

The lady takes a flyer from our “model” seminarian, Frank E. Fortkamp, who on other less posed days had been threatened by a few Black Muslims who claimed the location as their own—until the arrival of a policeman who just happened to belong to the parish.



The Church Mid-Decade and the Negro

by JOHN J. FRITSCHER

THE TORCH Magazine
VOLUME XLVIII
FEBRUARY, 1965

The Church Mid-Decade and the Negro

by John J. Fritscher (Jack Fritscher)
(written age 24)

I am white, twenty-four, the son of a salesman's middle-class family. Despite the Civil Rights Bill I still live in the *de facto* segregated suburbs of a Midwestern city over 125,000 population. I am a student for the priesthood and I have sat on the floor of Chicago Mayor Daley's office. For the heat of the last two summers of 1963 and 1964, I have been in Chicago. I have lived with the Negroes on Chicago's South Side. And since my return from the Black Belt many of my parents' friends tolerate me with the cool regard or the heated remarks sacred only to the memory of Benedict Arnold.

I am told by them that if they're prejudiced, then I am just as prejudiced—but the other way. If it seems that way to them, then I am sorry that I have not been clearer, kinder in expressing why I walked alone for the first time through a colored neighborhood. Why I wore a roman collar door to door and talked for hours to people living in unspeakable conditions. Why I marched and why I sat-in.



Like everyone else I've always seen and heard what I wanted to see and hear. But this time I tried to walk with my eyes wide open. I wanted to find if really it was true what is said: that by negligence and silence, I and my comfortable neighbors and the Church I intend to serve all my life are somehow accessories before God to the injustices committed against Negroes.

I'd read that Mayor Daley had said ghettos do not exist in Chicago. I thought they did, but figured I could be wrong. And I *was* wrong if a thirty-two per cent male unemployment rate, subhuman housing, and vice and crime (all restricted in one neighborhood tighter than any zoning commission ever dreamed) are not symptoms of a ghetto existence.

One can prove anything by selecting examples, and in my first week in the area I could have verified any of the worst stories anyone has ever heard about slums and sin and other human beings. I could have lined them up: the junkies, the prostitutes, the alcoholics, the deviates, and the good people sunk despairingly deep in the vicious circle of their circumstances.

A walk down any street, a climb up any stairwell proves that we have not abolished slavery. We have perfected it. Before, a master at least had to feed and house his slave to protect his initial investment. Since Emancipation there is no purchasing, no investment to guard, and the master-society has been free to hire and fire, to use and abuse according to its own whim, and the needs of the "slave" be hanged. So what if he gets sick, killed, is ignorant and discriminated against. There's always more where he came from.

And precisely because there are more where he came from, the Negro in 1964 has reached at least a landing lit by outside legal light on his way up the cellar steps. But he started on that climb long before this mid-decade. The Negro has worked for



Not in the least dismayed by the clerical clothes, these children took a few seconds out to see if the "Father" would give them a ponyhuck ride.

freedom since the very first day of his captivity. Passive resistance is as old as the Plantation.

And by your mint julep if you don't think breakin' massa's new plow, forgettin' how to ruin massa's cotton gin, and havin' some ol' kind of mysterious misery everytime massa needed something pronto wasn't passive resistance in its most primitive form, then think again.

But this resistance historically got bad publicity. It birthed, nursed, and weaned the full blown Negro stereotype that today is thankfully being laid to rest. My whole time on the South Side I did not hear one single wide-eyed chorus of "Summertime" or see one tap dancing boot-black or eat any Aunt Jemima pancakes. Instead, I saw individuals, people who basically were no different from the white society in which I had always lived. People who would have been the same were it not for discrimination and its ugly brood of children.

If I say Negroes are like this or like that, someone will always say, "Well I know one that isn't." Then let me say that Americans are like this or Catholics are like that and everyone knows I don't mean each and every American or Catholic, but rather the majority.

In the course of our work in Chicago's Woodlawn, we sixteen seminarians met and talked to more than a great majority of the forty thousand people in the neighborhood. We found the sensational all right: the characters right out of the novels of Richard Wright and James Baldwin. But more importantly, we found the people called *Negro*.

