

'Sanctity' Not Always Sufficient to Plug FBI 'Leaks'

Prairie Village, Kan.

Mr. Nixon assures us we must preserve the "sanctity" of FBI files because they are so malodorous. The "raw" files contain material that is shockingly "slanderous" and "libelous."

Fair enough. Then by Mr. Nixon's own terms, L. Patrick Gray 3d has disqualified himself as director of the FBI. He gave records of interviews to John W. Dean 3d. This "leaking" hardly fits the concept of file "sanctity" enunciated by the President in his press conference.

Besides, what was the damaging material Mr. Gray had revealed in testimony, prompting Ronald L. Ziegler, the President's press secretary, to denounce the White House's own nominee? Mr. Gray had revealed the answers given his agents by White House and Nixon reelection officials.

Who was slandering whom in these responses? Perhaps the White House aides were slandering the White House press secretary, who denied

some of the actions they admitted.

Files, files. Who's got the files? Mr. Nixon had to rake up the case of Alger Hiss again, anticipating journalists' questions about his own attacks on President Harry S. Truman for withholding FBI co-operation with Congress. As he put it in his press conference: "The FBI refused all information. We got no report from the Department of Justice, and we had to go forward and break the case ourselves."

Well, not quite. Congressman Nixon also had the help of an FBI agent (now deceased) named Ed Hummer. Hummer made daily reports on the FBI files about Hiss to Father John Cronin, a priest who had served as an FBI informer on Communists in the labor unions. In return, Father Cronin had been given FBI material to work from while drafting the American bishops' statements on communism.

As soon as Hummer gave

Father Cronin the latest FBI material on Hiss, Father Cronin took it to Mr. Nixon.

Well, the President might answer, there was no official help from the FBI. The information had to be smuggled out—an enterprise he takes a dim view of, now that Jack N. Anderson, a columnist, engages in it.

But in his press conference last week Mr. Nixon made a key admission: "I would like to say, incidentally, that I talked to J. Edgar Hoover at that time [of the Hiss case]. It was with reluctance that he did not turn over that information." Right. As the late Senator Joseph R. McCarthy (R., Wis.) found out, the Hoover FBI could show "sympathy" in all kinds of unofficial ways to the Red hunters of that time.

Father Cronin only volunteered information about Hummer's part in the Hiss case after Hummer's death

—not because Hoover would have objected to what he did; he would only resent (and punish) his getting caught—a matter of bureau embarrassment.

Hoover himself violated the FBI files, for all their sanctity. Father Cronin told me, in a 1968 interview, that he was shown the "raw files" on Martin Luther King—though the FBI has denied reports of their use. Hoover's bureau was not careful about leaking, only about the ideological bias of all leaks. Men knew when and to whom they should do their leaking—a point Mr. Gray and Mr. Dean still understand.

All this makes the President's pious talk on file "sanctity" rank with a drunkard's sermon against drink. Still, the sermon is not wrong just because the preacher got inebriated in order to give it: The files should be sacrosanct. So Mr. Gray should not be their custodian.