Vicar Calls for Black Leaders

By Father Mark Figaro, S.V.D.

(ED: This article by Father Figaro, Vicar for Black Catholics of the diocese, is the second article in a series that comments on various points raised by the recent U.S. bishops' statement about the Catholic Church in the U.S. today. Beginning in this issue, the "Perspectives" column on page 4 will present the views of several lay Catholics concerning aspects of the bishops' statement."

Perhaps in the minds of some it is still questionable whether or not a group of black Catholics in Lafayette acted right or wrong 60 years ago when they intimated to Father Teurlings that they would like to have their own separate Church. One cannot but be morally outraged when he understands the reasons that compelled them to express this desire and with great sacrifice make it a reality.

Are we now to give credit in retrospect to those black Catholics for initiating a separation that actually accounted ultimately for the retention of the Catholic religion among blacks in Southwest Louisiana in our larger towns later to become cities? In places where this was not done, with few exceptions, very many blacks were lost to the faith. This can be substantiated by church registers and family records.

The introduction of separation in a number of places later on was often less the expressed desire of black Catholics than a trend to get "them" out of "our" Church.

Still Reluctant

With this as a backdrop and keeping in mind that during the last decade there was a new awakening of black awareness, unfortunately the Church is reluctant to see realistically just how much it is identified with society and its political structure in this part of the state.

This relationship is at times stressed, usually opportunistically. However, it was because of this that black people were irreparably disappointed in their religious allegiance when at the height of the struggle for civil rights and equal opportunity they found their champion and protector in the federal courtroom and not in the Catholic assembly and in the halls of the church-related Catholic organizations.

Consequently, then, there should be no surprise, that in the wake of such lack of leadership in social and/or moral thinking blacks became ambivalent toward the Church and now ask hard questions.

Need Living Witness

According to the mind of the Church the priest is sent to witness to Christ. This witness is to be measured in terms of Christian living (preaching) on his part as well as on the part of the people to whom he is sent, not in terms of the number of Baptisms, Confirmations, converts, etc., let alone buildings constructed.

Is the priest to establish himself as an institution, a permanent and powerful figure within the adapting (?) society? Is he the Church? It is a question here of fostering Christian leadership in the indigenous black community in the Diocese of Lafayette.

More so today than ever before, the Church is viable within a community only when it is run, supported and encouraged by the members of that community. This challenge has been made in places in the Diocese within the last five years. The response has been uneven, to put it moderately.

Two Cultures

An openness on the part of the Diocese to bi-

culturalization is essential to the development of true indigenous leadership. One formed in his own culture must be retrained in another culture without sacrificing values of his original culture.

The Church cannot continue to presume that such (black) values are not sufficient Christian. As proof of sincerity the Church (in this case, the Diocese) must see the elimination of ethnocentrism as a prerequisite for eliciting black Christian leadership from a community.

Ethnocentrism in Church catechesis and approaches to family, love, good, strength, and values has been used as the yardstick for evaluating the black community. The Church has labored not only to witness to Christ but also to impose some values of "civilization" on this community.

Effort at All Levels

Black leadership is to be utilized in our parish churches. There are black leaders in our communities at large, men and women, but not enough involved in Church leadership.

The black leader is not the one who promotes and enhances the ethnocentric guidelines, unless, of course, they are truly Christian and guarantee the well-being of all. He is one who has a heart as well as a head. He must know the pulse and understand the pulse of his community. He is accepted by his people primarily.

Many areas of Church life will remain irrelevant and pointless at this particular time in the history of the diocese as long as a genuine effort is not made at all levels on the part of the diocese and local parishes to include all the people of God in the service and witness they are called upon to give.

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