

# Church stained by injustice to blacks, Jews



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

The recent controversy surrounding Father George Stallings in the Archdiocese of Washington, provoked a new round of "soul-searching" in the Catholic Church.

Are we a racist church? Is there no room for blacks and for black culture within the Catholic community?

Some agreed completely with Father Stallings. "As black priests," one told *The Washington Post*, "we have been saying there is a problem, there is racism in the church, the same racism that is reflected in society can be found in the church."

On the other hand, the 13 black Catholic bishops in the United States issued a statement in support of Father Stallings' ecclesiastical superior, Cardinal James Hickey, and in criticism of the suspended priest.

We must continue to combat racism in the church and in society at large, they said, but not at the cost of the unity of the Body of Christ and its structure of authority.

The media took to the Stallings story like the proverbial duck to water. The Washington priest made the usual rounds — "Oprah Winfrey," "Larry King Live," and the like — while the telephone lines carried calls from the press in search of anyone willing to comment prior to deadline.

One wonders, however, if the media

may have been covering the wrong racism-in-the-Catholic-Church story this summer.

Racism against blacks exists in the Catholic Church, to be sure. One is saddened, shamed and outraged by the obviously Catholic names that often figure so prominently in white-on-black assaults — the murder and subsequent neighborhood reaction last month in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn being one of the more deplorable examples.

But none of these Catholics speaks for the church. Indeed, the official church at every level has consistently condemned their attitudes and their actions.

The Second Vatican Council insisted that "There is in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race ..." (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, No. 32).

And in a remarkable, forthright document, "The Church and Racism," the Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission declared that "Racism and racist acts must be condemned ... The church wants first and foremost to change racist attitudes, including those within her own communities" (November 3, 1988; full text in *Origins*, February 23, 1989).

However, in the case of anti-Semitism, a different form of racism, the situation at the official level has been marked by some measure of ambivalence.

Indeed, the history of the Catholic Church is stained by forced conversions of

Jews, persecutions, denial of civil rights, and the portrayal of Jews as "Christ-killers."

Not until the pontificate of John XXIII some 30 years ago was the term "perfidious Jews" expunged from our Good Friday liturgy.

And, as in Bensonhurst, many of those associated with the Holocaust had Catholic names, and almost all had Christian names.

For Jews who are committed never to forget the Holocaust and its perpetrators, the cross is not an unambiguously benign religious symbol. On the contrary, it evokes the same reaction for many Jews that the burning cross and the white sheet evoke for blacks.

Catholics must understand, therefore, why the establishment of a Carmelite convent on the perimeter of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp site in Poland five years ago so profoundly disturbed the Jewish community.

Almost immediately thereafter a Belgian Catholic group began to circulate fundraising literature for the convent suggesting that the nuns would be praying for the conversion of the Jews.

The material was withdrawn after protests were lodged, but the atmosphere was poisoned. Meetings were held in Geneva in 1986 and 1987 between Jewish representatives from around the world and the archbishops of Cracow — the diocese

in which the convent was established — Paris, Lyons, and Brussels, where Jewish reaction had been especially strong.

Church officials promised to relocate the convent by February of this year to a center for Jewish-Christian dialogue to be built near the site.

But the deadline has passed with the promise unfulfilled and a massive 23-foot cross continues to stand outside the building that was used during the war to store poison for the gas chambers.

In the meantime, Cardinal Jozef Glemp has charged the Jews with offending the feelings of all Poles and even Poland's sovereignty by continuing their protest against the convent, and he warned darkly against their using their "power ... in the mass media that are easily at (their) disposal in many countries ... to spread anti-Polish feeling."

We're not dealing here with a suspended priest at odds with his bishop, but of the Primate of Poland — and indeed of other high officials in the church. Which is why the Auschwitz convent story is proving to be far more important than the Stallings story.

More about the church and the Jews next week.

# King David tries to conceal his sin against an innocent man, God

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier columnist

"Eli, who is that woman over there on the rooftop?" David asked his servant.

"Her name is Bathsheba," Eli replied. "She is the wife of Uriah, the Hittite, a high-ranking officer in your army."

"Any news of the war today?" David asked without diverting his gaze from the young woman.

"Yes, I just received a message from Joab this morning," Eli said, handing a small scroll to his master.

"War continues with the Ammonites," David read aloud. "All is well and we are making advances against the enemy every day."

Turning from the window, David told Eli, "Send a message to this Bathsheba and invite her to the palace for dinner tonight."

David had three wives and this woman was married, but Eli was the servant of the king and it was not his place to say anything. "Yes, Master, as you wish," he replied.



## THE BIBLE CORNER

Bathsheba was a very beautiful woman and David forgot all about God's laws. A short time later, he received a message from Bathsheba that she was going to have his baby.

Instead of admitting his sin, David tried to cover the whole thing up. He dispatched a message to Joab: "Send Uriah home to Jerusalem at once."

When Uriah arrived at the palace, he thanked the king for granting him a leave, but he did not return home to Bathsheba. His sense of honor prevented him. "It would not be right for me to sleep at home in a comfortable bed while my fellow countrymen are fighting a war," he said.

David wanted to pretend that the baby belonged to Uriah. But Uriah slept at the palace gates that night with the guards, and the next day he asked David's permission to return to the war.

"Yes," David agreed. "Take this message to Joab as soon as you arrive there."

Uriah carried his own death sentence. David's command to Joab stated: "Send Uriah to the front lines where the fighting is heaviest."

In a few days, David received a message back from Joab that Uriah had been killed. When the mourning period was over, David married Bathsheba and she had his son.

David thought he had succeeded in covering over his sin until the prophet Nathan came to see him.

"David, I want your opinion on something," Nathan said. "A rich man and a poor man both lived in a certain town. The rich man had many flocks of sheep and cattle. The poor man had only one lamb, but he was happy. He loved this animal so much that he allowed it to live in the house

with his family. It became his children's pet."

"On a certain occasion, the rich man was holding a banquet. He was very selfish and didn't want to give up even one of his animals. So he took this poor man's only lamb, killed it and fed it to his guests."

"What a cruel thing to do! The rich man deserves to die!" David shouted. "If not that, he must at least pay back his debt four times over to the poor man."

"You are that rich man!" Nathan retorted. "The Lord God made you king of Israel. He saved you from your enemies. You have been given wives and riches of your own. Now God will judge you for the great evil you have done by stealing Uriah's wife and having him killed!"

David wept. "I have sinned against an innocent man. But my greatest sin was turning away from God," he said.

"Because you are truly sorry, God will forgive you," Nathan said as he turned to leave. "However, you will still have to pay for your sins. Your own family will bring you trouble. The sword will never depart from your house."

Scripture reference: 2 Samuel 11-12:15.

Meditation: "Be merciful to me, O God, because of your constant love. Because of your great mercy, wipe away my sins!" (Psalm 51, David's psalm of repentance).

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