

CATHOLICS ASK FOR CHANGE

The Catholic Commission on Human Relations, official body of the Archdiocese of Omaha, has called for a change in the Church's official representation on the Near North Side.

It was learned from reliable sources that a group from the commission has met with Archbishop Bergan and Bishop Sheehan. They recommended parish leadership that could be identified with the struggle for social justice.

Mr. Irvin Poindexter, 2128 Pinkney, was chairman of the committee of commission members who met with the bishops. Others were Father Theodore Cunningham, SJ, of Markoe House at 1902 Wirt and teacher at Creighton Prep, Mother Rosemary Moody, RSCJ, of Duchesne College and chairman of the Sisters' Urban Apostolate and Denny Holland of 3719 Mason, chairman of the Catholic Commission on Human Relations of the Archdiocese. (Mr. Poindexter and Father Cunningham are former members of St. Benedict's, the Jesuit inner-city parish.)

The commission has had under study for several weeks the problems of the inner city. Mr. Poindexter as chairman of this special committee, reported to the commission:

"The parish of St. Benedict's was established to bring the faith to the Negro community and to serve their immediate and future needs. This was done in the 'old way' much the same as the white Masons did for their Negro 'one-half brothers!'. 'What do you need out there to make you happy? Football equipment, playground? Anything you want out there we'll give you to make you happy!'"

"As the years went by, the Negro's needs and attitudes changed, but the Church's attitude remained the same. After growing up, many converts left the parish and the Church because the parish did not fulfill their needs--total involvement in their community, acceptance in the Church outside of their community. This is not saying that other churches were doing more, but our ties were stronger with the other churches. Our feeling of belonging and being wanted are satisfied in these churches.

"Also there was a lack of an 'open arms' attitude (come to me, little children and I will give you peace--your problems are mine, we will fight together). Real meaningful leadership--not sponsorship--was denied us. The problem has reached a point where no amount of money can change the image of the Church in this area without first changing the Church's attitude. St. Benedict's is viewed as the Black Vatican. They tell us to 'use it, be happy, and thankful and we will keep adding to it.'

"To change this image the Catholic Church, with all its resources, must embark on an effort to help the oppressed people of this area to gain full equality. Not because we are Negro people or poor people, but because we are God's people."

Some of the commission members who said 20 years has been too long to wait mentioned that in cities like St. Louis, Chicago and Milwaukee the official representatives of the inner-city parishes have for years played an important part in the struggle for social justice.

They pointed out that while the Catholic Church in Omaha has for years sponsored activities to promote social justice, these efforts have had to operate without the support of the official Catholic structure in the innermost part of the Negro community, that^{is}, St. Benedicts. They further pointed out that presently operating on this basis are the Markoe House, Christian Family Movement, Archdiocesan Social Action Office, Holy Family Parish, Sisters' Urban Apostolate, and the Commission itself. They then stressed the complete lack of support and even opposition to such efforts as those of Father John Markoe, SJ, and the many activities that received Father Markoe's enthusiastic support.

There was strong feeling by members of the Commission that the official representatives of the inner-city parish should be the first to offer their cooperation, facilities, and enthusiastic support to all worthwhile efforts to eliminate racism in Omaha. They stated that until this is done, the Catholic Church in the inner city presents two faces and those who are in the struggle for social justice will continue to have little effect and a near hopeless frustration as in the past 20 years. They stated that it was too late to remake anyone's image.

The Catholic Commission will hold its next meeting December 13th.