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Catholics, Integration And Charity

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"Because of you, this year the seminary in Kansas City will not receive the \$600 I usually donate to it," shouted the slender, middle-aged balding man at the young seminarian.

The seminarian said nothing. It was obvious that he was surprised by the remark of the passer-by and at a loss for words. The erstwhile benefactor walked away. A few minutes later he returned. The Catholic theological student who had been talking to his Protestant and Jewish comrades noticed him coming.

"Have you changed your mind?" he inquired.

"No!" replied the man from Missouri. He was growing angry, but the half smile on his face manifested his reluctance to display his emotion toward someone he had been taught was worthy of respect. He continued, "You people have gone too far with this. You're all wrong. I'm a good Catholic, a right-hand man of the Monsignor back home, but I'm fed up with the way some Catholics have become involved in this whole movement."

The seminarian asked how the Monsignor back home felt about Catholic participation in the movement to secure equal rights for American Negroes.

Growing more annoyed, the other answered, "He thinks its wrong too." He hurried away, crossing the street. He was on his way to visit the Lincoln Memorial.

This episode took place in June at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. The Catholic seminarian was one of three theological students taking part in a prayer vigil. He was with a Protestant and a Jew. The vigil was begun on April 14th of this year and terminated with the passage of the Civil Rights Bill by the United States Senate. It was a manifestation of the conviction of the three major faiths of the United States that equal rights for Negroes and other minority groups is a religious and moral

issue. It was designed to show visibly their commitment to the truth that discrimination based on the color of a man's skin is morally evil.

Catholic seminarians have not been the only segment of American Catholicism to take a strong stand on the side of the Negro in the question of equal rights. Their action would have meant nothing were it not supported by the American hierarchy and were it not a reflection of the teaching of that same hierarchy. The bishops of the United States, collegially and individually, have spoken out against discrimination, segregation and all forms of racial prejudice on numerous occasions. Many Catholic organizations, united with other groups through the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, worked to persuade the 88th Congress to pass a strong, effective Civil Rights Bill. Among them can be counted the Catholic Interracial Council, the National Catholic Social Action Conference, the National Council of Catholic Men and the National Council of Catholic Women.

Yet, the words of the man from Kansas City in front of the Lincoln Memorial and his remark about the Monsignor demonstrate that some Catholics find it difficult to accept the teaching of the Church regarding the complete integration of the Negro. Such a difficulty may be the result of background or environment. The emotions, especially fear, may also play a part. Again, ignorance, either of the Church's teaching or of the Negro himself, may be the reason why some Catholics openly reject or quietly ignore the directives of the bishops.

It is our purpose to discuss objectively the reasons for the Church's position on race relations. We are aware of the difficulty some Catholics will have in adhering to this teaching of the Church. Their acceptance of and obedience to this doctrine may take a long time, yet, the spirit of Catholicism, the love of Christ demands that they do so, or at least honestly attempt to do so. The passage of the Civil Rights Bill is a victory for the just treatment of the Negro. But, another battle is still to be fought by some, the battle of the individual person with his irrational prejudices which will hinder just and charitable association with his Negro neighbor.

What Is Discrimination?

Pope John XXIII in one of the many statements in *Pacem in Terris* on human dignity remarks that ". . . racial discrimination can in no way be justified, at least doctrinally or in theory." Racial discrimination is the name given to that pattern of action which manifests one's inner convictions about the inferiority of another race. It is a "judgment of the intrinsic

inferiority of either an individual or an entire group because of racial origin."¹ It is something internal; a rash judgment without sufficient forethought or motive. This judgment is made by the intellect, but not without the influence of the will and the emotions, their vagaries and disturbances. This would explain why some can give an outward rational assent to the Church's doctrine on the equality of all men and yet find it most difficult to act according to what they know is true.

When race prejudice becomes deep-seated and permanent in a person, it gives rise to racism. A racist is convinced that a particular ethnic group is naturally and uncontrollably inferior to another hereditarily superior group, usually his own race.

Patterns of thinking such as these give rise to discrimination and segregation. "Understood in this way, it (segregation) embraces the entire complex of discriminatory techniques, practices and patterns and includes the whole system of racial discrimination."² Segregation, however, is noted by its public or semi-public character.

Obviously, many evils accrue to persons who are the objects of discriminatory practices. Not so obvious is the fact that even those who discriminate are the victims of the evil effects of such action.³

Discrimination and segregation have forced the American Negro to seek low paying jobs. He has been deprived of rightful voice in the government of *his* country, been the recipient of sub-standard education and coerced to live in slum areas surrounded by dangers to both physical and moral health. Segregation can and has affected some Negroes psychologically. Inferiority feelings are to be found among Negroes as a result of the continual assertion in word and deed, that his race is naturally inferior. What makes this all the more evil is the fact that such feelings have no basis in reality.

