

INTERRACIAL
REVIEW

A JOURNAL FOR CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY
THE WORK OF THE CLERGY CONFERENCE

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OMAHA DE PORRES CENTER

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VANISHING MYTHS OF RACISM

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CIVIL RIGHTS CONFERENCE

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as a subject for radio talks and for discourses by Catholic laymen; Negro spiritual welfare was accepted as part of the regular program of the National Confraternity of Christian Doctrine and other national Catholic organizations; special centers for converts, catechetical and social service work had been inaugurated or-greatly-increased in nearly every one of the Northern cities or dioceses with corresponding spiritual fruits; many newly ordained priests as well as older members of the clergy were requesting assignment to the colored work; with each new term more Catholic institutions—high schools, colleges and universities—were opening their doors to Catholic colored students; study groups in colleges and seminaries were giving increased attention to the

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By JOHN P. MARKOE, S.J.

for a general discussion. Before this first meeting ended, the dozen or more students present had organized the Club and elected Denny Holland its first President. Meetings have been held regularly on Monday nights ever since.

As time went on and social workers, public-minded citizens and students from other schools joined the group, it was decided that the general objective of the Club would be to promote the practice of interracial justice and charity. A set of basic principles and a few simple regulations were adopted. Membership would be open to all, regardless of race, creed, or color. We would be a civic group with no particular religious affiliation. This done, we were faced with the big question: what were we to do now? Obviously, the first thing to do was to study the racial problem with all its ramifications. So an educational program was inaugurated and has been carried on ever since. A bibliography of books, pamphlets, and magazines bearing on the problem was prepared. Many of these were obtained, read, and discussed. Qualified leaders of the local branches of the National Urban League, the N.A.A.C.P., of the C.I.O. and A. F. of L. labor organizations, of the National Brotherhood and various other social groups—anyone who had some worthwhile infor-

EATHER,
are you interested in sociology?" I looked up to greet for the first time a young man who had just entered my room at Creighton University one September afternoon in 1946. Noticing my hesitation in replying he added: "I mean in-
terracial work" and

introduced himself as
Denny Holland. "O!
I said, "that's differ-
ent. Sit down.

We sat and discussed the race problem for several
hours. That meeting was the first in a chain of con-
ferences which eventually led to the founding of the
Omaha De Porres Club.

During the following days so many other students
came in to see me about the same problem that it
was suggested to Denny that he invite any students
interested in the problem to meet in one of the parlor
rooms at Creighton on the following Monday evening

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race question; a new appreciation of the Church's
position had been awakened among non-Catholic Ne-
groes.

This list, to be complete, would fill many pages.

The Conference dissolved not because its work was
complete but because other groups were by then pre-
pared to carry it on. Regional branches—like the
Mid-West Clergy Conference, which is still flourish-
ing—had been formed. The Catholic Interracial Con-
ference had the facilities and abilities to continue
and develop the group's major activities on a na-
tional scale. So, though the original Clergy Confer-
ence has not held a meeting in the past seven years.
the policies it formulated, the advances it began and
the influence it wielded are the source of never-end-
ing growth and expansion.

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mation to offer—were invited to address the group at its weekly meetings, now being held in one of the larger classrooms at Creighton University. In this way much useful information on the various aspects of the problem was obtained, interest was aroused, and valuable contacts were made.

While continuing the educational phase of the problem, we decided before long to get some active work under way—to combine practice with theory. First of all the problem was discussed in a friendly manner by members of the Club who made personal calls on various pastors of churches and principals of schools in the City. A few of these resented what they considered to be an intrusion into their own private business. But the problem began to be talked about. Questions began to be asked. What is this De Porres Club anyway? What do they stand for? What are they after? Calls began to come in inquiring about the nature of the Club and its activities. In other words, Omaha was just like any other Northern city with a sizable Negro population. As long as the Negro minority group remained in its place of compulsory segregation, peaceful and satisfied with the crumbs that fell from the white majority's table in the way of jobs, homes, and educational opportunities, all was well. But, as soon as any individual or group attempted to remedy a bad situation by changing the social pattern, a flutter of excitement followed.

