

Integrating a Southern Catholic high school

As early as 1917, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, at the request of Bishop William T. Russell, began missionary work among the black Catholics in the unique city of Charleston, S.C. Previously, the Sisters of Charity of Charleston taught the black children. However, in the mid 1830s, Bishop John England, after attending the First Provincial Council and visiting the Oblates School for Colored Girls, decided to start such an institution in his diocese. The bishop encountered much opposition and threats and as a result, closed the school.

In 1968, the diocese decided to integrate the two Catholic high schools. The project would start with the integration of the faculty of the white high school, Bishop England. The following year, the student body would be totally integrated. Both buildings would be utilized. The black school, Immaculate Conception, would house the freshman class, and Bishop England would serve as the building for the upperclassmen. Both campuses would have, like the student body, an integrated faculty.

While revamping my biology at St. Frances, I received a call from my superior general to report to her office. On entering, I was offered a seat only to hear the words, "You are being transferred to Charleston."

Mixed emotions surfaced; my lab was a mess, equipment was everywhere. I had just rewritten a new lab-oriented curriculum. And I was being transferred at this late date? Yet, I had heard only good things about Immaculate Conception: wonderful, cooperative parents, students eager to learn, a well-equipped school, zealous priests, a good curriculum and an A-1 basketball team.

My immediate answer was, “Yes, Mother, when do I leave for Immaculate Conception?”

Mother Theresa answered, “Dear, you are not going to Immaculate Conception, but to Bishop England.” Bishop England? I had never heard of Bishop England High School. Mother Theresa told me that Bishop England was the white Catholic high school, and I was going there to integrate the faculty. More mixed emotions. Again, in the spirit of obedience, I asked when I was to leave. The reply was, “Immediately.”

The train ride to Charleston was pleasant. The very next day, I met with the principal, Father Kelly, a transplanted northerner. After a tour of the campus, I was instructed as to what my duties and responsibilities would be. Primarily, I was to teach five classes in biology, all boys. Mixed emotions again. Somehow I survived the initial shock and within a few days, was preparing for my all-male classes. Teaching at Bishop England were the Daughter of Charity from Emmitsburg, the Sisters of Mercy of Charleston, and new in 1968, like the Oblates, were the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Having graduated from the Daughters of Charity’s college in St. Louis made me feel a little more at home.

In spite of the fact that John Calhoun was revered in Charleston and Fort Sumter were sacred words, teaching at Bishop England was a new, but wonderful experience. One afternoon, after watching the band practice, I discovered that one of the flags associated with Bishop England was the Confederate Flag. I told Father Kelly that I could not teach under a confederate flag. Know that I was assigned to the diocese for the year; nothing could be done about the flag at present. I don’t know if my objection to the flag had anything to do with its removal, but the following year, the flag was not included in the lineup.

The lay faculty was ideal to work with. The kids were kids, and the parents were most cooperative. In fact, the parents from each parish prepared a Southern home-

cooked meal for the staff each day. Maintenance took care of the classrooms and each morning upon arriving at school, your room was ready, windows opened. School spirit was unbelievable.

My classes with the boys went along well. Somehow there were a few black boys on the football team and two of them were in my classes. One of my African-American students was the son of the principal of the largest black public school in the city. All were from devout Catholic families. I believe there were only three or four black girls in a school of more than 900. One girl was a cheerleader. For the most part the students got along very well during the school day. What happened in the evenings when they went home, I don't know.

This is the first in a two-part column.

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