

Blacks in the Church: Ten Years After King

By BISHOP JOSEPH A. FRANCIS, SVD

Newark, N.J. (RNS) — In the late '50s, a black Catholic bishop from Ghana asked me why the Catholic Church in America had not been able to produce a priest who could do for black Catholics and the Catholic Church what Dr. King was doing for blacks in general and for and with his church in particular.

As politely as I could I informed the bishop that he could reflect, as a bishop, that no black priest would survive and that Dr. King enjoyed a freedom in his church which few or any Catholics enjoyed and certainly no black priest enjoyed.

I concluded the discussion by playing prophet and suggested that Martin Luther King Jr. was one sent by God to all of us and that he would be our liberator. He would liberate black Catholics along with the rest of the nation.

In making this prediction, I was not ignoring some hard realities about black Catholics. Historically, black non-Catholics had been very much in the forefront of the struggle for

freedom. They spoke loudly, forcefully and effectively to the conscience of white America using the teachings of Jesus as their point of departure. The Old Testament provided them with more than enough models of liberation. On the other side of denominational affiliation, black Catholics had not been so deeply involved in the struggle for freedom. They did not possess their own pulpits. Their priests and sisters were not ready or even willing to recognize the oppression under which they lived, because the Catholic Church practiced a most effective form of oppression in relegating her black members to status of tolerance replete with all of the indignities that tolerance without love makes manifest.

I am not suggesting that black non-Catholics had an easy time, but I am suggesting that it was inevitable that from a religious people like my black non-Catholic brothers and sisters, a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would arise and lead all of us, at least to a realization of our own potential not only to free ourselves, but to free our oppressors as well.



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As I look back on the Martin Luther King Jr. era, I find that I cannot speak or write of an unqualified acceptance by black Catholics. I am sure that this is so even among blacks in general. Many black Catholics, like most white Catholics, looked upon Dr. King with suspicion. Yet they could not really escape the appeal to their consciences and for the black Catholics they resonated only too well with what he said and did.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was not a myth, he was not a five talking, fly-by-night evangelist; he was a leader whose leadership was incarnated in suffering and rejection. The Christ figure reflected by him was too obvious to be ignored. The accusations of his enemies could not destroy the truth he spoke and by which he lived. Yet, no one denied that a great part of his appeal came from the fact that he was human and not Divine.

Black Catholics looked up to him with suspicion because he was a Baptist preacher and Baptist preachers were not looked upon kindly by Catholics in general and black Catholics were no different. But Catholics were able to bridge that prejudicial chasm because being black was much more important than not being Catholic. Dr. King show them what priests and bishops had not been able or willing to show them, namely, that they had been shortchanged by a Church which spoke of freedom and equality, but did very little to become a liberator, and nothing to challenge and change segregated practices and policies within the Church itself.

As the special charism of Dr. King began to make itself known in ever widening circles, black Catholics in small clusters began to join their non-Catholic brothers and sisters — white, black, brown — and they began to march to the steady beat of this new drummer and to follow the certain note of his trumpeted message. When black Catholics witnessed the commitment and dedication of a small group of nuns and priests who marched in the South, were jailed and suffered the most vicious kinds of slander and

detraction, they realized that Dr. King had touched the conscience of their Church also.

I believe that one of the most significant results of Dr. King's leadership for black Catholics is the motivation it gave them to seize the leadership in their Church in matters that concerned their participation and their rights.

Up until Dr. King and his non-violent movement took hold of America there were some significant Catholic interracial movements and through organizations like the National Catholic Council for Interracial Justice some significant progress for blacks had been made in the Catholic Church in the larger community. The men and women who were involved were dedicated and made great inroads in arousing the conscience of the American hierarchy and many Catholics. But even here there was opposition in the Church.

As black Catholics began to come into their own, spurred on by the influence of Dr. King, they became more and more aware that the leadership in these Catholic organizations was still a white leadership. Black Catholics wanted to see themselves in that leadership and to speak and act for themselves.

