

Dream still out of reach 25 years after shooting

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — A quarter of a century ago the nation was jolted out of its complacency by the assassination of a black man who many consider a modern-day prophet.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., an eloquent preacher and civil rights leader who became the conscience of the nation on issues of race, was shot dead by an assassin's bullet April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tenn.

Dr. King was mourned worldwide. Pope Paul VI on Palm Sunday that year assailed the "cowardly and atrocious killing" of the minister, linking it to the "tragic story of the passion of Christ."

The visibly shaken pontiff ended his sermon by calling the slain civil rights leader a "Christian preacher who taught the human and civil promotion of his Negro people on American soil." Pope Paul prayed that Dr. King's death not be in vain.

Twenty-five years later, Dr. King is remembered with a national holiday. Parents of all races recount for their children the story of his life and the tragedy of his death.

In classrooms nationwide, construction paper silhouettes of Dr. King's face are tacked to bulletin boards. His serious eyes stare out at students from the pages of their U.S. history textbooks.

Bishop J. Terry Steib, auxiliary bishop of St. Louis who was recently appointed bishop of Memphis, cites Dr. King's "philosophy of being non-

violent" as his greatest legacy.

The slain civil rights leader's dream of a colorblind society required a change in "our attitudes, our words and our actions, how I treat people and how I talk with people," said Bishop Steib, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Black Catholics.

Today, too, the dismantling of racism "begins with each one of us," said Bishop Steib. Too often instead, he told Catholic News Service, individuals abandon personal responsibility and look to institutions, the church or government offices "to do for us" when it comes to racial harmony.

John A. McDermott, founder of the *Chicago Reporter*, a weekly newspaper on race based in Chicago, told CNS that Dr. King understood clearly that the fight for racial justice was a struggle for the nation's soul.

Dr. King "came to the fight" from a Christian perspective, he points out. "He did not hate white people. He could distinguish between the sin and the sinner, as we Catholics like to say. He sought to bring about reconciliation," said McDermott.

McDermott, executive director of the Catholic Interracial Council of Chicago during the 1960s, said Dr. King linked the causes of racial justice and equal opportunity "to the deepest values of the American people," making them hallmarks of decency and good citizenship.

In this way, he said, he captured the support of the vast majority of Americans. Had the struggle instead been made into an "all-out battle of power" it would have failed because blacks

Bombay after the bombs



AP/Wide World Photos

A building destroyed during a series of bomb explosions last week in central Bombay is demolished by laborers of the Bombay Municipal Corporation March 20. Bombay, India's financial hub, is humming again just a week after powerful explosions ripped through the city.

made up only 12 percent of the populace, said McDermott.

The Chicagoan says the civil rights struggle has been long and hard, from the mid-19th century agitation of the New England Protestant abolitionists to the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. It dates from the rise of Jim Crow and the doctrine of separate-but-equal to the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* school desegregation decision by the Supreme Court.

Racial equality has not been achieved, but many doors of opportunity have opened and a new black middle class has emerged, he said. Yet, largely due to impatience with the pace of change, the civil rights community has

abandoned Dr. King's values, he maintains.

McDermott said prevalent today is a "much more pessimistic and cynical view of the American character and of white people."

He claims many civil right proponents are trying to achieve racial justice by inciting guilt and preaching retribution.

And affirmative-action programs — initially "a way of helping people to qualify for opportunities based on need, not on the group to which you belong" — have turned into a "system of special preference that goes against the grain of American ideals," said McDermott.



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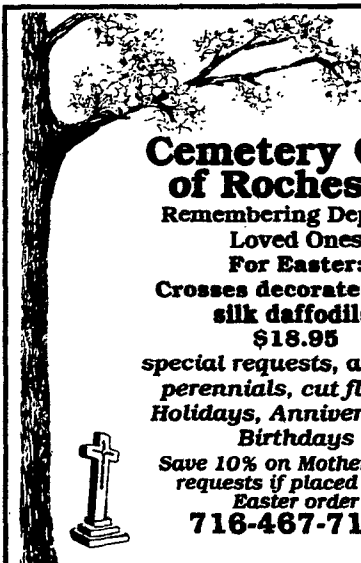
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