

A PLEA FOR JUSTICE

JORDAN AUMANN, O.P.



IN A RECENT encyclical, *Sertum Laetitiae*, addressed to the American hierarchy, Our Holy Father expressed his interest in the Negroes of this country and his ardent desire that their condition should be improved by means of religion and education. Immediately, countless expressions of joy found their way into the press from the pens of leaders of the Negro race and from those outside that group who are interested in the question of justice for the Negro. The very fact that the Holy Father has expressed himself in regard to the Negro question is indicative that he sees here in America a problem that must be remedied—a problem which all too many are wont to overlook.

It is folly for us Americans to decry the fanatical persecution of the Jews on the part of Hitler or to condemn the treatment of Catholics in Mexico if we ourselves crush the Negro under the heel of oppression. In any case, it is still depriving a minority group of its rightful advantages. And if we stop to compare cases, we shall find that our oppression of the Negro has no foundation whatsoever and that it is all the more unjust because it is not carried on by a few leaders of a movement or for a brief period of time, but is practiced by practically every white person in our nation and in every sphere of social activity. And why? Simply because it has been handed down to us as a precious heritage that there is a definite line of demarcation between the black and the white; that the question of race forms a barrier strong enough to separate one man from another in every one of the manifold contacts of social life and even prevents unison in the temple of God.

But what is it that lies at the heart of this question of racial discrimination? Is it scientifically sound? If so, why has it been attacked at various intervals by the last three Pontiffs? Surely we may rely on it that if the Holy Father labels racial discrimination and the persecution of minority groups as anti-Christian and anti-social, it must indeed be so. For where else in the world can we find such authority as speaks from the chair of Peter?

However, we are able to do more than quote authority in this question. We are able to see for ourselves that racial prejudice is

scientifically unsound and socially ungrounded. Once these facts are acknowledged, definite steps can be taken to alleviate the moral and social position of those oppressed.

We must and do admit that there is some rational fundament for this antipathy towards the Negro in the same sense that there is a feeling of aloofness between men or between classes whenever there is dissimilarity. Saint Thomas gives this principle as a basis for love: "Likeness, properly speaking, is the cause of love." Accepting this, we admit at the very outset that white men can never be expected to show to the Negro the same deference in every phase of human life which they would show to other white men. This is where the proponents of miscegenation fall into error. Love seeks its own. That is the nature of man, and we must recognize that fact especially when we deal with race problems. Yet this fact in no way offers an excuse for racial prejudice. It merely explains why we may prefer one person to another. Racial prejudice, on the other hand, is a violation of the laws of distributive justice, which should effect the distribution of social rights and duties to each person in keeping with the rules of equity.

Since the Negro question is basically a race problem, it would be well to consider what is meant by "race" and to what extent racial differentiation causes prejudice. To the ordinary man on the street the term "race" offers little or no difficulty because his division is based on observation and common sense. To the scientist, however, the term offers many complications because of its lack of clarity, fixity, and universality. As Herskovits put it, "one characteristic of race is that if you analyze it sufficiently, you analyze it out of existence." The hypothetical notion of race may be satisfactory, but when applied to actual living groups it is found lacking. Thus, at the very outset, the problem offers a curious dualism.

Strictly speaking, race is a purely biological term and is based on the physical characteristics resulting from blood relationship. But in the usual connotation of the term there is found more of the cultural and social than the biological. This is readily understood since most men are prone to judge others not from physical differences, but from social and cultural disparity. The difference of opinion in regard to races has arisen from the difference of criteria used. Some of the more common standards are color, hair texture, and cephalic index. Although by far the most common, color is not the most exact since a dark white is darker than a light Negro. The criterion of hair texture is surprisingly stable, while the cephalic index depends on body stature rather than race.

There is still another standard of division of races, and that is culture. This is a very unscientific method for determining races, however, and we can see the absurdity of it when we consider the amalgamation of all the various peoples of different cultures in the United States. The extremes to which this notion of culture can go is clearly shown in the false theory of Aryan supremacy. It had such promoters as Hegel, Fichte, Count de Gobineau, Schlegel, and List. These men so popularized the notion of the supremacy of the pure German over every other race that soon every form of art was permeated with their false doctrine. Race, language, and nation were the trinity which they worshipped. They held that the Latin races were impure because they had intermingled with the Semitic and Negro groups. The ancient German myths were revived and popularized in the music of Wagner, and it was this idea of German supremacy which led to a glorification of German imperialism prior to the World War. Under Hitler's régime there is evidence of another attempt to renew that same notion of Aryan superiority.

It is a fact well known in history that whenever various peoples come into contact either as a result of conquest, migration, or economic exploitation, the first result is conflict. The culture of one or both parties becomes disorganized so that language, family life, and economic organization are affected. This conflict does not last forever, and it is in the period of adjustment following it that racial prejudice appears. One of the best examples of this procedure is England's economic exploitation in many of her colonies.

Racial prejudices have a wide variety of motives, but in general they may be summed up under two heads: (1) immediate causes, which include those conspicuous factors, such as color and hair, which give focus and collective significance to antagonistic race attitudes; and (2) remote causes, which include those more fundamental considerations of personal and group interest and involve especially fear of loss of status, fear of loss of prestige, fear of loss of security, or all of these together.

