

## **Bishop O'Malley is Guest Speaker at NAACP Event**

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FALL RIVER While the 20th century eliminated diseases like smallpox and polio, the spiritual disease of racism is still menacing our world at the start of the new millennium, Bishop Sean P.O' Malley, OFM Cap., told members and guests at a meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Bishop O'Malley was the principal speaker at the NAACP's annual Freedom Fund Breakfast held June 10 at White's of Westport.

The bishop's address reads:

"My uncle, Father Jerry, baptized me a Catholic when I was eight days old. At six, I joined the Cub Scouts. The next organizations I joined were the Legion of Mary and the NAACP when I was in high school. In collaboration with the NAACP, I did some voter registration work in a black neighborhood in Cleveland. The people received me kindly, although many commented with some amusement that a white kid had never knocked on their door before. Some asked me if I had ever voted. 'As soon as I am old enough, I will vote,' I replied.

I have always had the highest regard for your organization as a force for good in the United States, and I truly am honored to have been invited to be part of this annual Freedom Fund breakfast.

The 20th century will be remembered by many as a century of great progress in science, technology, and medicine. Indeed, outstanding achievements unimagined in earlier times were attained; but the 20th century was the most violent hundred years in the history of humanity. The death toll of two world wars was staggering, and an additional 50 million people have died in armed conflicts after the Second World War.

In our planning for the millennium celebration, I have asked the Catholic Community to focus on the three great assaults on humanity that have characterized the 20th century — anti-Semitism, abortion, racism.

The Pastoral Letter on Racism entitled, 'Solidarity: An Arduous Journey to the Promised Land,' was my way of inviting the Catholic community and people of good will to reflect on the sin of racism and the havoc which it has unleashed in our country. I was pleased to see that Mr. Lee Charlton mentioned in a recent interview that he hoped today's breakfast attendees would leave with the notion that racism is not only harmful to the victim, but also to the perpetrator. Indeed, every sin, every injustice, every evil act, or even an act of indifference in the face of a crisis, diminishes the humanity of the perpetrator and damages the spiritual environment of the planet.

Racism has been a terrible cancer in the history of our country. It first manifested its ugly head in the deplorable treatment of the Indians, the Native Americans. It is the story of genocide. The aboriginal Americans were despoiled of their lands, subjugated, and humiliated. They barely survived— a defeated people, ravaged by alcoholism, poverty and dependence, victims of terrible injustices and countless broken promises. Bingo halls and casino licenses are a poor substitute for the ancient noble traditions, proud culture, and sense of oneness with nature and responsibility for each other that characterized this once independent and proud people.

The sin of racism continued when African slaves were brought to the United States to do the work which often falls to the newest wave of immigrants in our own day, work typified as '3D jobs,' i.e. dirty, dangerous and demeaning. Moreover, in the case of the slaves, these jobs were also uncompensated.

The people of the United States were divided on the morality of slavery and a Civil War ensued. The slave states were defeated and the period of reconstruction did nothing to prepare the South for a new economy, or for the integration of freed slaves into the larger society. The legacy of slavery was the continued exploitation of the Afro-American population, discrimination, and segregation. This was true throughout the United States for a century following the Civil War. The participation of blacks in the Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement have helped Americans to jettison a portion of the evil legacy of slavery.

One of the great prophets of our age is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is difficult to think of an American who has made a greater contribution to the well-being of the United States. He calls us all to embrace the ideals of democracy and the equality of each and every person. I am so pleased that his birthday is a national holiday.

As a believer, a Christian, I am very proud of the fact that Dr. Martin Luther King's idealism springs from his personal commitment to Christ and to the Gospel. The heroic path of non-violence and martyrdom of Dr. King has been a great source of blessings for America. He has helped us to grow closer to what we are supposed to be both as Americans and as Christians.

The work is not finished. The 'Promised Land' of integration, 'where children of former slaves and children of former slaveholders could sit down at the table of brotherhood,' is still very elusive. Integration is so much more difficult than desegregation. We have made great strides in desegregation; we have much to do to achieve integration. Desegregation is a matter of law; integration is a matter of the heart.

For 20 years I lived in the nation's capital — as the radio disc jockeys described it as, 'the chocolate city with the marshmallow suburbs.' Much desegregation, but not a whole lot of integration.

To me Shakespeare was such a keen observer of human nature —of our noble aspirations, our weaknesses and our fatal flaws; but I have never liked adaptations of Shakespeare set in modern times, or tampering with the original plays in other ways. When I was a young monk we were not allowed to have money, so the only time I would get to a show or to a play was when it was a 'freebie.' I remember one such production at the Sylvan Theater of 'Romeo & Juliet.'

The director of the play modernized the story somewhat and changed the venue. Instead of portraying the feuding families of the Capulets and the Montagues in Verona, the play was set in 19th century New Orleans. Romeo's family was a prominent white family, and Juliet's family was a wealthy black family. It was easy to feel the tension between the two families and to imagine the depth of their hostility towards any relationship between the young lovers. When the young lovers lie dead — there is no doubt that the hatred between their families was like a poison. that claimed the lives of Romeo and Juliet.

