

Church focuses on efforts to combat racism

Continued from page 1

— including Catholic Family Center, St. John Fisher College and the Sisters of Mercy — in calling for public hearings on police and judicial issues in Rochester.

In a June 17 statement — which also was signed by leaders of the Greater Rochester Community of Churches, the Unitarian Church and the Rochester Board of Rabbis — the signatories stated:

"The brutal beating of Rodney King ... (and t)he subsequent acquittal of the Los Angeles police officers ... add to a growing body of evidence, nationwide, that there are serious problems between some law enforcement agencies and court systems and the communities they serve."

Although the signers of the statement stressed that they "have different views about the need for a civilian oversight commission" independent of police control, they nonetheless assert that hearings are needed to review court and police issues affecting "our racial and ethnic communities."

Their request for public hearings came one day after more than 350 people marched on Rochester's City Hall to demand a civilian review commission. Organized by United Church Ministry-People's Coalition, the activists dominated a City Council meeting June 16 with strident speeches condemning police harassment and brutality against minorities.

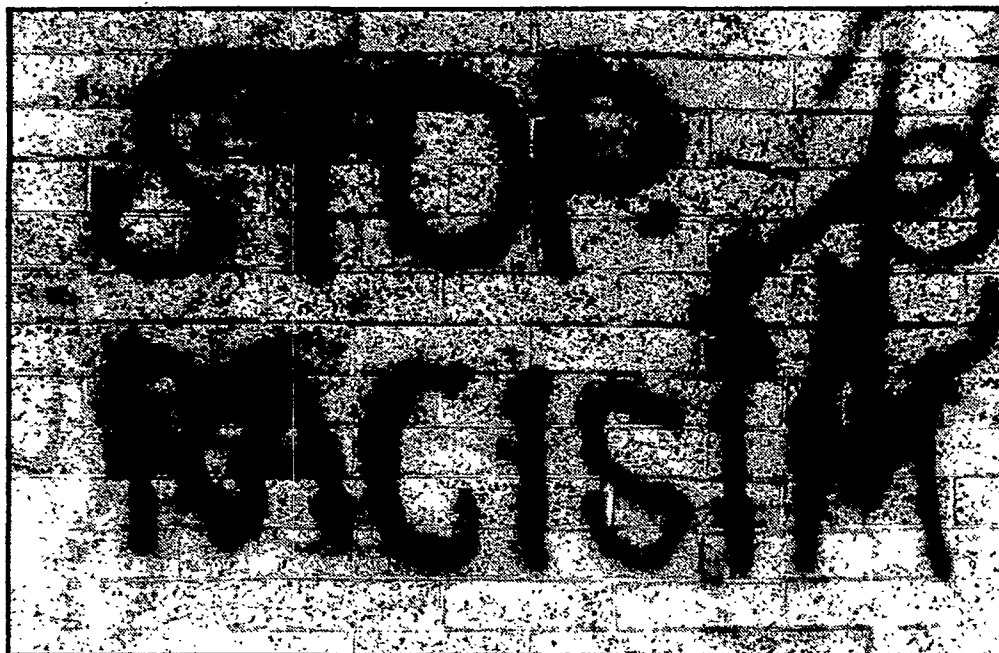
The protesters also called for improvements in housing, employment, criminal justice and youth services for city residents.

One minister told City Council members: "If you don't start listening to the voices of those in pain and anguish, you think Los Angeles was something?!"

According to William Sullivan, Rochester City Council's chief of staff, the city may issue a statement early next week in response to the call for public hearings on civilian-review boards.

Sullivan noted that illness in the family of Councilman Wade S. Norwood prevented the councilman from responding to citizens' concerns at the June 16 meeting. Norwood is chairman of the Public Safety Committee.

Sullivan said Norwood — who has been working on the issue for six months — favors reviewing police and judicial issues through an approach



Graffiti along Monroe Avenue in downtown Rochester illustrates the feelings of some Rochester youths.

Kellie McCann/Photo intern

that is more comprehensive than civilian-review boards. He added that Norwood may schedule public hearings on the issue as early as next week.

And where is the church in these times of crisis?

In the wake of the Los Angeles riots and disturbances in downtown Rochester, the diocese convened a Task Force on Social Injustice. The task force has been working on a report that is scheduled for release sometime in August, according to Father Peter C. Clifford, diocesan director of Parish Support Ministries.

Included in the report's suggestions will be practical steps parishes can take to further racial harmony and social justice, Father Clifford said.

Across the country, meanwhile, church leaders asserted that the church must step up its activism against racism.

"The frustration is nationwide," said Thomas Shellabarger, urban issues policy adviser for the U.S. Catholic Conference's Department of Social Development and World Peace.

Through such programs as Catholic Charities and the Campaign for Human Development, the church has been working with people even before the latest string of urban eruptions. But the church has undertaken these efforts "in its own modest way," Shellabarger said, "because we don't have the money of government."

Even so, he added, the church can contribute to society's discussion of racism "the philosophy and theology that we are part of a community."

And community building is paramount in fighting urban violence, church leaders believe.

