

# Church must teach racism is sin

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Several weeks ago ABC's "Prime Time Live" did a special segment on racism in America. Hosted by correspondent Diane Sawyer, the program exposed — with the aid of hidden cameras and microphones — the ugly, everyday face of racial discrimination.

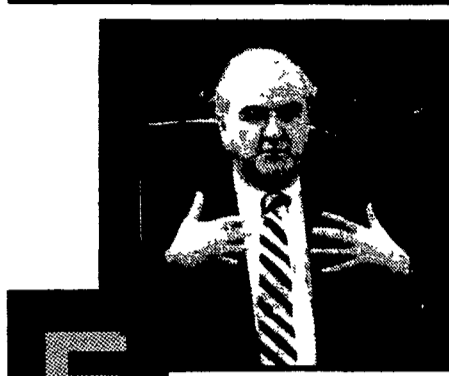
Two network "plants," one white and the other black, attempted to rent an apartment, purchase an automobile and obtain a job. In each case, the white person received preferential treatment: a better deal on the used car, an opportunity to rent the apartment, and the offer of a job.

When Sawyer subsequently confronted the apartment owner, the car salesman, and the employer — all on camera — they muttered unconvincing "explanations." They had been caught in the act.

About the same time, a front-page, two-part series on racism at the neighborhood level appeared in *The New York Times* (June 21-22). Two Chicago neighborhoods — the all-white Mount Greenwood and the all-black Roseland — are only two miles apart. Both are filled with working-class people who go to church every week, and take pride in their children, their lawn and their community.

"In many ways," *The Times* observed, "the two neighborhoods represent a society that is still two nations in one, a place where race is omnipresent but rarely spoken of."

Roseland residents pay a high price for this segregation. They are rejected



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for mortgages at three times the rate of Mount Greenwood residents with the same incomes. Their automobile insurance rates are almost twice as high. And they have to travel several miles to buy fresh meat and vegetables.

The disparity is also evident in such public services as police protection and local libraries.

According to *The Times*, the very mention of race in Roseland "unlocked a torrent of painful accounts" from black residents.

"Wherever you go, you see hatred," one said.

"We got the opportunity to move out to white areas," another said, "but they don't want us there."

A black registered nurse told of white patients who refused to let her touch them. A black bus driver reported being spat upon by white

passengers while riding through white neighborhoods.

Despite their unhappy experiences with the white community, most Roseland residents said they would welcome a white person in their homes and would like to live in an integrated neighborhood.

"The same questions drew either blank looks or impassioned diatribes about welfare and affirmative action from most whites in Mount Greenwood," *The Times* reported.

Many whites said they wouldn't want a black living next door to them, and while they described the few blacks they knew from work as "decent," they harbored "an almost instinctive animosity toward black people in general."

One 23-year-old man, a parochial-school graduate, admitted that if he were running a business and two qualified people applied for the job, one white and the other black, he'd pick the white man because he'd feel "safer."

A black postal worker recalled seeing a white co-worker at a bus stop and walking over to say hello. The white man turned his back and refused to answer, apparently afraid of what people would think.

On "Prime Time Live" a well-dressed, well-spoken black professional man told of his own frustrations. No matter how good an appearance you make, he complained, it's the color of your skin that counts. And I can't change my skin, he sighed.

"They can't even imagine what it's like to be black," said a 25-year-old

hairdresser. "They don't know what we go through. You try not to let this stuff drive you crazy. You'd be trying to kill every white person in the world."

Many whites in Mount Greenwood said that blacks in Roseland "could pull themselves up if they wanted to."

But blacks in Roseland don't want to hear about boot straps and the work ethic. The whites' "fathers and grandfathers came of their own free will," the blacks point out, while the Roseland residents' forbearers came in slave ships.

At its end, *The Times'* report describes the "quiet pain" of a black woman who, as a young 11-year-old girl, did housework for a white woman. At noon the woman would order her down into the basement, because her husband was coming home for lunch — and he didn't want any blacks in the house.

The black girl would sit quietly on the darkened stairway until the man was finished eating. Then she'd be called back upstairs to wash the dishes. Fifty years later she still thinks about it.

No wonder three California Catholic bishops, in the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots, characterized racism as "a pervasive and pernicious virus running unchecked in our society."

Racism, they pointed out, is an affront against human dignity and a sin against God.

If our parochial schools and our churches can't teach us even that much, we're a dismal failure indeed.

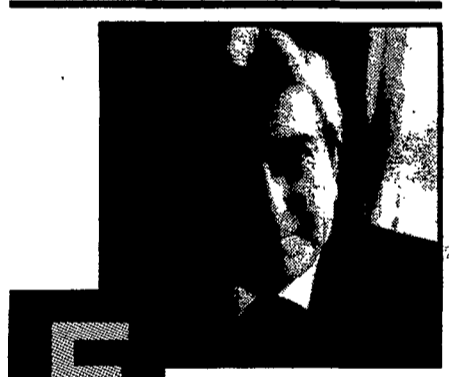
# What fills seminary's old role for laity?

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
Syndicated columnist

Why do former seminarians so often make good workers? That question was posed to me recently, and it made me reflect on my own experience as an "ex-sem" and my observations of others.

First of all, it seems true to me that people who were in the seminary for a significant amount of time tend to excel at the careers they choose after they leave. I'm sure that's not universally true, but I think about my doctor, Frank Weschler; and my lawyer friends, Tim Regan and Charlie DiSalvo; and psychologist Mike Tobin; social worker Dan Kuhn; businessman Jack MacNamara; community organizer Ed Shurna; teachers Bill Droel and Terry Johnson; and.... The list is very long of former seminarians I consider to be doing outstanding work in their fields.

For the most part, former seminarians also make excellent husbands and fathers when they finally settle down. They are attentive to their wives, present to their chil-



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dren, and work hard at balancing their job, family, community and church responsibilities.

If this is also your experience with the bulk of former seminarians, then the question we should ask ourselves is "Why?" What was it that made these men so conscientious, creative and hard-working.

One answer might be that seminaries attracted people with these

qualities in the first place, but I believe the seminary also did something to the men who went there. A definite work ethic was instilled in seminarians that somehow stayed with most of them after they left.

One thing most seminaries did is to make men feel that they were important: what they thought was important, what they did with their lives was important. Seminarians were there to discover if they had a "vocation," a calling to be a priest. Many decided that they did not have that particular vocation, but that they were called to serve in a different way.

Seminaries also taught their students that religious faith was central to life. Religion was not something that was practiced once a week, nor was it reserved for the few. Seminarians in the 1950s and '60s especially were imbued with the idea that their religion had a social-justice dimension.

Finally, seminaries taught discipline. I can remember kneeling for hours on the hard floor of a gymnasium during days of recollection in seminary high school. In seminary

college, we were awakened every morning at 5:45 by the ringing of the school fire alarm (except on Sundays, when the alarm didn't go off until 6:30 a.m.). Believe me, that kind of discipline has come in handy when it came to getting up in the middle of the night with my three children or finding the extra strength to put in a few more hours at work to finish a project.

I am not suggesting a return to the seminary system of the past. Certainly the seminary experience had negative aspects, which all former seminarians are only too quick to point out. (I still, for example, have trouble with my knees!) Besides, seminary training excluded women, and that was neither healthy nor fair.

The question I'll leave you with, however, is this: If seminaries in the past produced a large number of good lay men who took their religion seriously and carried it out into their daily work, what institutions or programs of formation in the church today perform the same function for both lay men and lay women?

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