



Selma Reconstructed

Joseph R. Cooney, O.P.

What we witness . . . is the spectacle of a nation which struggles doggedly against itself, or, more accurately, against large segments of its own people, against a certain legacy of evil in its own mores, and against the demons of the human heart—in order to free itself of abuses which are repellent to its own spirit, and to raise its entire practical behavior to the level of the tenets and principles in which it believes. . . . Jacques Maritain.

Selma, Alabama, was totally segregated as 1965 began; now public accommodations have been integrated and school integration is planned for September. There are quiet interracial meetings by the Negro leaders and the City Council, which, through negotiation, attempt to minimize conflicts. Federal interference and the new Civil Rights Law will guarantee Negro voter registration. Throughout the South, the Negro is just beginning to receive equal status. The expectations of the Negroes are rising faster, however, than their

status, and so disappointment, frustration, and despair result. President Johnson recognized this when he said that one hundred years is too long to wait.

The events at Selma and Montgomery are landmark incidents in our nation's struggle to rid itself of "white supremacy." Some people have chosen to label this struggle "the racial crisis." The murders of the civil rights workers in Mississippi, three murders to date at Selma, the boycotts, riots and "sit-ins"; these merely manifest the strain created by an active process of change in society.

The following is a discussion not of the indications of strain which are prominent in your daily newspapers, but of 1) the conditions which contributed to change in Selma; 2) the process of change, with special emphasis on the technique of non-violence; and 3) a few personal observations by way of conclusion.

Favorable Conditions

Conditions are favorable. The United States society can be treated separately from southern society, but for the most part we will intertwine both societies. Generalizations always carry the weaknesses of generalizations, i.e., there will always be exceptions unmentioned.

The prerequisite for the successful Selma-Montgomery march was the sympathy among a significant number of the citizens of the "greater United States," who have become committed to the equal rights cause. Our society has been permeated by a conviction that there ought to be another pattern of behavior in living with Negroes. The pattern most accepted—the traditional pattern—saw the Negro in an inferior role. The alternative pattern—seeking an equal role for the Negro—has been accepted by a significant number of citizens who are the indispensable platform on which change begins to take place.

The people who are disposed to change because of another set of values are: the Negroes themselves, who are awakened to seek a higher role for themselves and for their children, and those whites interested in racial justice. This latter group has grown to substantial proportions, including interracial religious groups, certain unions, and civic organizations. Finally, Texas' Senator Yarborough's nationally televised attack on the violence permitted by

Governor Wallace, and President Johnson's assurance that Negro marchers would be protected by Federal troops crystallize the evidence that a consensus is seeking to express itself.

This desire for change and a discontent with present conditions are being channelled by several organizations. Group solidarity strengthens and nourishes the alternative outlook of Negro equality. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) has co-ordinated and still is co-ordinating the movement in Selma, thus avoiding wasted and erratic efforts. On that crucial Tuesday of March 9th, the unexpected injunction against the marchers caused much confusion. The key question was, "What has *King* decided? *He* asked us to come and to march. What does *he* say?" When he led the march, the Negroes and clergymen followed. When King turned back after the confrontation with the State Police, his leadership was accepted. Yet, having been in that Tuesday march, I know that King's decision to turn back was not acceptable to all. There was one woman behind me who protested, "Where are the two hundred who vowed with me not to turn back, who vowed to go over the barricades with or without King?" But they could not stampede the marchers. This group that resists King's leadership advocates more direct non-violent action. Subsequent events again proved King to be the greatest tactician of the movement. To the Negroes of Selma, King is a new Moses.

This interracial movement did not blossom overnight. The first attempt, following the Civil War was the Populist Party composed of poor whites and Negroes in the southern states. With the collapse of the party around 1900, every attempted revival was blocked by the Jim Crow laws. Following the passage of the Peoples Party, the poor whites were to suffer almost as much as the Negroes. The NAACP began in 1900 and became the champion of Negro rights. The National Urban League was established in 1910, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942. Finally, the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 was the beginning of King's leadership.

The Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed in 1960, and the Congress of Federated Organizations (COFO) began in 1964 with freedom schools and voter registration projects in Mississippi.

