



# **The Washington Riots, April 1968 ... A Journal of Hope?**

*by Noel Vacin, O.P.*

New Bethel Baptist Church is a red bricked, soul searching house of God located in the heart of Washington's riot area. Prayer and the practice of the Christian life are its hallmarks, but during the riots of last April New Bethel added a new sheen to those time-worn bricks. This "House of God" (Beth-el) is a black man's church, yet the series of events beginning with the death of Martin Luther King brought all men to its washed out, maple-stained doors. Probably, its most prominent visitor was Senator Robert Kennedy who attended its Sunday services and afterward toured the demolished and smoldering 14th Street area.

There are three usual ministers to the people of New Bethel: Reverends Fauntroy, Davis and Ball. Reverend Fauntroy was a close intimate of Martin Luther King and is presently a member of the District of Columbia City Council; he was a veritable tower of strength during the trouble. Reverend Davis is a balding man of deep concern and "backwoods" humor. He, along with Father Geno Baroni of the Archdiocese of Washington, organized and expedited the aid programs throughout the city. Reverend Ball is a tall, man of the moment,

who huddled with us in the upper room of New Bethel while we worked to solve the myriad of problems that arose.

And there were extraordinary ministers to S and 9th Streets during the riots: seminarians, college students, ordinary men sacrificing their free time from work, and the people from the riot area themselves. It was not the apostolic venture that St. Paul mentions in First Corinthians; these men there were blessed with the spiritual gifts of preaching, healing, the power of miracles, prophecy, etc. No, ours was a mundane and more practical charism: cheese cutting, the power and patience to incessantly telephone "Welfare" for food, the endurance needed for lugging Number 10 sized cans of food, and a certain magical touch to keep the confusion and hysteria to a minimum.

To attempt to dilute the food distribution project into a logical presentation seems now an extremely onerous task, and an injustice to the ingenuity of the effort itself. There was little time for conferring and mapping out pre-planned attacks, but rather we acted in a helter-skelter fashion piecing together ideas and actions on the spot. Just as the looters had not attacked the individual stores with a master plan in mind, so neither did we. Welfare trucks rolled in at the oddest and most unexpected moments, and the ministers, both new and old, had to unload, bag, and distribute food with the same unexpectancy as the welfare trucks' time-schedule. Often the hungry came seeking food when there was none. It is an anguishing moment in a man's spirit when he has to say, "Sorry, no food." Yet somehow these random reflections do not even approximate the experience of those days. The nearest re-creation of them can only be approached by attempting to present the events and experiences as each of them unfolded.

### **Monday, April 8th**

Monday was the day the bricks at New Bethel began to shine with the advent of these *new* ministers. I walked up the cracked sidewalk to the front door, and was cordially greeted by Mr. Perry, the aged janitor who still drank from the fountain of youth. He escorted me to the lower church, where there in the middle of the floor was a mound of clothes. Jack Smith, an Augustinian, sweating profusely, looked at me with pleading eyes which said: "The mound is yours, do with it what you please." After an hour of rummaging through men's pants, women's dresses, babies' diapers, and blankets, I felt as confused and dazed as the moment I began. At this moment Mr. Perry returned, this time with a dozen volunteers from the University of Maryland. Within an hour, the added man power and the feminine

touch had brought order out of chaos . . . a true reflection of the creation event!

As the afternoon sun began to spring its warm rays onto S Street, swarms of riot victims began crowding about the doors of New Bethel. The majority sought food, but a healthy number found their way to the back room and to makeshift counters overflowing with clothes. Some were discreet and a few descended upon the tables like zealots of old. "Clerks" were distributed at various parts of the room and at the counters with the hope of maintaining some semblance of order and to discourage any over-ardent tendencies. For the most part, it worked, but somehow during the course of the afternoon a few women managed to slip by our strategic network. Then, with four or five boxes packed with clothes, they would inquire about our delivery services with, of course, sheepish looks on their faces and words loaded with the innocence of children! The clerks consented, and thus assumed a new role—delivery boys! With boxes balanced precariously on shoulders and heads, the delivery boys proceeded down S Street. About a block past 7th Street they stopped and entered a brick tenement house glaring with messages of "Soul Brother" and "Soul Family" on its windowpanes. The stairway was narrow, dark, and utterly noxious. The door opened into a minute one room apartment inhabited probably by ten or twelve people by the looks of it. Who knows, really, how many actually lived there? A television was blaring with an early evening quiz show. Only one woman, nearing thirty-five or so, but aged beyond those years, managed to notice simultaneously both the program and the box-laden intruders. A two or three month old baby was perched on the one bed in the room, and on his face was an empty and distant look. He was oblivious to everything in that room, and to the days and years he would have to spend in that room. Hellos and good-byes broke through the quiz master's voice erupting from the television, and then, for us, it was back down that narrow, dark, noxious staircase.