Many dedicated and well meaning whites neither understood nor appreciated Dr. King's movement and its strategies. In the middle 60s the alienation between vocal and aggressive blacks and the more conservative whites and some blacks became painfully apparent. Many whites, many of them my friends, took this as a personal rejection of themselves and gradually disassociated themselves from the struggle for freedom. Other younger and more progressive whites joined the struggle, but even they to this day were not and still are not sufficiently sensitive to the hard reality that white leadership cannot bring about the fullness of liberation and provide the measure of self worth that blacks must have.

With this in mind a group of black Catholic priests, brothers and seminarians met in Detroit in April 1968 and formed the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus. This organization shocked the Catholic Church in America by issuing a statement that proclaimed, "The Catholic Church in the United States is a white racist institution." The organization then affirmed its intention of uniting to exercise their leadership in the Catholic Church as blacks.

From the seeds planted in Detroit we now have a National Black Sisters Conference, a National Black Catholic Lay Caucus and the National Office for Black Catholics. The men and women who spearheaded this new direction in the Catholic Church were all firmly committed to Dr. King and his movement. Names like Clark, Porter, Davis, Lambert, Martin dePorres, Gray, Taylor and others will be remembered with gratitude by black Catholics. They suffered through some difficult

years, but were unbending and uncompromising.

For me personally, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. still remains a challenge and an inspiration. He is a Christ figure not in spite of his humanness, but because of

it. I firmly believe that God selected him and he answered a call that I must try to hear and continue in my small way what he has begun. A Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. will not pass this way again for years to come.

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Lk. 24:13-35. (R1) Acts 2:14, 22-28. (R2) 1 Pt. 1:17-21.

"Christ is alive today," sums up fairly well what next Sunday's readings are saying.

The Lucan story explains that Christ is present in the liturgy: in the Liturgy of the Word (Christ's explanation of the Scriptures on the road) and the Liturgy of the Eucharist (the breaking of the bread at the end of the journey). The real discovery of Emmaus was the truth that Christ was alive.

We too have lost the bodily presence of Christ, but we have His sacramental presence in the breaking of the bread. To discover this presence, it is necessary that our eyes be opened. Of the two disciples, it is said, "Their eyes were opened." The passive voice was used, to indicate that their discovery of the presence of Christ was not their own doing, but something done to them by a Power outside them — the Holy Spirit.

"Their eyes were opened." Their eyes, not their bodily eyes, for with these they saw the man Christ. But their inner eyes, the eyes of the mind and of faith.

These eyes are constantly being closed by mistakes of education, bad early training, youthful prejudice, every neglect of duty, every violation of conscience, each and every sin. The result is that often man can see nothing, can see nothing beyond this world, beyond the senses, beyond the

physical, beyond the material. Has no perception of the invisible, the metaphysical, the spiritual — of divine things, of Christ! Yet all the while these things are near to him, as near as Christ was to the two disciples on the road.

How can our eyes of understanding and faith be opened?

How do we open our two bodily eyes? Is it not by an act of our will? How our wills do this is a perfect mystery. The will sends a message to the brain and the brain to the optic nerves and the nerves to the organ. The will controls our opening and our shutting our eyes.

So with the opening of the eyes of the mind and of faith. There must first be the will — the will to see, the will to believe. The disciples on the road wanted Christ to be alive. "We were hoping," they said. Then this will of theirs became evident in their readiness to listen to the explanation of Scripture and in their talking about Christ. After this, the Spirit opened their eyes.

The results were spectacular. First, the two disciples felt their hearts burn within them. They felt God's presence while the Scripture was being explained. Then they got their "walking feet" — they got up and immediately returned to Jerusalem. And they got a "ready tongue" — they talked about Christ. No one can find Christ and be quiet about it. No one can be open to God and not be apostolic.

So we need just simple good will expressed by our going to Sunday Mass to listen to the Scripture and homily and by our talking about Christ in prayer and meditation. When we begin to experience Christ in the liturgy, feel his presence, have burning hearts, then we too shall get "walking feet" — the desire to plunge into parish activities; and a "ready tongue" — the urgency to spread the good news.

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