Shakespeare concludes the play:

'The Sun, for sorrow, will not show his head:

Go hence, to have more talk of

These sad things;

Some shall be pardon'd, and some punished:

For never was a story of more woe

Than this of Juliet and

her Romeo.'

We all long for the day when the sun will not be ashamed to shine on our world. We long for the day when racism will no longer divide the human family into Capulets and Montagues harboring old grudges and prejudices.

Shakespeare's story becomes a parable of the battle between love and hate. In the story the death of their children cause the old rivals to be reconciled. I like to think that the death of Dr. King, and so many who generously dedicated their lives to the cause of solidarity, will finally cast out the demon of racism once and for all.

I must confess that I have known interracial marriages where the couple was rejected by the parents; but God is good. When the grandchildren were born, the grandparents became colorblind.

One phenomenon that is not uncommon is the tension that often arises among different minority groups as they are thrown together in the ghettos and often find themselves competing for same jobs, housing, or government programs.

In Washington, that was the case. I was director of a social service agency across the street from a public school where the students were, for the most part, blacks and Hispanics. Once a disturbance arose, billed as a race riot (I would call it a food fight), but the teachers were unable to gain control and did not know what to do so they called me. When I walked into the building, the Spanish kids immediately quieted down; they were my parishioners. I had baptized many and given them their first Communion. They were terrified that I would complain to their parents. The reaction of the blacks was quite curious.

Most were Protestants and had never seen a monk. In fact, many of them thought I was like the Buddhist karate masters they had seen in the Kung Fu films. They interpreted this white belt as indicating a high level of proficiency in the martial arts.

It was one of the best dialogues on racism I had ever experienced. Sadly, it became very clear that these youngsters were learning terrible attitudes from their parents. In those days, there was a Cuban nun working in the Washington, D.C. public school system by the name of Sister Mary Ann Justiz. Oftentimes, she would receive calls from Hispanic parents who, when they found out that their call was being handled by an Hispanic nun, would speak very frankly. They would say, 'Sister, help us move our children to a better school where there are not so many black children often using racial epithets and slurs. Sister Mary Ann would say — 'Come and see me. I think I can help you.' They would go to the public schools administration building and when they were ushered into sister's office they were shocked to be confronted by very imposing black nun with formidable presence. She would say — 'And now, why is it that you want to move your children to another school?' And then she would talk to them about racism, and prejudice, and the disservice they were doing to their children. Her goodness and patience changed a lot of racists into decent human beings. She used to lament the fact that many of these immigrants were not racists in their own countries. Sadly enough, they learned to see color when they came to America. In fact, in most Spanish-speaking countries, references to people's skin color are terms of endearment and affection. In the United States they are often insults and pejorative expressions. As bishop in the Virgin Islands, I was distressed to see how our young people would graduate from high school and come to the United States for college. Often, they would return crestfallen having experienced for the first time in their lives discrimination and racism in the United States.

One of the points I try to make in the Pastoral Letter is that racism is like a disease most often transmitted from parent to child. Its early symptom is the delusion that one's race is somehow superior to others. In advanced stages, it leads to hatred, violence, and untold suffering. This contagion needs to be checked. The 20th century was able to eliminate certain diseases like smallpox and polio, but this spiritual disease of racism is still menacing our world as we begin a new millennium.

I am optimistic because great strides have been made. Following the murder of Martin Luther King much has been done in the area of desegregation and the blatant violence of lynching. The overt racism of the past has subsided.

I remember going as a volunteer with Reverend Abernathy to Resurrection City in Washington at the time of the Poor Peoples' March after the death of Dr. King. A huge tent went up next to the Lincoln Monument. I lived there in those tents for a couple of days. It rained and it rained. I thought we would have to build an ark. Children were sick. There was not enough food. It was awful. I kept losing my sandals in the mud. It was like a swamp. We put down boards and they sunk into the mud, but I learned why God made mud. At night a group of men (who, we were told, were off-duty police) taunted us, shouted obscenities and threw canisters of tear gas. The tear gas cans were devoured by the mud. When I asked them to stop using bad language in front of the women and children—one of them said: 'Priest, why aren't you with your own kind?' — I replied, 'but I am.' And I feel like that today. I am with

brothers and sisters who hope for a better world where people will love and respect each other — a world where racism will be replaced by solidarity, and where Dr. King's dream will be a dream no longer, but a reality.

I believe that we truly love God only when we truly love our neighbor, made in His image and likeness. In Catholic social teaching, the antidote for racism is solidarity. Solidarity is an expression of the great commandment of love that invites us to form a community among people that will enable us to overcome the structures of sin and oppression. John Paul II insists that solidarity is not sentimentality, or a vague compassion or empathy for the suffering of so many. Rather, solidarity is a firm determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say, the good of all and of each individual 'because we are all really responsible for all.'

The virtue of solidarity is not only an antidote to racial tensions in our own country, but points the way to a program of development and world peace based on a 'new model of the human race. In his message for World Peace Day, January 1, 2000, Pope John Paul II states: '... we can set forth one certain principle: There will be peace only to the extent that humanity as a whole rediscovers its fundamental call to be one family, a family in which the dignity and rights of individuals — whatever their status, race, or religion — are accepted as prior and superior to any kind of difference or distinction.'

May God bless all of you for your work on behalf of social justice and racial harmony."