The set of beliefs or ideology which legitimizes the action of

the Selma voter registration drive is reaching the entire society. One reason is that the communications media are reporting the events even though they are personally dangerous to reporters and, in the short run, nationally embarrassing. Even more important in diffusing the ideology has been Martin Luther King's effective articulation. The ideological formula is based on the great American creed of "equality for all," and on the religious ethos of the brotherhood of man. "Have we not all one Father? Has not the one God made us?" (Malachias 2:10). The technique of non-violence is a concrete expression of the Golden Rule: Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself. As the values which underwrite the movement are communicated to more and more people, and as they gain wider acceptance, the deviant movement that is changing society is gaining the ascendancy.

The racial movement is striking at a particularly vulnerable point in the practical way of life. Since the very inception of our country great numbers of the people have believed and fought for universal equality. But the "equality dictum" of the Constitution cannot be maintained logically if we have slavery or inferior citizenship. The tortuous reasoning that seeks to continue the acceptance of inferior citizenship within our society is vulnerable, and the institutions which concretize these attitudes are tottering. Progressively, the Constitution (which forbade the importation of slaves after 1803), the Northwest Purchase, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil War struck at slavery and the "white supremacy" notion. These were followed by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments, *Brown vs. the Board of Education* (May, 1954), requiring desegregation of the school system, the Civil Rights laws of 1957, 1964 and 1965. All struck at slavery and the "white supremacy" notion.

The greater society of the United States is adjusting itself to grant the Negro his due place as an equal citizen. Churchmen, labor leaders, civic and cultural leaders are writing to rid society of an "evil in its mores." The successful end of the struggle is long overdue. Every man must fight "the demons of the human heart," to use Maritain's words. Quite probably, the change that must be made in the southern society will require the making of a new society. The "white supremacy" doctrine has permeated the institutions of

the South so deeply that removing the evil will require a true reconstruction of the social order. The subculture within the greater American Society must be rebuilt to conform with the American creed of justice for all within equal opportunity.

Reconstructing Society

Any process of change may be said to have two phases. During the first phase, the goal is to disturb the established order by organizing another way of doing things and having a good reason to support the new way. During the second phase, after the "new broom" approach has been accepted by society as a whole, the new movement exerts a serious and direct influence within the power structure. The greater United States society is now being "swept" by the new broom. The society of the deep South is being disturbed by a newly organized way of doing things. The rest of our thoughts will focus on the process of reconstruction in the southern states. We will describe generally the initial state of that society, observe the changes and means of change, and, finally, look to the proximate and ultimate goals.

The Dixie Society, which places the Negro in an inferior role, is characterized by these words of a white southerner: "We love 'em [Negroes], in their place—like shinin' shoes, bell-hoppin', street sweepin', pickin' cotton, diggin' ditches, eatin' possum, servin' time, totin' buckshot, river-floatin', etc." (*Life*: April 23, 1965)

In this "other America" white supremacy has decreed an unequal role for Negro citizens. This is shown by non-prosecution (or non-conviction if indicted) of whites for crimes against Negroes or against whites associated with Negroes. Negroes are kept out of the jury box. Negroes are not allowed to participate in government as office holders, or as police officers. This denial of citizenship rights is made possible because the Negro is not allowed to vote.

It all began a century ago when the plantation South led, nourished, and solidified resistance to change. This resistance impeded the natural adjustive mechanisms of society. The vested interests which controlled the power structure rejected the American creed of equality, and taught its citizenry to think themselves "up" by looking "down". The very vital process of adjustment and growth was choked-off; society stabilized in the old form (the "old

South”), the Negro was shut out educationally, civically, culturally, humanly.

The movement is consistently winning court battles. School integration is moving along in most communities; Negroes are now called for jury duty (Will they be selected?). Some of the cities have Negro policemen, and most National Guard units have at least token integration. The amendments to the National Constitution of the Democratic Party withdrawing representation privileges from any segregated Democratic state organization is an important advance. The civil rights laws of '57, '64, and '65 are most significant on the national scene.

Still incomplete, the advance towards equal justice requires *voting participation* by the Negroes in the local democratic political process. This is the immediate goal and purpose of the organized effort which began at Selma on January 2, 1965, and already has cost the lives of Jimmy Lee Jackson, Reverend James Reeb, and Mrs. Viola Liuzzo. While the Federal Constitution and varying laws have guaranteed the right to vote, this right has been denied unjustly by violence. The Selma story is about citizens who want to vote, who want to influence their local government in a democratic way. The means used by some white southerners to deny the right to vote have ranged from violence, murder, and bombings, to the literacy test and poll tax. Violence at Selma is not restricted to the court house, the river bridge, or to Highway 80; the very air is filled with hatred; “Don’t sleep near the windows. Don’t silhouette yourself at a doorway or window at night. . . .” But some things are changing now. By court order the people will be registered. The people can march peacefully. Sheriff Clark cannot use his possemen against the demonstrators. The disenfranchised majority of Selma will be franchised with the opportunity of mastering its own destiny—it will be able to vote. (An historically similar situation was the Irish and Italian emigration and settlement in Boston and New York.)