Questions began to etch themselves on my mind: Was this the real hard core trauma of the riot? Maybe this was the way the family lived riot or no riot. And what about the middle class rainbow of values so many of us live under? Would that rainbow ever hover above S Street? Call us delivery boys or clerks, but for a few moments for that family living on S Street somewhere east of 7th, we were rainbow makers.

Evening crept onto S Street. Patrolling squad cars reaffirmed the evening curfew to unpeopled streets. Our food distribution activity

had rolled to a halt. This enabled a few of us to go out to the front steps of New Bethel where we sat transfixed by the silence intermittently shattered with blurts of noise coming from police bull-horns. An hour later, I was called to the upper room. Someone had telephoned. I was handed the phone, and from the other end someone began questioning me about the authenticity of our food distribution center. The call was from welfare. Questions were being asked, and the right answers were not being given, which finally climaxed when I stammered over the phone: "Look, I don't know the title of the official who is running this set-up. I've been sorting clothes all day! Do you call that a position of authority?" Then these words began to break over the phone in reply: "Listen, Sonny, what do you think we are running a McDonald's hamburger stand?" With that I knew we had reached an impasse, and I handed the phone over to Reverend Ball. Hours and hours passed, or so it seemed, before a welfare truck appeared loaded with canned vegetables, meat, bread and doughnuts (!) for the next morning. How that truck ever arrived after my conversation, I will never know!

### ***Tuesday, April 9th***

Monday welfare hadn't recognized our existence, but Tuesday we were greeted like long lost friends. Truck upon truck bombarded us with food. The mystery of it all was that as soon as the food was unloaded and bagged, it was gone. Often when we were caught short of volunteers, off the street came men, women, and children to our rescue. Pandemonium was rampant. The cries of children seemed virtually everywhere.

During the afternoon there was a lull in the activity: no trucks and no people seeking food. Jane Erickson, a volunteer worker from the University of Maryland, and I took a walk down 7th Street, by then a bomb scarred mélange of bricks, dust, and smoldering fires. A towering wrecker was awkwardly maneuvering into position to raze what only a few days before was a store bustling with patrons. The khaki donned troops, usually six to eight per corner, were monitoring traffic. Men lingered on the street waiting for perhaps another blow-out, waiting for something to happen. All around us there were ironic signs that a better day was on the horizon. As we crossed Rhode Island Avenue, we paused at an island of sapplings (most likely part of Washington's beautification program). Jane walked over to the flowering tree, picked a blossom, and wondered aloud how this row of verdant trees could still be thriving in this land of shambles. Further



down 7th Street, we were taken aback at a message, in its own way even poetic, which we saw in a store window: "I am African, American Japanese and tomorrow I'll be a butterfly . . ." What a shame there aren't more of us with butterfly tendencies! As we again approached New Bethel, we were astounded again, our benefactor welfare had arrived once more.

As 6:00 P.M. began to arrive, the police were back with their trumpet-blasting announcement that the curfew was now in force. Our miniscule force of the night before resumed its step-seated position. A less tense feeling pervaded the night; far off in the distance somewhere on 9th Street, we could hear the rhythmic sounds of Negro boys singing. At 7:30 P.M. an olive colored falcon bucked its way through the curfew networks and parked at our door. The door opened, and out came the Reverend Davis. He confessed that exhaustion had finally reached the very marrow of his bones, and he was calling it quits for the night. We went inside and began exchanging the pertinent details of the day's labor. Then Reverend Davis broke through the maze of data and gave us a terminal sketch of his background: born in the backwoods of North Carolina and now ministering in Washington. He remarked about the contact he has had with the White Southerner. They usually take him to be a Northern boy. This had resulted in some odd situations, most of them hilarious. The hilarity centers on a joke most of the time in which the Southerner's drawl deepens almost to the point of obfuscating the joke itself. And this is the brunt of the Reverend Davis' laughter: that he has had to maintain a Northern posture to a situation he has experienced time and again in the backwoods' country.