At this point the Club began to experience what seems to be an inescapable difficulty in work of this kind. Anything done to disturb the status quo is inevitably resented by a noisy few. Parents of some of the younger members of the group objected to their association with the movement. A few College professors and citizens found fault with the program. The Club began to be accused of being radical, a group of crack-pots, disturbers of the peace. Because it was interracial in character it was accused of fostering interracial "dating" designed to culminate in interracial marriage.

Fortunately this unfavorable reaction had been anticipated and was more than offset by the many who knew better. Far from being discouraged by this false gossip and rumor, the Club felt encouraged. It was evident that they had at least done something. Otherwise there would have been no reaction, favorable or otherwise.

Thus heartened,
we decided to call
on the local cap-
tains of industry
to see what could
be done about pro-
viding equal job

opportunities for qualified Negroes.

More telephone calls of inquiry and talk resulted.

The City began to be alerted to the unsavory social

DENNY HOLLAND
conditions existing

within its borders. Other civic and religious groups with bridgeheads already established in the inter-racial field were stimulated into greater action by these efforts of the De Porres Club.

This led to cooperative action by several such groups. As a result a successful Human Relations Institute, sponsored by the Omaha Urban League, was conducted for one day in a leading hotel of the city. The Moderator of the De Porres Club was privileged to give the keynote address opening this Institute. The program aimed to bring about the establishment of an official and permanent Human Relations Committee. The newly elected Mayor himself attended the opening session and, in due time, did establish such a Committee which has been functioning ever since.

The natural, normal integration of various racial groups, being diametrically opposed to compulsory segregation of the races, always strikes a telling blow at the heart of the race problem. For this reason, members of the Club frequently associated together in public, outside of meeting hours. Sometimes refreshments would be sought by a mixed group after a meeting. On several such occasions service was refused. A friendly discussion would then follow and, where this failed, the proprietor would be gently reminded that Nebraska had a State Law forbidding such discrimination. When this failed to bring the desired result, a member of the Club would have a warrant sworn out for the arrest and prosecution of the offending proprietor. The few court cases that resulted were all won by the Club. But

in one interesting case the tables were turned. The proprietor had two Club members arrested when they protested the serving of a Negro member with a dirty paper plate and cup and a wooden spoon while the white members of the group were served with chinaware and silver spoons. The Court found the accused members of the Club not guilty and lectured the offending proprietor.

While continuing its educational program among the increasing membership of the Club itself, carrying on its business meetings, taking advantage of every opportunity to undermine and dislodge Jim Crow, the Club voted to expand its activities by opening the Omaha De Porres Center in the most blighted part of the Negro district. A suitable building was obtained and staffed by volunteer workers from the Club. The weekly business meetings are now held at the Center, a lending library has been established, clothing and food are distributed to the needy, a few of the run-down homes in the neighborhood have been painted, jobs are obtained for the unemployed wherever possible, programs are held at stated times for the children, at other times for adults, a discussion group meets on certain evenings and every Friday night is reserved for a public forum, at which qualified leaders in the religious social, political, educational and economic fields have presented their viewpoints on the racial problem and on proposed solutions.

In keeping with this material expansion, the Club is always seeking opportunities for extending its educational and cultural influence. The American Brotherhood provided many splendid opportunities for Club members to speak before various religious and civic groups. Denny Holland, still the Club President, was recently invited to address a sociology club at the University of Nebraska. Shortly after opening its Center the Club sponsored three very successful lectures by the Baroness Catherine de Hueck, of Friendship House fame. On another occasion, when Mrs. Clare Booth Luce visited the City, the Club supplied her with information on the local race situation that she used with great effect during several radio interviews.

In the music and dramatic field, the Club presented, on September 9th, 1949, in her first public recital in Omaha a very talented Negro pianist and, on December 9th of the same year, staged with phenomenal

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success the Reverend George H. Dunne's powerful anti-discrimination play, Trail by Fire. Efforts of this kind are more effective in arousing attention than was, for instance, the getting of thousands of signatures for a petition addressed and presented to the Omaha and Council Bluffs' Railway Co. urging them to consider the employment of Negro motormen and

bus drivers, as was done some time ago.