A recent disturbance in Washington, D.C., was brought under control with the help of that city's Sacred Heart Parish. Its ministry has focused on the neighborhood's Hispanics — many of them Salvadoran immigrants — for at least eight years under the Capuchin Order's pastoral care of the parish.

Since then, the parish church and school have worked to build up good will in the community by hosting classes in English as a Second Language, voter-registration drives, and by addressing homelessness.

These efforts gave the parish credibility to address the rioting, observed Capuchin Father David Lippert, associate pastor.

It's essential for the parish to be involved in the community before a crisis hits, he said.

"I think it makes sense," Father Lippert added. "Gone are the days where you're credible for just wearing a Roman collar. You have to prove your credibility."

Father Michael Pflieger, pastor of St. Sabina Parish in Chicago, likewise explained that it took 15 years for his south side parish to get a good name in

the community.

Still, it was his neighborhood that bore the brunt of a recent celebration turned ugly, with scores of injuries and 1,000 arrests — 10 times more than in the aftermath of the Chicago Bulls' first NBA crown last year. Rather than be discouraged, the priest carries on.

"I don't think the church is doing enough. We're not as involved in 1992 in social justice as the church was in the '60s," Father Pflieger said.

"We've been neglectful in addressing the issues. We've gotten into this posture of unleashing statements and unleashing pastors but we're very slack on action," he added.

He told of a May meeting he hosted to forge a community consensus in the wake of the Los Angeles riot. The meeting featured comedian and social activist Dick Gregory, and invited the members of all South Side churches — Catholic and non-Catholic — to participate.

"One other Catholic priest showed up," Father Pflieger said.

In Flint, Mich., a riot reflecting anger over the King verdict was averted when Rick Nix, head of the Black Catholic Concerns Office for the nearby Diocese of Saginaw, Mich., performed crowd control.

But he wasn't alone. Standing with Nix for two nights were high school-age black men and women to whom Nix had given leadership training the weekend before.

The training program has been in place for a decade and Nix said he would like to take the program nationwide.

In Shreveport, La., where tensions have lingered following the fatal shooting of a black man by a Palestinian convenience-store clerk last May, "we are working really hard on race relations," said JoAnn Czerwinski, diocesan director of social ministry.

But the effort isn't easy. Catholics number about 38,000, or 5 percent of the total population in the diocese. Most Catholics live in the diocese's rural areas.

Shreveport, which has a population of 198,525 according to the 1990 census, is half black. And the diocese has only two integrated parishes and one historically black parish in the city.

Contains reporting by staff writer Rob Sullivan and Catholic News Service.

L.A. archbishop calls riots 'warning to the nation'

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

NOTRE DAME, Ind. — The Los Angeles riots "are a warning to the nation," Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony told the U.S. bishops June 19.

"Los Angeles is not alone — not alone in its problems or its potential for violence, not alone in its challenges for the nation and the church," he said.

When the bishops opened their three-day spring business meeting at the University of Notre Dame June 18, they changed the agenda to make room for Cardinal Mahony to talk to them about the implications of the riots that shook his city following the Rodney King verdict this spring.

The prelate recalled the video images that defined the Los Angeles events for Americans — "a brutal beating captured on videotape, television reports of a stunning verdict

neighborhoods in flames, brazen looting, people pulled from their cars and beaten, and then people coming together to help one another and clean up after the disorder."

He condemned the lack of social concern that led to the festering conditions underlying the riots.

"American society," he said, "has come to accept the unacceptable: widespread poverty among our children; continuing hunger and homelessness in our midst; widespread drug and gang violence in our neighborhoods; and many young people who have no hope and little opportunity."

In the debates that followed the riots, he said, people set up "false dichotomies" in their search for solutions, some focusing only on public responsibilities and some only on personal and family obligations.

"We need both better values and better policies," Cardinal Mahony said. "We need more responsibility

on the part of individuals and institutions, including government. Money cannot substitute for basic values. Nor can personal responsibility replace essential public and private investment in our cities."

"We must reject the 'blame game' — there is enough blame for all of us," the prelate said.

He told the bishops that in all the looting and burning the only damage to Catholic churches and schools in the devastated neighborhoods consisted of "three small broken windows."

The explanation people gave him, he said, "was that everyone in the community — even the looters and arsonists — understood that these institutions belonged to the neighborhood, that they respected and served the people."

He called that a solid basis for the church to be a "voice in the public arena" for framing the kind of "just society" that will avoid future riots.

"We have to teach again and again the fundamentals of Catholic social doctrine — respect for the life, dignity and rights of the human person; the evils of racism and discrimination; the importance of family and the dignity of work; and the call of solidarity — to live as sisters and brothers, members of one family," he said.

Cardinal Mahony took the occasion to thank the bishops' national Campaign for Human Development for its "crucial and generous support for our economic development and anti-gang efforts" in the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

"Through a generous CHD economic development grant of \$200,000 we have been able to leverage to a full \$1 million," he said. "we hope to increase that to \$5 million as we move ahead with our projects that will involve the poor in developing a new destiny and future for themselves."