

Bishop personified changing church, society

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Bishop Harold R. Perry's 25 years as this century's first African-American bishop symbolize both the advances black Catholics made during that time and the gap they still see between the Gospel mandate and U.S. Catholic practice.

Appointed auxiliary bishop of New Orleans in October, 1965, and ordained the following January, Bishop Perry died July 17 at the age of 74. His death came just six months after the celebration of his silver jubilee as a bishop.

"No one will ever know what he had to endure as the first black bishop," said Archbishop James P. Lyke of Atlanta. The opposition he would face was symbolized from the start, Archbishop Lyke added, when "people demonstrated at his ordination, with signs like, 'We don't want a nigger bishop.'"

In a recent Divine Word newsletter, Divine Word Father Jerome LeDoux, a cousin to Bishop Perry, described the 1966 ordination as "the ecclesiastical equivalent of Jackie Robinson's introduction into the major leagues."

"Bishop Perry was the personification of the changes (in the status of blacks) that were taking place in the church and society," said Baltimore Auxiliary Bishop John H. Ricard, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Black Catholics.

"At that time there were no black leaders in the political world, the government or the church," said Bishop Ricard. "Bishop Perry took the brunt of the resistance."

He was a quiet pioneer of black leadership well before becoming a bishop.

In the 1950s, as founding pastor of the first black parish in Broussard, La., he built a church and school that celebrated black Catholicism. Above the main entrance to the church he placed a sculpture of the Holy Family with black features — a bold statement of black Catholic identity and culture which, Father LeDoux noted, came "decades before most black Catholic activists and militants were feeling their oats."

In 1958 he became the first black rector of a U.S. seminary. In 1963, a month after meeting with President John F. Kennedy on strategies for peaceful integration of public accommodations, he became the first black clergyman of any denomination ever to lead the prayer opening a session of the U.S. House of Representatives.

When he was elected head of the Divine Word southern province in 1964, he was the first black provincial of a religious order in the United States.

Named an auxiliary bishop in New Orleans 1965, he entered an archdiocese in which desegregation of Catholic schools



File photo
Bishop Harold R. Perry, SVD, is shown here outside the U.S. Capitol with Dr. Bernard Barskamp, chaplain of the House of Representatives, following then-Father Perry's 1963 delivery of the invocation opening a House session.

had touched off a near-revolt only three years earlier. Then-Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel had been forced to excommunicate three segregationist political leaders. One Catholic school was bombed and Catholic school registrations in the archdiocese dropped nearly 4,000.

Just 10 years before Bishop Perry's appointment, Archbishop Rummel had been forced to suspend all services in a Catholic church when parishioners refused to let a Negro priest celebrate Mass.

Similar stories could be told in other dioceses across the country, especially, but not exclusively, in the South.

When Bishop Perry was ordained a priest in 1944, he was only the 26th black to be ordained in the history of the U.S. church. He joined the Society of the Divine Word because it was one of a handful of religious orders that would accept a black candidate.

By the time he was ordained a bishop, 164 of the nation's 59,000 priests were black — 62 of them Divine Word priests.

Among the 53,000 U.S. priests today, about 350 are black, Bishop Ricard noted. That figure indicates a significant underrepresentation for black Catholics, who constitute about 3 percent of the U.S. Catholic population. But it also represents a notable increase during a quarter-century in which new priestly vocations plummeted nationwide and the total number of priests decreased by 6,000.

Bishop Perry was the only black among the U.S. bishops for six years. He publicly praised the warmth and support he received from fellow bishops whose dioceses he visited as he traveled to meetings and speaking engagements around the country, but he also confided to close friends that he was snubbed at first by many bishops.

"It was a strange coincidence," Father LeDoux wrote, "that talk slowed and soon stopped whenever he neared a group of bishops engaged in conversation during coffee breaks at their meetings."

Four more-black bishops were added in the 1970s and eight in the '80s, bringing the total to 13 before Bishop Perry's death.

Archbishop Lyke, who earlier this year became the nation's second black archbishop, noted that he was ordained a priest

the year Bishop Perry became a bishop.

He described the tension Bishop Perry faced not only in trying to break down barriers of white racism, but also in trying to lead a black community that was torn between militants and those who advocated slower, quieter approaches.

When he was a young activist priest in the '60s and '70s, the archbishop said, there were many times "I wished (Bishop Perry) would be more public."

At his first press conference in New Orleans after his appointment, Bishop Perry declared, "I am not the Catholic answer to (the Rev.) Dr. Martin Luther King." He said he would "have so many things to do as a Catholic bishop that I personally will not have time to be considered a civil rights leader."

"As a person, he was not a public figure," and he refused to take on a role that did not fit his personality, said Archbishop Lyke. "He was a great pastor, and he fought racism in more quiet, one-on-one ways."

"As I grew older, I appreciated (his different style) more and more," the archbishop said. "Not everyone is disposed to be that kind of public person" that many black Catholics wanted Bishop Perry to be.

He did speak out on civil rights and racism, but often it was in homilies to black congregations around the country, and he did not make national headlines.

"He took his role in an intensely personal way," Bishop Ricard said. "He was a man of the church. ... He saw his role as internal to church structures, developing black Catholicism within the Catholic community."

Scrutiny continues over Thomas' views

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Clarence Thomas' views on "natural law" have stirred controversy about how the Supreme Court nominee might rule on abortion cases.

But according to Thomas' chief backer in the Senate, charges about the nominee's position on natural law stem from a single comment that was little more than "a throw-away line."

Sen. John C. Danforth, R-Mo., said Thomas told him he has "formulated no views on the relationship between natural law and abortion." Danforth formerly employed Thomas, who served as his liaison in arranging meetings with Senate members.

In a 1987 speech to the Heritage Foundation, Thomas praised an essay as a "splendid example of applying natural law." Written by onetime New York gubernatorial

candidate Lewis Lehrman, the essay called the ruling in *Roe vs. Wade* a "coup" against the Constitution. The 1973 Supreme Court case legalized abortion.

Some abortion-rights advocates have cited Thomas' reference to "natural law" as evidence that the nominee is disposed toward opposition of legalized abortion.

But Danforth said the comment was "a throw-away line," which he compared to senators turning the form of address "my distinguished colleague" into a "full-fledged endorsement of everything your colleague has ever said."

Thomas was a prosecutor when Danforth served as Missouri attorney general, and the nominee later served on Danforth's congressional staff.

In addition to abortion-rights supporters, most of the Congressional Black Caucus has come out in opposition to Thomas'

confirmation to the Supreme Court. Caucus members say Thomas turned his back on the aspirations of minorities.

Among organizations that have given their support to the nomination are several anti-abortion groups that have said Thomas will adhere to the Constitution in his rulings.

The National Urban League, meeting in Atlanta, voted July 21 to remain neutral on the nomination.

Thomas, who is black, was nominated July 1 by President George Bush to fill the seat soon to be vacated by retiring Justice Thurgood Marshall. Marshall is the first and only black to have served on the Supreme Court.

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