

Brooklyn bishop writes letter on racism

By Tracy Early
Catholic News Service

BROOKLYN, N.Y. — Bishop Thomas V. Daily of Brooklyn, the diocese that includes the Howard Beach and Bensonhurst scenes of racial conflict, made racism the topic of his first pastoral letter in Brooklyn.

"Every citizen should have the right to travel safely into and through any neighborhood, unmolested by insult or physical assault," wrote Bishop Daily.

The pastoral, "Created in the Image of God," said racism contradicted the unity of the human family derived from its creation in the divine likeness. It was issued Dec. 2 at a vesper service in the diocesan cathedral.

"Our task is to identify the sin of racism in ourselves and in our culture that we may eradicate it," Bishop Daily wrote. "It is a task that every one of us — no matter what our race — must undertake as our own."

"It is insufficient to focus only on attitudes of prejudice and bias," he continued. "We must pay attention to the way our society has come to be structured."

Though the pastoral cited "events of the last few years," it did not identify Howard Beach, Bensonhurst or any other points of racial tension specifically.

On the night of Dec. 20, 1986, a black man, Michael Griffith, was killed in Howard Beach when white youths attacked him and two other black men walking through the community, and chased

Griffith onto a highway in front of oncoming traffic.

During the evening of Aug. 23, 1989, Yusuf Hawkins, a black 16-year-old, was surrounded by whites and shot dead when he went to Bensonhurst with friends to look at a used car.

Black protest marches encountered white resentment, and trials of the young white men accused of the crimes have kept the incidents in the newspapers and fresh in the minds of the communities.

In an interview after the service, Bishop Daily said his strategy was to work in a positive rather than negative way, and "name the sin but not the sinner."

"My design is to promote harmony, justice and peace in a positive way," he said.

Bishop Daily, ordained a priest of the Boston archdiocese, was bishop of Palm Beach, Fla., before he was installed last April as bishop of Brooklyn, a diocese that includes the New York City boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens.

He named Auxiliary Bishop Rene A. Valero to chair a committee charged with developing a program of follow-up and implementation.

Bishop Valero said the committee charged with developing a program against racism was initially composed of six priests, but would now be enlarged to include a dozen or more lay members of various ethnic groups.

He said the committee was asking parishes to hold hearings in January, and would draw on those for vicariate hearings in February and then a diocesan event.

Bishop Daily said he expected this process would bring an airing of some of the situations of racial conflict, and produce a program of greater specificity than his pastoral.

An effort will then be made, he said, to enlist leaders of other religious groups for a broadly ecumenical approach to the problems brought by racism.

The pastoral included a section on anti-Semitism, and noted that it was condemned by the Second Vatican Council.

"Our city has, perhaps, the largest Jewish community in the world," Bishop Daily wrote. "There is no part of our civic life that does not owe a great deal of gratitude to the Jewish community for its contribution to the excellence for which New York is known throughout the world. In literature, the arts, science, education, politics, the law and religious thought, Jewish scholarship is significantly represented and often leads the way. Anti-Jewish prejudice not only speaks injustice, it speaks inexplicable ingratitude."

The bishop said that "the marvelous diversity" of New York marked it as a place "where the whole world can find its languages spoken, its culture visible and look upon faces reminiscent of 'home.'"



Bishop Thomas V. Daily File photo

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