

Catholic Review Column: Fifty Years After the Civil Rights Movement

Fifty years ago this summer, the Civil Rights Act was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, marking a watershed moment in our nation's history and in the ongoing struggle of African-Americans for fair and equal treatment.

The passage of the law, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin, and ended voter discrimination and segregation of schools, came amidst a tumultuous period that saw sit-ins, marches and mass protests staged from major cities to college campuses of every size. These were the vehicles of a massive social movement and symbolized the "tipping point" for modern day racism, the beginning of an end to tolerance of intolerance. There would be several more years of "moments" that we reflect on today and can see as integral to the movement's success.

Here in Baltimore, the protest to end the segregation of Gwynn Oak Park on July 4, 1963, was a seminal moment that added to the swell of public sentiment that compelled lawmakers to act. Members of our local presbyterate joined the protest, as they did the marches in Washington, D.C. Three were arrested that Independence Day. Cardinal Lawrence Shehan was among the nation's leading Catholic figures during the Civil Rights Movement, adding a much-needed voice to the public discourse. And he not only talked the talk, he also walked the walk ... literally!

He participated in the Aug. 28, 1963, March in D.C. that was led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In January of that same year Cardinal Shehan appeared before the Baltimore City Council to testify in favor of the Open Housing Bill with an estimated 2,000 people in attendance. In March, the cardinal banned racial discrimination in the institutions of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, including schools, churches, social organizations and charitable institutions. A Baltimore Sun article about the decision quotes the cardinal as saying, Catholics "have a special obligation to place ourselves in the forefront (of efforts to end) injustices and discrimination which still remain."

Three years later, in 1966, the cardinal formed the first Archdiocesan Urban Commission to position the church to better address the unique needs of those living in Baltimore City, which had begun to see spikes in violence and poverty. And just five years later, in 1968, the cardinal issued a landmark pastoral letter on racism that challenged Catholics of every race in the Archdiocese of Baltimore to see themselves as St. Paul instructed in his Epistle to the Galatians: “You are all children of God ... for you are all one in Christ.”

A similar “awakening” was occurring outside the United States, as people from countries across the globe were demanding justice and equal opportunity for those who had been oppressed due to discrimination and colonialism.

Pope St. John XXIII, in his encyclical “Pacem in Terris” (Peace on Earth), wrote in April 1963, “When the relations of human society are expressed in terms of rights and duties, men become conscious of spiritual values, understand the meaning and significance of truth, justice, charity and freedom, and become deeply aware that they belong to this world of values. Moreover, when moved by such concerns, they are brought to a better knowledge of the true God Who is personal and transcendent, and thus they make the ties that bind them to God the solid foundation and supreme criterion of their lives, both that of life which they live interiorly in the depths of their own souls and of that in which they are united to other men in society.”

The sad and disturbing scenes playing out in the suburbs of St. Louis – and in many communities around the country, including some here in our own local communities – are just the latest reminders that we still have a way to go, making this statement from Cardinal Shehan’s 1968 pastoral letter eerily and sadly relevant today: “Recent experience has shown much – very much – remains to be done; that grave wrongs still need to be righted.”