

BOB BARTH:

Mizzou's Jesuit Professor

By JAY ANTHONY

THE PRIEST stood before the gathering. The audience waited attentively for him to speak.

"My text today is first Corinthians," he began.

The audience burst into laughter.

Blasphemy?! Heresy?! Sacrilege!?

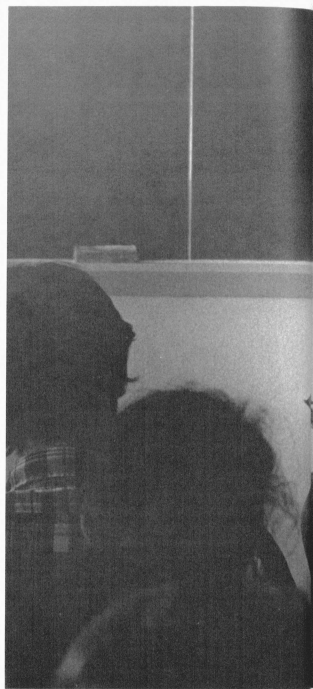
No, just the faculty of the College of Arts and Science acknowledging the ability of Father J. Robert Barth, SJ, PhD, to find a touch of humor in the most serious situations. He wasn't standing before the group as a Jesuit priest delivering a sermon. Rather, he was addressing them as chairman of the English department, advocating a reconsideration of the proposal to split the College into separate units of the arts and sciences. To anyone knowing Bob Barth, it would come as no surprise that his reasoned, thoughtful argument carried the day.

ADD A BLACK TURTLENECK sweater to Bob Barth's salt-and-pepper beard and fringe of hair of the same coloring, put his favorite pipe in his mouth, perch his half-frame reading glasses on his nose, and put a poetry book in his hand. Sit him on a stool in a single spotlight. You have the gentle poet reading to a hushed audience in a smoky coffeehouse during the Beat period of the '50s.

At first glance, Bob Barth would appear to lead a schizophrenic existence, priest one minute, professor another. But he doesn't see his life that way. He's one person, doing one thing: helping others, whether in the chapel or the classroom.

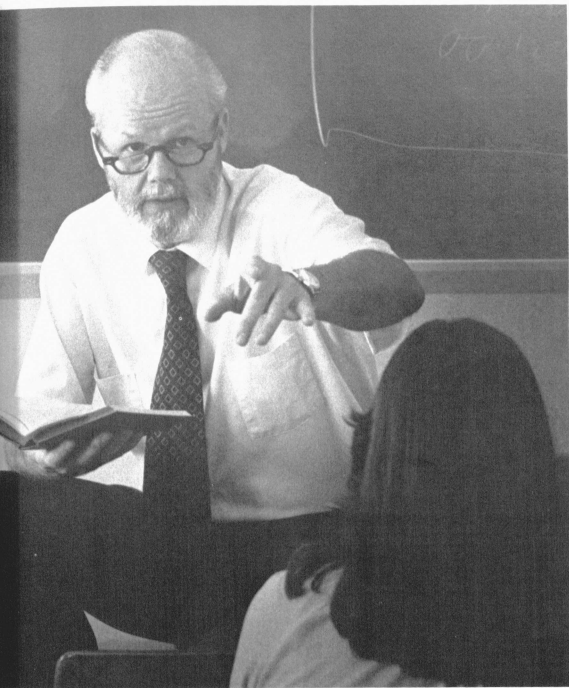
His first exposure to the Society of Jesus came at Canisius High School in his hometown of Buffalo, N.Y. It was the teaching priests there who fostered the two major influences in his life, poetry and the priesthood. His decision to enter the order, made in his senior year, was part of "a normal chain of events. It's like choosing a career; you pick role models. These were absolutely admirable people. I thought I would like to share their life. If I was going to be a priest, I was going to be a Jesuit priest. I admire them."

What was most attractive about the



Jesuits was that it is a service-oriented order and Barth knew he wanted to serve others. He even felt sure he knew how he wanted to serve, but first he had to go through 15 years of spiritual and scholarly training which eventually led to his ordination in 1960. (Jesuits are ordained after completing 13 years of training, leading to the joke, Barth says, that for other orders ordination is the beginning of a new life while for a Jesuit it is a reward for a life well-spent.)

But the new Father Barth didn't want to be a parish priest. Nor did he want to join the hundreds of Jesuit missionaries in re-



Preferring a figured tie and a colored dress shirt to his Roman collar, Father Barth says his ministry is whatever he is doing. "I don't feel any less a priest when I'm teaching than when I'm preaching."

mote parts of the world. He didn't want to go into politics like Father Robert Drinan, a Massachusetts Democrat who was recently ordered by Pope John Paul II to give up his seat in Congress. And he didn't want to be on the battlefield of social reform like Fathers Phillip and Daniel Berrigan, leaders of many Vietnam War protests.

Instead, Father Barth wanted to follow two other Jesuit traditions: the intellectual life and teaching. "I think I always saw myself in a teaching role," he says now, "because the Jesuits [who influenced him at Canisius] were teachers."

That decision was cemented when he taught at a Jesuit high school and loved it.

THE LOVE OF POETRY and literature came a long time ago. "I've always been fascinated by words, the sound of words."

When he finished his training, his role in the society was clear to him. And there was never any question from his superiors in the order. "They try to find the places where we're naturally suited. We're not forced into a role that we don't fit in." It was decided that Barth would pursue a doctorate in English at Harvard.

"Excellent teacher," "full of fervor," "entertaining as well as enthusiastic," are all phrases students use to describe Barth. But seldom, say his students, does his priesthood enter the classroom. "I just think of him as a professor."