The idea of Negro equality is not new; the technique for promoting the movement is new—non-violent direct action. The Selma-Montgomery march is a well-publicized example of this method which causes social conflict, and in turn dislocates society to effect social change. The body “politique” responds to the awareness of disequilibrium within itself as an organic body reacts to thirst,

hunger, and other needs. Street demonstrations and the march to Montgomery were the very successful first steps dramatizing the injustices and attracting local and national attention to an unjust situation. These demonstrations coupled with a consumer boycott of the now cooperating white merchants of Selma were moves planned to upset the social balance. Weekly meetings of the Selma City Council with Negro leaders are continuing to effect more changes in the power structure of the community. These bi-racial meetings are the bargaining forum whereby the social order can be adjusted and conflict averted, or at least diminished.

The white merchants have been partially responsible for these meetings because of the Negro consumer's boycott, called a "buyer withdrawal." The profit motive which underlies the economic institutions is being used as a weapon against the "white supremacy" way of life. Business groups, seeing that racial disturbances will result in loss of business, will make concessions and adaptations. Among these groups the various Chambers of Commerce are prominent (the Senior Citizens Committee of Birmingham is a good example). Certain other groups are prompted principally by a desire to establish social tranquility, and only incidentally to promote integration. Examples of these groups are: SOS—Save Our School, Inc., in New Orleans; and OASIS—Organizations Assisting Schools in September, in Atlanta.

The conflict calls attention to an injustice, and the favorable conditions promote the adoption of an adjusted course of action. The non-violent technique enables the people to apply pressure and at the same time to attract allies among religious and civic groups. How better can a group show its Judaeo-Christian beliefs than to overcome evil by good, or to overcome violence with non-violence. The government could easily put down armed resistance, yet the State of Alabama was helpless before a thousand people at Selma. The violence of the troopers only emphasized their frustration and defeat. Enlisting the teen-age marchers of Selma continues the technique developed at Birmingham. The almost unlimited source of youthful marchers can fill up the jails and completely frustrate any "mass-arrest" strategy of the police.

The proximate goal is to checkmate the influence of certain groups, such as the White Citizens Council, by neutralizing the

sanctions facing the new pattern or way of living. To introduce an equal role for the Negro in society: this is the final goal of the racial movement. But many of the leaders and interested people have broadened their outlook and activity to embrace the wider field of civil rights which delves into the core of the community power structure. The area of civil rights includes the poverty problem, automation and its effects on the total community, housing, education, city planning, and social welfare policy.

Personal Remarks

Many people are frightened by this talk of "reconstructing society". The terms "power structure" and "equal rights" cause them a degree of uneasiness. A study of the social encyclicals of the popes would dispel this fear and apprehension. The title of Pope Pius' encyclical, *On Reconstructing the Social Order*, quite obviously indicates the nature of its contents. Social reconstruction as an ideal was not something that began with Pius XI. It can be found in the encyclical, *The Condition of Labor* by Pope Leo XIII, and of course its fundamental source is the life and teachings of Jesus. Pope John XXIII's words are truly revolutionary when applied to the old south:

For our day, those attitudes are fading, despite their prevalence for so many hundreds of years, whereby some classes of men accepted an inferior position, while others demanded for themselves a superior position, on account of economic and social conditions, of sex, or of assigned rank within the political community.

On the contrary, the conviction that all men are equal by reason of their natural dignity has been generally accepted. Hence social discrimination can in no way be justified, at least doctrinally or in theory, and this is of fundamental importance and significance for the foundation of human society. (*Pacem in Terris*, Nos. 43-44)

Catholics are positively encouraged to remake society, to enter into the heart of the struggle to restore true relationships among people in justice, in love and in freedom. Let all America work "to raise our practical behavior to the level of the tenets and principles in which [America] believes."

Father Cooney is presently in the third year of the School of Law at Catholic University. He participated in the second march at Selma on March 9th and 10th of this year. This summer Father will be working on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's project, SCOPE, in Georgia.