Discrimination has a psychological effect on the discriminators also. For example the feelings generated in them as a result of their practices are not based in fact. Those who discriminate acquire a false sense of superiority which can have damaging results upon their personalities. White Americans who have put their prejudicial feelings about Negroes into action have also been the victims of feelings of guilt, conflict and tension

¹ Joseph T. Leonard, S.S.J., *Theology and Race Relations*. Bruce; Milwaukee, 1963, p. 13.

² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³ The following consideration of the evil results of segregation is a summary of Chapter 5 of Fr. Leonard's book.

arising from the contradiction between their actions and the principles of Christian ethics and the ideals put forth in the Declaration of Independence regarding the equality of all men. Again, discriminators are affected morally by their unjust actions, since violations in this area weaken their moral fiber in other spheres.

Finally, it ought to be noted that the conflict between the Church's teaching on segregation and the actual practice of individual Catholics can be a source of scandal for the Negro. There is much in the Catholic Church that could attract the American Negro. He hears the statements of the bishops about the equality of all men, the dignity of man and universal brotherhood of man. Such truths would move the Negro to seek information about and association with the Catholic Church were it not for the attitudes and actions of those Catholics who reject or ignore the doctrine of the Church. The Negro doubts the sincerity of the pronouncements of Church leaders when faced by the discriminatory practices of individual Catholics, and consequently the conversion of many Negroes is seriously impeded.

The Social Nature of Man

Practices which produce so many ill effects as those mentioned above must, of themselves, be evil. However, there are other reasons for rejecting segregation as immoral. It destroys the concept of the dignity of the human person, acts in contradiction to man's social nature and denies the unity of the human race, each member of which is ordered to a common end, an eternal life of union with God.

Man's dignity derives from the fact that he is a person, a being endowed with intelligence and free will. He is truly the master of his own actions. Again we cite Pope John in *Pacem in Terris*:

"Indeed, precisely because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature. And as these rights and obligations are universal and inviolable so they cannot in any way be surrendered."

Every human person, then, has certain rights by reason of his nature to which he may lay rightful claim. Concomitantly, every man has from nature the duty to respect these rights in his fellow man. Moreover, each human person was created by God in his own image and likeness. The salvific mission of God's own Son, Jesus Christ was universal in its em-

brace. All men have the opportunity to share unending happiness with God. Man, therefore, has a right to all those things which will help him attain his divinely established end and perfection. He possesses the right to life and a suitable standard of living, to housing, medical care and the necessary social services. He is entitled to his good reputation, to education, to worship God and to choose freely his state in life.

Reflection on the plight of the American Negro in the history of our country reveals that he has been denied many of these basic rights in varying degrees solely because of the color of his skin. The denial of such basic rights for that reason alone is immoral, since it deprives a human person of that which God intended him to have, and denies the essential dignity of every human person.

A long time ago Aristotle said that man was a social animal. This pithy phrase is an abstract way of saying that each individual human person needs other men. He cannot "go it alone." The human personality cannot be developed in a vacuum. Nature demands that the individual have the assistance of others in developing both physically and spiritually. The baby is totally dependent for its physical needs on the family. Without this society he could not sustain and maintain life. A man's progress in science, the arts and culture depends to a great extent on the social contacts he makes. Again, Divine Providence has ordained that men achieve salvation in that society founded by Jesus Christ, the Church. In the Mystical Body each living member contributes to the sanctification and spiritual progress of the others.

The right of association arises from the social nature of man. This right ". . . allows men to come together for the securement of religious, intellectual, or social goals which are not opposed to the rights of others or injurious to the common good."⁴ In achieving these goals through cooperation with others the individual is able to better himself as well as the community.

Segregation manifests its intrinsically evil qualities by denying a certain group the opportunity of developing themselves, both as individuals and as a race, through association with others. Thus, the deficiencies, social, cultural, intellectual and moral which are used as arguments for the segregation of the Negro are, in reality, the evil fruits of such a practice. The American Negro has been deprived of the right of association, of the right to better himself by those who practice segregation. And these same

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

people advocate a continuance of this policy because of the deficiencies it has caused. Not only would the Negro benefit from a greater association of the races. Whites too will receive definite advantages from their encounters with Negroes, if only they would be willing. As Cardinal Meyer said in an address to the National Conference on Religion and Race: "The newcomers bear gifts, if we have the intelligence and imagination to help them develop them."