WHY A SECULAR SCHOOL when the Jesuits run many fine universities? Again, Jesuit tradition. The order believes its members should attend the best schools, Catholic or secular — the belief being that the priests will be more effective as teachers if they get the best possible education.

Barth was again following Jesuit tradition by going to Harvard, where numerous Jesuit scholars have studied and taught. "I remember going to class for the first time and being intimidated by the Harvard mystique," he says, but that soon passed because of the quick acceptance he was given by Harvard's many intellectuals who openly acknowledge the Jesuit intellectual tradition.

Barth upheld the order's stature at Harvard as his doctoral dissertation on Samuel Taylor Coleridge was named the best of his class. It later became his first book. His latest book, *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition*, won an award as the best in its field in 1977. Barth made such an impression at Harvard that he was offered a five-year teaching post in the English department following completion of his studies. This enhanced his growing reputation among English literature scholars. In his fourth year at Harvard, when it became known that he might soon be on the job market, other schools began courting him to join their faculties. The winner was the University of Missouri and eight

years ago he came to Columbia.

Why leave the heady atmosphere of Harvard and the culture of Boston? To Barth, the answer was as clear as when he decided to join the Jesuits. Coming to Mizzou offered the chance to continue as a college teacher and also to pursue his priestly calling more directly by joining the staff of the Newman Center. He could combine his two commitments in a single setting.

Until about 20 years ago, Jesuits taught almost exclusively at their own schools. But Jesuit leaders realized that although the many Catholics on Catholic campuses needed help, there was an even larger Catholic student population at secular campuses who also needed to be served.

"God does not confine his presence to Catholic campuses," says Barth. "A Jesuit is called to be wherever is the meeting place of God and man. One of those places is a university where people are always thinking."

A priest in a secular classroom could raise questions. Barth says, though, that he's never had his objectivity in the classroom questioned. "I'm not trying to convert anyone. I meet people on their own terms. I try to help them be themselves. I tell them the first day what I am. I let them know where I'm coming from.

"If you're an honest teacher, that [his priesthood] shouldn't make any difference. I have personal feelings, but I try to be objective. It's likely that I will let some

of my personal feelings come through. That's not all bad. I think it's a plus. It lets them see a committed person. Students need to see passion. I want to teach them, move them."

Sitting in on one of his classes, it is easy to see that Barth indeed touches and moves his students. His dramatic teaching style — filled with hand and facial gestures and body language, his voice overflowing with his love of the subject — draws students out, involves them in the words of Wordsworth and the other Romantic poets. He challenges them with questions about their feelings about the poems. "Right on!" he says, his clenched right hand punches the air like a cheerleader applauding a great play. His ever present smile adds further reward for a student who has voiced an insight about the poem under discussion.

With his feet resting on the seat of a desk, Barth reads a section from Wordsworth's "The Prelude." His voice rises and falls with the rise and fall of the words, again conjuring up the Beat poet in the coffeehouse, following his dictum to students "to read aloud, regale your cats and dogs. How much of the poetry is in the sound!" The passage describes a flowing breeze. As he reads, Barth's arms become that breeze as he bends at the waist, sways from side to side, arms weaving through the air.

"AN EXCELLENT TEACHER," says Michael McKeon, a second year English master's candidate from New Hampshire. "He's a good interpreter of the poems. When he reads them, they really come to life. He knows how to get students to say what they feel. He's entertaining as well as educational."

"He's full of fervor," says Rocco Marinaccio, another English master's candidate from New York City. "He's as enthusiastic as you can be about a subject. It's obvious he loves the subject and loves being in front of a class."

McKeon and Marinaccio are both Catholics, but Barth's priesthood "doesn't come off in class either way," says McKeon. "It seems to jar me when someone calls him Father. I just think of him as a professor."

Mary Louise Rau, who is from St. Louis, is not Catholic, and she has no problem with Barth being a priest. "I don't find him trying to impress upon us that he's Catholic."

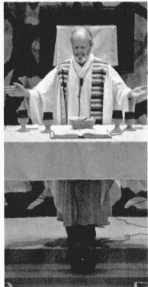
SOME STUDENTS admit being leery at first of taking a course from a priest, but that's quickly dispelled and he hooks them on the poetry. They even call him "The Bard." The word gets around Campus about good teachers, and good students work their schedules to include these teachers. And they give teachers further recognition with things such as the Purple Chalk Awards, presented annually by the student government to three outstanding instructors as chosen by students. Barth received one last year. He cherishes it more than any other scholarly recognition. "It's from the students," he states simply.

When Barth doffs his academic robes to don his priestly robes for Mass at the Newman Center, there's no dramatic change in personality. The smile remains [he smiles at each communicant as he hands them the Eucharistic bread, looking them straight in the eye with a look of true caring], the sense of humor remains. (He tells some late arrivals to come sit down front in "the \$8 seats"). He uses the same well-honed speaking techniques to involve the parishioners in his sermon's messages as he uses to involve students in the Romantic poets. The poetry remains. It's always in his speech, unconsciously perhaps as when he says of the Jesuit teachers who inspired him at Canisius: "It was a matter of being inspired by people I admired."

John Robert Barth obviously loves the dual path he has chosen to walk and plans to continue along the way. "I just love the university setting. The students keep me alive. I enjoy teaching — I'm always learning."

And also he likes Columbia and Miz-zou. "When I came I expected to be in deep culture shock. But I was at home here in a week and I've been at home ever since."

"I'd like to stay here for a long time," he says, smiling. □



The smile, humor and poetry remain as Father Barth begins his priesthood duties. He uses the same teaching techniques to involve parishioners and students, he says.