A Christmas party at the Center ended the Club's activities for the past year. Greatly encouraged by the progress being made all along the interracial front throughout the length and breadth of the land, the Omaha De Porres Club is already off to a good start on another successful year. It is especially interested in two major Seminaries of the middle West where former Club members are preparing for the priesthood and where they have already organized racial problem study groups and where they hope soon to have lectures on the subject. It is also watching developments in Kansas City, Mo., Sioux

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City, Ia., and Denver, Col., where present and former members of the Club are in the process of organizing their own local De Porres Clubs. One member has gone off to join the Trappists, another is pursuing social studies at Grailville and several have joined the staffs of Friendship Houses in other cities.

The Club has always been convinced that basically the race problem is a moral one and that to compromise in cases of discrimination where principles of justice and charity are involved would not only be wrong in itself but would immediately cause the Club to lose the respect and confidence of all minority groups. The leader in the field of interracial relations is pretty much like an acrobat walking the tight-rope of justice supported by charity. His only safe course is a straight one. Let him lean too far towards either side and he loses his balance and falls.

A Point of View

By THEOPHILUS LEWIS

VANISHING MYTHS OF RACISM

ALTHOUGH I do not possess the gift of prophecy

I predict that within the next five years a candidate for public office in the South—running congressman, perhaps, or even senator or governor—will declare himself in favor of extending full and complete civil rights to the Negro citizens of his community. And I predict that he will be elected!

In both the upper and lower houses of Congress, there is a sprinkling of Southern legislators who would support the President's civil rights program if they were not afraid of being knifed by professional racists when they come up for reelection. I think that in several, if not many, instances their fear is unfounded. Eventually they will find out for themselves that supporting proposed legislation according to conscience may not mean sudden death to their political careers. From the year when I marked my first ballot until 1948 it was political gospel that in normal elections, when the nation was not frightened by war or depression, a Democratic candidate for President could not win without the solid support of the South. Truman's victory proved that the importance of the "solid South" in national elections was more myth than fact. It won't be long before some local Truman, somewhere in the South, will discover that the strength of the racist element in his community has been exaggerated. He will campaign as a Christian and a gentleman, appealing to the decency of the South, while defying the racists to do their worst; and when the ballots are counted he will find himself elected.

After that, the dam will be down.

Another candidate for election or reelection will defy the racist taboo, and then another and another and another—until defying racism becomes a mark of courage and political honesty. Not all of them will be successful, for there are many sections where the majority of whites are either emotional racists or racists from habit. There are other sections—Georgia, for instance, with its county unit rule—with tricky

methods of counting ballots that enable a candidate, favored by a minority of the popular vote, to win the election. The total casualties among progressive Southern statesmen will be rather light, however, and another myth—the impregnability of racism in the South—will vanish over the hill.

I have no idea which Southern statesman—Stennis, of Mississippi, or Sparkman, of Alabama, or some obscure congressman from South Carolina or Virginia—will be the first Ajax to defy the lightning of racist wrath. I am certain, however, that it will not be our Louisiana co-religionist, Senator Ellender. But people are still dying in Louisiana, and younger people are inheriting their estates and positions of importance. It will not be long before the babies born since the turn of the century will become a majority of the voting population of the state. And it will not be much longer before those younger voters, weary of Ellender's racist claptrap, retire him to private life.

Intelligent Southerners no longer defend the racist pattern that blankets the South. They only apologize for it and try to explain that changing the pattern too suddenly would result in bloodshed, with Negroes shedding most of the blood. If Negroes ever attempted to vote, they said, enraged white racists would slaughter them at the polls. Negroes are now voting in national elections everywhere in the South, and there has been no blood-letting, or, at worst, very little. Thus, another racist myth, when its bark proved more painful than its bite, retires to limbo.

The South, of course, is not the only myth-ridden section of the nation. For years the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company refused to hire Negroes for anything except menial work, offering the excuse that if Negroes were given office jobs white employees would refuse to work with them. The Metropolitan now has colored and white employees working in the same office without friction, and another racist myth goes down the drain.

Metropolitan, undaunted when its racist employment policy fizzled, persists in drawing a color line when investing company money. When the company financed the building of Stuyvesant Town, a housing project, only white applicants were permitted to sign leases. Several white tenants have sublet their apartments to colored friends and Metropolitan is in a dither. It seems that another racist myth—that white people do not like having Negroes for neighbors—is on the way to oblivion.

And so it goes. One after another, the myths that support racism have been punctured. The time is coming, and it's not too far off, when racism itself will become a vanishing myth.