

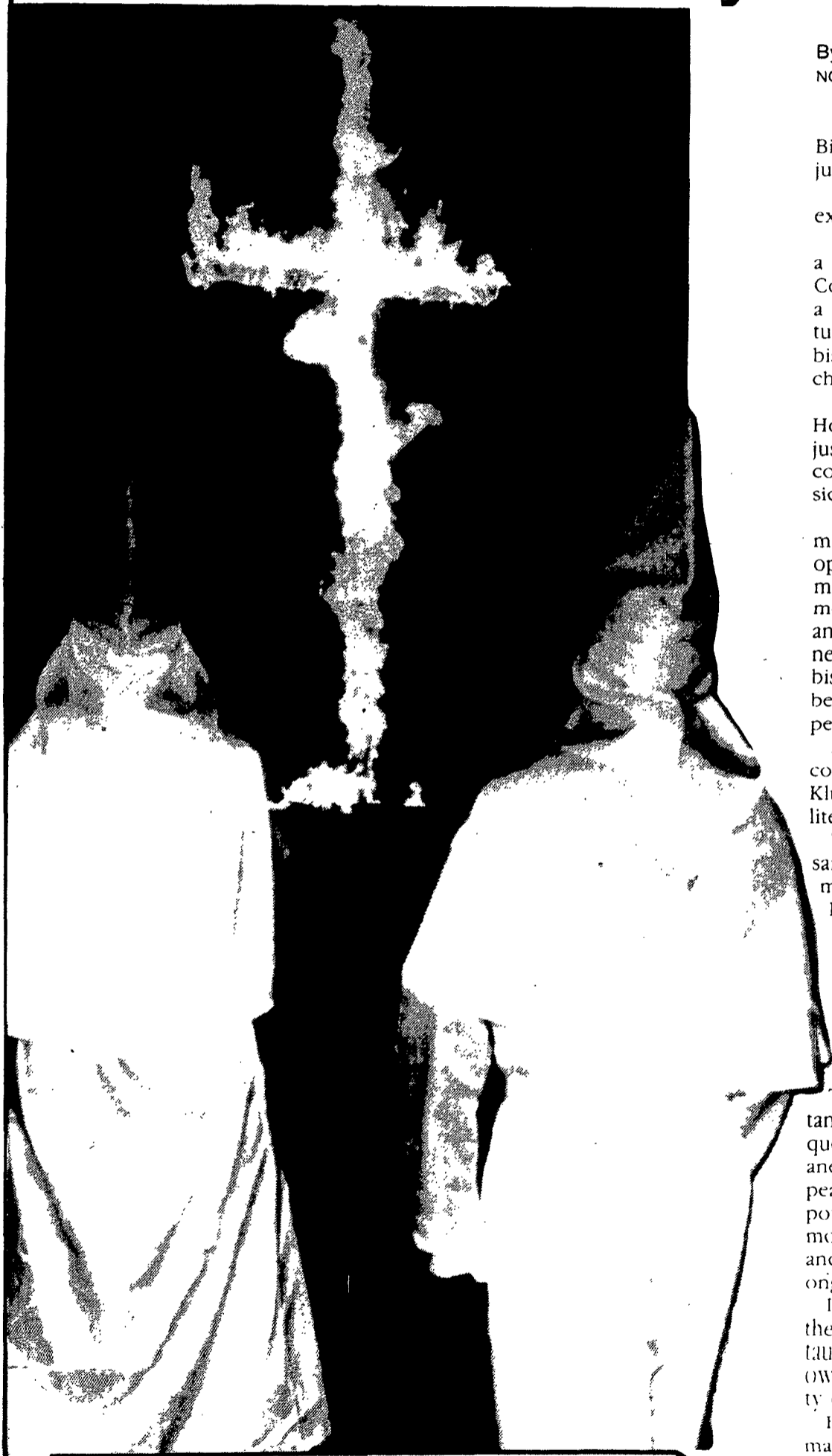
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Faith Today

Encounters with injustice



Poverty. War. Racism. The world is still haunted by the specter of injustice and suffering. Faced with glaring examples of man's inhumanity to man, what's a Christian to do?

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

When Bishop Joseph Howze of Biloxi, Miss., speaks about social justice he speaks from the heart.

He also speaks from experience.

The bishop, who was raised as a Baptist on the Alabama Gulf Coast, was the first black to head a U.S. diocese in the 20th century and only the third black bishop in the history of the U.S. church.

In a recent interview, Bishop Howze discussed the issue of justice and some of his encounters with injustice, both inside and outside the church.

"Once when I was a young man in Mobile I was denied the opportunity to receive the sacrament of penance. The priest told me that that wasn't my church and to go somewhere else. I never will forget that," the bishop said. "And I remember being directed to sit in the last pew of a church."

More recently, Bishop Howze continued, he saw a group of Ku Klux Klansmen passing out literature in his own diocese.

"I got in line to get some," he said. "They didn't want to give me any but they finally did."

Bishop Howze took the Klan material and showed it to some of the priests and people in his diocese as an example of the prejudice that still exists in society. It was a small protest, he said, but small things can do much good.

The bishop, however, is reluctant to reduce the social justice question to a series of stories or anecdotes. Problems of racism, peace, sexism, discrimination, poverty and hunger are all enormously complex, he believes, and must be addressed on an ongoing, comprehensive basis.

In educating for social justice, the bishop said, people must be taught first "to appreciate their own dignity and (then) the dignity of all human beings."

Bishop Howze stressed that matters of justice — even worldwide issues such as peace — begin with individuals in neighborhoods and communities.

Msgr. Francis J. Lally, rector of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston, agrees with Bishop Howze that justice is not an

abstract idea detached from the lives of ordinary people.

"You run into these issues just by living," said the Boston priest. Msgr. Lally is the former U.S. Catholic Conference secretary for social development and world peace. Christian faith, he added, "compels us to do something" about unjust situations.

"Faith isn't something you protect and keep like a treasure," Msgr. Lally said. "Everything since Vatican Council II has emphasized that we're a Christian community. From the very beginning the church was a community. And everything is wrapped around Christianity in action."

The priest acknowledged that a "certain number of people are going to be uninterested. There's a tendency in all of us not to look at (social problems). People have to be persuaded that the problems are theirs."

Msgr. Lally cited the war and peace issue. A few years ago, he said, the general feeling was that the war issue belonged to the politicians and the military. Several factors, including the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on war and peace, have caused the issue to come to the forefront in American society. It is an issue that's close to people now, he said.

Other justice issues remain clear — and abundant — in society today, Msgr. Lally believes.

"Who would have thought there would be food lines in 1984" or people living in the streets of American cities? he asked. The race issue, Msgr. Lally added, "has been swept under the rug" and has yet to be fully resolved.

Asked how ordinary Catholics can respond to seemingly extraordinary social ills, Msgr. Lally said that this is a basic question the church is seeking to address.

"You've got to look outside yourself. You may not have much money or much time but you've got to do something. Every place has people who are hurting, people who are oppressed in one way or another," Msgr. Lally said. "We can find practical ways to help if we really want to."

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)

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