We found the good ordinary people trying to live ordinary family lives in a circle of appalling circumstances. We went door to door in hundreds of six-family dwellings inhabited by up to fourteen families. And we talked. And *how* we talked. If nothing else, we established communication with some of those people locked behind their tenement doors. We were Catholic priests to them, but we were also the first social contact many of them had made in the community. Since the area's entire population shifts about every three years, the neighborhood is a constant flux of new addresses. Many are Southern Negroes new to the city. Their adjustment from their former rural or small-town way-of-life is not easily made. Many of them do not know their neighbor across the hall, much less where the local church is, who the doctor is, whom to see for social help. And for as many who sit bitterly in their one-room walk-ups because the North is not the Promised Land, there are more who are attending night classes at local schools, more who recognize the difficulties in their neighborhood, more are worried to death over their children's future.

And here with the children is the impelling force driving the Negro to seek his rights. He wants education for his children so that applications for decent jobs can be made by qualified Negro applicants, so that life can be lived with some dignity of profession. He doesn't want his children to slide back into the morass that has stalled the Negro for centuries. Up to this past summer he was finding it more and more difficult to tell nine-year-old Suzie she couldn't go to this or that movie theater because she is black; and more and more easy to explain to her why she must go with her father to a freedom march ("Because you're a human being, honey, and you have a right to live like one."), knowing full well that her participation in the demonstration would be awakening in her the social consciousness of a whole new generation. The Civil Rights

Bill has boosted the Negro's hopes and responsibilities enormously,

The Negro puts a different value on children than does our white "control-conscious" society. Perhaps because he has fewer other distractions his focus is electrically on the worth and future of his children as social entities. Even the names common among Negroes, outlines of the most famous heroes of American history from Washington to Lincoln to Roosevelt and now John Kennedy, are clues to the aspirations American Negro parents dream for their children.

But why were we in Woodlawn? Negroes asked us that and we asked ourselves and each other. Monsignor John J. Egan, director of the Chicago Archdiocesan Conservation Council, answered us quite succinctly one July evening: "The religious institution which remains aloof from its neighborhood and whose administrators do not involve themselves with the aspirations, causes, and organizations of the neighborhood, is, by virtue of its symbolic role, denying God in that neighborhood."

With those fighting words no one wants to quarrel, least of all the pastor of Woodlawn's Holy Cross Parish, Father Martin Farrell. He it was who invited us to the South Side. He needed a large force to canvass his shifting parish population quickly. And he thought seminarians might jump at the chance to people the somewhat dry pages of their theology textbooks with real experience.

So we set out, frankly frightened at first, to teach and to learn. Ultimately we were there for a spiritual reason, to bring souls to Christ in the Church. But we quickly found that is done in a very concrete way.

The culture of many large northern cities has been largely shaped by Roman Catholics and their institutions. And Chicago is no exception. (Woodlawn itself had been Irish Catholic.) Thus with a basically Catholic spirit somewhat dominant in the city's social consciousness, one judges there can be little serious tackling of the still existing problems of segregation and discrimination if Catholics and Catholic parishes do not earnestly tackle them.

That was our place to begin, or rather to enter what Father Farrell had long before begun. That was how we came to sit on the Mayor's floor with four hundred Negro demonstrators, how we came to march in the NAACP's July 4th parade to Grant Park. This we could understand having heard often that you can't preach the gospel to an empty stomach.

Father Farrell's instrument for community improvement is the nonsectarian group, The Woodlawn Organization, in whose circle he has been a leader since its beginning. TWO has been called by sociologist advisor to Cardinal Montini (now Pope Paul VI), Saul Alinsky, "the most effective community organization of Negroes in America."

But besides TWO which pressures slum landlords, fights for neighborhood urban renewal on a local level, and crusades for all the justice lacking in everything from job discrimination to unequal education, Father Farrell has thrown his own parochial resources into the fray. In answer





to the parents' concern for their children's education, he has opened his school to all area children, Catholic or not. And here our task took specific form: to flood the teeming neighborhood with literature about the "Sisters' School"; to spread information about the adult instruction classes; to awaken in the neighborhood conscience the fact that the Church is there, doing more than watching, actually caring what happens to their bodies and minds as well as their souls.

It is evident the Church simply cannot afford to miss the boat in the current social revolution and

so lose the American Negro. The Church cannot afford to repeat the maneuvers made during the eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution when her slowness lost her the European working class. The Church either opens to the Negro now or never.