### **Wednesday, April 10th**

Wednesday was children's day at New Bethel, a healthy portent that the electrifying tensions of the riots were easing. It seemed that from some hidden source a waterfall of children began to stream onto S Street. They had a mania for interfering with anything which approximated efficiency and order. Aside from this a great thing was happening in the streets: laughter, the uproaring, billowing merriment of children! It may have taken three or four days for laughter to resume bubbling in their hearts, but now it was back and ringing in our ears.

Possibly their laughter had some far reaching effect, for the curfew was somewhat relaxed, the people were back on the streets, and the kids were still at our door. About 7:00 P.M. we went inside and in

followed the kids. Jokes were cracking in the air, small feet were stamping on the floor in dance, and make-believe stories were being contrived for our pleasure.

We heard the footsteps of Reverend Ball coming down the staircase from the upper room. He was a man of wisdom, and the children seemed to intuit it; they gravitated toward him almost automatically. One incessantly laughter-ridden boy looked up at the minister and began to question him about a bone that was protruding from his own hand. The wise man began his dialectic: "Have you ever heard a finely tuned guitar or bass fiddle? The child responded that he had. Reverend Ball then began scratching his beard, and asked: "Have you ever heard an under-tuned guitar or bass fiddle?" The boy agreed again. Solomon pronounced his verdict. "Son, your hand is just like an under-tuned guitar or bass fiddle; it just doesn't play right." The boy's eyes lighted up on hearing these words. He looked down at his hand (or under-tuned guitar) and shook his head in agreement. Waves of laughter broke into the room again. It was a great night! The fires, the anguished faces, and the fierce turmoil of the riots were being pushed out of our minds with the gay spirits of children.

### **Thursday, April 11th**

And now we were closing. By 4:00 P.M. our last bag of food had been distributed, and a certain feeling of exhaustion and peace set in. Over two thousand bags of food had been given out, and as many cigarettes had been smoked, or so my throat began to tell me! But for all the cigarettes, all the meals we hadn't eaten, all the rest we didn't get, a new glaze had begun to shine on those bricks at New Bethel.

Later on I was sitting in a back room exchanging small talk with one of the men off the street who had given us a helping hand during the operation. All at once, he broke into this unbelievable diatribe about his great love for his dog. His love for him knew no bounds even to the extent of allowing the dog to sleep in his bed! His love for his dog was greater and more intense than his love for his own mother. "That dog takes care of me; he don't do no wrong," he kept affirming. I was laughing at this whole encounter until this thought began to seep into my mind: "My God! What a strange pathetic statement to make." Somehow an irrational animal had been more faithful to this man than his own mother, at least in his own eyes. And what was the name of his dog? *Whitey*! And that's

the way it ended with a name "Whitey" popping in and out of my mind.

### **What Did It All Mean?**

For the most part I have recorded the striking and more optimistic events of my experience in the Washington Riot. But there is more to this story than the words printed on these pages. My first thoughts during the riot centered on the monstrous tragedy that it was, a tragedy in which I had a part. I heard many words concerning solutions—some over idealistic, many too pessimistic. Many people responded to the aftermath of the riots in an extremely generous fashion. But I went a step further and asked myself the question, why? And this I can only answer in the form of questions: Was I trying to rid myself of guilt-laden conscience? How paternalizing were my actions? Have I begun to realize the full implications of the fact that my skin is white and that theirs is black? These are hard core questions, but we have to ask them, and ask them within the recesses of our own hearts. Only when one interprets the riots in this sense, i.e., as tragedy, and consequently asking some honest questions can we hope to rebuild S and 9th Streets.

And it was Holy Week. The death of Martin Luther King, the riots, and my experience in them, enlivened, burned the symbolization of Holy Week into me. Possibly this article was my need to penetrate more deeply the meaning of Easter in 1968. But more than this, the ringing laughter of those children sounded a striking parallel to the joy which those "soul brothers and sisters" of Christ experienced when he broke bread with them after His resurrection from the dead. In those children, the spirit of joy had not died although it may have quivered for a few days. It rose again on S Street, and so did I!

On Easter Monday, I was paging through the *Washington Post* and these words of Martin Luther King, Sr. caught my eye. They tied the knot between my experience in the riots and the meaning I was fumbling to find in the Easter symbolism this year:

"These are mysterious and perilous times in which we live," said the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr. "But never lose your faith." "Yes, Yes," the audience responded. "We're not serving a dead God. You tell me about a dead God after all I've gone through this past week. He's got me standing up here!"

There's the knot. And now all that remains is to what extent we can all say, "Yes, yes!"