The color of a person, however, does not constitute his inferiority. This fact is proved by a glance at the list of achievements of representatives of the black and yellow races. This racial antagonism based on color is usually the result of repulsion felt towards a certain racial group. By many it is not considered a natural aversion at all since it is not found in children.

The second group of causes of racial antagonism is by far the more prevalent. The fear of loss of status and loss of prestige, although totally ungrounded, is all too common. Supposedly reputable

people in certain localities will not have any associations with certain groups because they think that their reputations or social standing will suffer. But this association would be considered a loss of prestige only by others who are of the same opinion and are equally prejudiced towards the same minority group.

The fear of loss of security is to be taken in the economic sense. Those engaged in unskilled labor are antagonistic toward other race groups because they fear the loss of their own financial security. This was especially noticeable when so many Italian and Slovak immigrants came to America and threatened to take over the unskilled trades of the country. Because of resentment on the part of Americans doing the same type of work, it became increasingly difficult for immigrants to obtain work and, as a result, a worse evil followed. The immigrants gathered together in certain sections of large cities; this made Americanization practically impossible and handicapped their children by rearing them in an environment that was European. This self-segregation, in turn, promoted more antagonism toward the minority group, and so the problem assumes such vast proportions that it is the despair of civic leaders and social workers.

In the case of the Negro, there are three important reasons for prejudice on the part of the whites. These are economic motivation, maintenance of social status, and customs. The first is the most essential and is, as it were, the source from which the other two spring. From the time that the Negroes were released from slavery there was a fear that they would take the position in labor formerly held by the lower class of whites. This led to the refusal to permit Negroes to join labor unions and as a result of that deprivation, there has been vast exploitation of the Negro to the benefit of unprincipled employers. The Negroes provided a source of cheap labor, and, as long as they were barred from labor unions, they had no method of registering claims for higher wages. And as long as they could not demand higher wages, the dominant group was assured of fat profits and financial security.

The loss of social status has been amply treated above so that a recapitulation in regard to the Negro is hardly necessary. Suffice it to say that this argument is used against the Negro more than against any other group. Every race has the tendency to think that its culture is superior, but all of them forget that no culture is original and is at best a motley assembly of cultural patterns acquired from a myriad of sources. It is interesting to note that this sort of prejudice is more noticeable in those whites whose social status (or lack of it)

makes their position most susceptible to challenge by the Negro. This is the point of combustion in racial prejudice.

By customs are meant stereotyped ways of thinking. It is all too common an assumption (and equally as false) that the Negro is mentally inferior to the white man; that the Negro is essentially immoral; that the Negro is criminally inclined. Now it is a pure waste of time to discuss such inane statements. If certain Negroes seem to be inferior mentally to certain white men, it is due to external influences primarily and not necessarily to native inability. Even if it were, this would not brand all Negroes as intellectually inferior. The question of immorality is obviously false, as is shown by the statistics taken from court records and from the statements of priests and religious who work among the Negro. As to the question of criminality, most sociologists now hold views that are opposed to the theory of inherited criminal tendencies, and stress rather the environmental factor. But the Negro has no control over his environment because the economic position forced upon him by whites prohibits his choice of locality.

Hence, it is evident that we Americans have no plausible excuse for practicing our injustice and prejudice toward the Negro—or any minority group, for that matter. The practical question now is: What are we going to do about it? There are two things to be done; one is a task for the government, federal, state, or civic; the other is a task for the Church primarily. The work before the government is rehabilitation. And by that is meant slum clearance, housing projects, and the construction of recreational centers. No one is foolish enough to expect a generation of angels to rise from the slums of Harlem, but certainly we are wise enough to remove the impediments which prevent the Negro from soaring to the heights of which he is capable. How expect a people to attain a decent standard of living and a representative grade of culture when they are pushed back into the mire every time they make a noticeable effort? We do not postulate environment as the most important and sole factor which determines the behavior of a group or individual, but it is nevertheless a potent force. Give the Negro the environmental improvements which this country offers to every other citizen, and you will find that the Negro lived in slums because he was forced to.

The other remedial measure which is the lot of the Church is much more important than rehabilitation, and that is education, education along religious and civic lines as well as in art and science. We are not interested in the present generation so much as in the rising generation, and we know that it is by education that the whole

problem of Negro prejudice is going to be solved. True, we should seek to alleviate the needs of the adult Negro today, but that relief will be temporary at best. It is the education of the child that is going to give lasting results. Now, that particular education is bilateral. It consists in teaching the Negro how to be a *useful, Christian* citizen and teaching the white American how to be a *Christian* citizen.

Obviously, this education must begin in private schools, and more particularly, in Catholic parochial schools. The curricula of Catholic high schools, colleges, and universities must also be extended to the Negro youth, or else our educational system is false to the principles upon which it was founded. There is no dual doctrine of justice handed down by Christ, and when the Master commanded His disciples and after them their successors to be "all things to all men," He meant just that. In like manner, the Vicar of Christ on earth, Pius XII, has made it clear that the Negro is the object of his special affection. Where, then, is there any justification for the attitude taken by so many American Catholics? There is none. And as long as we Catholic are influenced by this racial prejudice, we are not truly followers of Christ; for how can we have that charity one for another which He enjoins upon us if we are lacking in the fulfillment of our duties and obligations one to another?