles, wearing Nike shoes and a blue-and-white jogging suit. He says mass first thing each morning in a chapel built into the former third-floor ballroom of his home; if his secretaries are out in the evening, he will leave them notes on the floor at their bedroom doors noting the time of the next morning's mass.

He is proud of his leadership abilities; he is working on his impatience and his expectation that he and everyone around him ought to be perfect. Even Britt, his secretary, says that while he likes best his boss' honesty, what he likes least is his exactness.

As he grows more comfortable with himself, and with criticism, he is also comfortable, he says, with the possibility that he may never be named a cardinal, whose main perquisite is the right to vote for the new pope or even become that pope.

Three years ago there was a hot rumor that Szoka would be named cardinal, and the press reported it, but he wasn't, and he was embarrassed. Cardinal Dearden reassured him, however, saying: "It's better to explain why they *didn't* make you a cardinal than to try to explain why they *did*."

It doesn't matter, Szoka insists, that his two predecessors have both been elevated to cardinal. "I might be the end of the line," he jokes, admitting he'd probably feel "some disappointment" if he died a mere archbishop.

"But it would not be the end of the world. And that could happen, you know, apart from any merits or demerits on my part. It could happen because they don't have a slot, or maybe by the time they'd get around to me, it'd be too late and I'd be dead."

He talks easily and calmly of death. He confronted it lying in his hospital bed in 1982, his heart behaving mysteriously in his chest, and decided he wasn't afraid. More than once he's felt the lonely nausea of the misunderstood: "You feel that you're trying and you get a lot of criticism, and you begin to wonder if you've got any friends left, or you got anybody who approves of anything you're doing. You could feel a little bit down on those days, and you can think, realistically, if you did just drop off the earth, who'd miss you?

"And the reality is, who's gonna miss you a year after you're dead?" He laughs. "There's nothing deader than a dead bishop."

When he talks of the God he is sure he will meet on the other side, it is a God who is both forgiving and exacting, just as exacting as Edmund Szoka. A God who keeps score. A God who will hold him accountable.

"That doesn't frighten me," he says. "I'm not afraid to be held accountable, even though there are many failings, because I also repent of those.

"You see, I've told this to people in sermons, and especially to young people. . . . When we die, you know, I don't think God is gonna say, 'Were you perfect?' But I think He *will* say, 'Did you try?' "

A good general, he can say he did. ■