

Prayer Service on Poverty and Racism

The reading from the prophet Micah calls us to do works of justice. Repeatedly in this year of the Great Jubilee Pope John Paul II, speaking in the name of the gospel of Jesus, has called us to the same evangelical task. Even more, he has reminded us that we should stand before the Lord and ask God's pardon for the times we and those who went before us have failed to do what God's word and the virtues of truth and justice require.

We gather this evening mindful of an evil, a spiritual malady that has gnawed at the moral fiber of our nation, our community and our church from the early days of colonial America. The early history tells us of the slave trade. Like other sad pages whose message causes pain, these have been torn from the history books most people study, but the scars, the consequences remain. The illness festers. Today we call it by the name of racism.

Although I had read of this offense to human dignity, its reality struck me vividly when, as a seminarian, I had a long meeting with three Salesian seminarians from Latin America. They had come from Mexico through the United States to New York by bus. The year was 1952. Time after time, because two of them had dark complexions, as they traveled through the southern states of our land, they were forced to eat separately, to go to the back of the bus, to be other than they knew God had made them, people with the dignity that comes with being a child of God. They poured out their anguish and their anger to me, and I could only listen.

Since then, many things have happened. More widespread in our land and in this community is the understanding of racism as an evil, a spiritual evil, a sin. More general is the knowledge of its reality, not something to be blinked away, but to be named, confronted, dealt with.

We know too that racism has touched and hurt many people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Native Americans were the first on our continent to suffer. Recently a Maryland resident wrote me, observing that the Church has prayed for pardon for

other sins but, to his knowledge, has neglected to mention the Native Americans who felt initial discrimination. Like the slaves of the same era, they were treated as though they were without souls, and had neither innate dignity nor an eternal destiny.

In February 1992, Pope John Paul II visited the island of Gorée, in Senegal. This was the place from which the slave ships for the West departed sailing for South America, and for our own land as well, with a cargo of living humans who were treated as objects, wares to be sold on the docks of America. The Holy Father, reviewing the situation, said,

“I have come here to pay homage to all these victims, unknown victims; no one knows exactly how many there were; no one knows exactly who they were. Unfortunately, our civilization which calls itself Christian, which claims to be Christian, we turn to this situation of anonymous slaves in our century: We knew what concentration camps were: here is a model for them. One cannot plumb the depths of the tragedy of our civilization, of our weakness, of sin. We must remain ever-faithful to a different appeal, that of Saint Paul who said: ‘Where sin abounded, grace abounded even more’; grace, that means love, abounded even more.”
(February 22, 1992)

Later Pope John Paul II spoke to the people on the island of Gorée and implored, “Heaven’s forgiveness for us, for the sin of those persons ‘who did not live their faith.’”

Among other things, the Holy Father said,

“From this African shrine of Black sorrow, we implore heaven’s forgiveness. We pray that in the future Christ’s disciples will be totally faithful to the observance of the commandment of fraternal love which the Master left us. We pray that never again will people oppress their brothers and sisters, whoever they may be, but always seek to imitate the compassion of the Good Samaritan in the gospel in going to help thos