Again, the immorality of segregation is seen in the fact that it denies the unity of all men by reason of their common nature, origin and end. Every man is essentially a rational being endowed with free will. The color of his skin is as incidental to his status as a man as is the color of his hair. We have all been created by God and His infinite wisdom shines forth in every creature. The very diversity of race is a result of this infinite wisdom. Men of every race are to find their perfection and final reward in a life of union with God, their Father. All men, therefore, are truly brothers. We find this truth stated in the *Message to Humanity* of Vatican II: "We proclaim that all men are brothers irrespective of the race or nation to which they belong." Such unity demands that all of us associate with one another, that we live and work together to attain our common goal. Racial segregation prevents this. In doing so, it sets itself in opposition to the nature of man and, consequently, is immoral. In *Pacem in Terris* we read:

"Neither are we to overlook the fact that men of every ethnic group, in addition to their own characteristic endowments by which they are distinguished from the rest of men, have other important gifts of nature in common with their fellow men by which they can make more and more progress and perfect themselves, particularly in matters that pertain to the spirit. They have the right and duty therefore to live in communion with one another."

Charity

It is our contention that the problem of racial integration has not been completely resolved on the individual level by some Catholics. Whatever legislation has been passed or will be passed is to be obeyed by all citizens. But mere legislation is not the final solution to the problem. Law cannot make a person change his feelings about another race. Love can! Moreover, the Catholic solution does not consist solely in formal obedience

to an act of Congress. The Christian will associate with Negroes because he is a disciple of Christ. His will not be a token integration; he will not be content in following the letter of the law. Rather, Catholics will communicate with their Negro brethren in the spirit of charity. They will treat the Negro as Christ would have treated him, because they are his followers. "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:35). Christ taught us to imitate his way of life and his love extended to all men. So too must our love, if it is to be genuinely Christian. Pope Paul VI explains that, "Revelation teaches us to love all men, for they have all been redeemed by the same Savior." And the American Hierarchy reminds us that, "The most crucial test of love of God is love of neighbor."

Charity, true Christian love is the means offered by the Church to attain the cessation of racial tension on the individual level. It should be noted, however, that the practice of such charity will not be easy. One cannot wish away in the wink of an eye what years of prejudice and misinformation may have built up. It will be difficult for a White Catholic to change his attitudes, if he has lived for most of his life in an environment where the Negro is accepted as an inferior. The Negro will not find it easy to love the Whites who have continually exploited him and denied him his rights. Yet, this is the course Dr. Martin Luther King advises the American Negro to follow. Extremists on both sides, and their irrational actions make it more difficult for honest people to practice charity in racial matters. Yet, a virtuous life never was an easy one. It takes courage and strength to be a Christian, to love others as Christ loved them. The Cross will always be present in Christianity challenging us to give a meaningful witness to our love for God.

True love of a person presupposes a true understanding of him. It is a valid psychological principle that we cannot love what we do not know. White Catholics will seek a true knowledge of the Negro. They will not be satisfied with the false caricatures that have been passed down from preceding generations. An honest Catholic will ask himself how he would feel, if he were treated like the American Negro in some areas of our country. How would *you* respond if you were denied a job you were qualified for, solely because of the color of your skin? And Catholics should be motivated in their love by the fact that when they love their neighbor they are loving Christ. It is the mark of a true Christian that he tries to see Christ in his neighbor. And who is his neighbor? Anyone to whom he can give the love of Christ.

This true Christian love, which is the solution to the problem of racial integration, is not the emotion we feel toward our dear ones. It means taking an active interest in the welfare of others, both material and spiritual. Pope Paul says that when revelation teaches us to love all men, . . . it obliges us to offer those who have least the means of arriving in dignity at a more human life." True charity toward the Negro would consist in our acting to remove the obstacles that impede their rights and opportunities. Again, charity demands that Catholics not give scandal to Negroes, that they avoid detraction and contumely and that they show them the common signs of friendship. This prohibits the refusal to greet a Negro and the refusal to answer his questions etc. The Negro is not looking for special treatment; he merely wants to be accepted as every other human person is. Thus, a good rule of thumb is to treat our Negro *neighbor* as we would treat our White *neighbor*. For in loving our *neighbor*, be he White or Black, we are loving Christ.

In conclusion, may we recommend the cause of a peaceful integration in the United States to the prayers of all. Let them also pray that each Christian may face the problem in the spirit of Christ, the spirit of love. Recalling the words of Pope John XXIII at the canonization of St. Martin de Porres, it seems fitting that our prayers be offered to him for these intentions:

"May the light of his life illumine all to walk in the way of Christian social justice and universal charity without distinction of color or race."