It's all very well and good to have one of the neighborhood status symbols be the children's attendance at the Sisters' School. (A status symbol and more because the children receive, besides the regular curriculum, a highly valued "training in goodness"—as the character formation is popularly called.) And it's also well and good that the Church draw in converts through its classes and its civic and social prominence in the community; that it help the mothers and fathers of families obtain all the rights owed to them and their children; that buses chartered for demonstrations leave from the Church door. It is well and good that this clamor after Rights is preached from the pulpit of the Catholic Church; but more than this, the Negro sitting

in the pews hears that with every right comes a corresponding duty. Duty too he must discover. Duty too he must seek and fulfill to become an integral member of society.

The honor given by Negroes this summer to John Kennedy can compare only with the love given last summer to another John, the Twenty-third, whose picture, cut from magazines and torn from newspapers, was conspicuous in apartment after apartment, Catholic and non-Catholic. The Pontiff's name, in those first months after his death, was spoken with bound-





less admiration. And rightly so. For only the April before the summer he died had he said in *Pacem in Terris*:...*"The conviction that all men are equal by reason of their natural dignity has been generally accepted. Hence racial discrimination can in no way be justified at least doctrinally or in theory. And this is of fundamental importance and significance for the formation of human society...For, if a man becomes conscious of his rights, he must become equally aware of his duties. Thus he who possesses certain rights has likewise*

the duty to claim those rights as marks of his dignity, while all others have the obligation to acknowledge those rights and respect them." (Itals. ours)

The American Negro has heard the late head of the Catholic Church, the Vicar of Christ, saying such things on radio and television, in newspapers and in some Catholic pulpits. The ground is plowed for the Church. The seed is there. It must be nurtured carefully in the next months and coming years. For the Catholic Church, as a body already present in society, can help through education and social action the implementation of the Civil Rights Bill and thus hasten the day when rats and hate and hunger no longer distract men from the care of their souls.

Because this social revolution will continue until justice is righted, I want my parents' friends to understand what is happening. I want everyone to know that every time a Negro minister is dragged down courthouse steps, Christ is dragged again; that every time a Negro girl is killed in a senseless Sunday School bombing, Christ is killed again; that subhuman housing, substandard education, all the devices and implements of racial hatred and prejudice have as their victim not a race or a mere cultural minority. They have as their victim Christ.

I want them all to know that my generation of Chaney's and Goodmans and Schwerners, that our world is in a state of revolution and certain values once held can no longer be supported by antiquated law or outdated custom, by private agreement or public indifference. Already the barber in the shopping center near my home can no longer insist to me after a casual question that he will never cut a Negro's hair. Discrimination has always been immoral. Now it is illegal as well.

I want my good Catholic friends, even the ones who attend study clubs and Holy Name and Altar-Rosary, to know something that I found out about them, about the ones who say they have nothing against Negroes but don't want any next door. They say they know they are prejudiced, but they can't help it. But when they talk about it, it's clear they're not anti-Negro because Negroes have dark skins. Their prejudice is against filth and poverty and laziness and vice. These are what they hate. Not Negroes. And when these otherwise good people finally make this distinction, they see that discrimination in jobs and education has bred the poverty all must war against. They see that poverty breeds defeat and dirt and hopelessness and sin in whatever group it enters. It is then they see that it is not the victim, the Negro, that they hate. But rather

it is the cause and the cancer itself, the denial of human dignity and rights implicit in discrimination, that they despise. And this practicing Catholics need to know for a right conscience; for prejudice, no matter how it is sliced, is sinful.

Christ was the world's greatest rebel. Christianity is the religion of revolution. And the Church in these days of ecumenical renewal is out to establish beachheads. Revolutions are not new to the Church and she knows how to handle them. The Church, founded in upheaval, has seen too much growth come from upheaval to cast any movement off lightly.

Every nation that ever rose and fell, collapsed because people who forgot how to suffer and sacrifice themselves for justice weakened its moral fiber. Today the American Negro character stands purified by centuries of patient suffering. Full integration has legally come. The racially incestuous barriers of cultures and ideas and blood will be melted away. And as the Negro is accepted into the society of American business and politics and religion and art, the very strength he brings to the transfusion, especially if guided by the social-moral doctrines of solid Christianity, will be for our country and our world the bringing in of a new hope.

© 1964, 1965, 2002 Jack Fritscher

All photographs by H.A. Martin Photography from the collection of Jack Fritscher

Featured seminarian is the now Reverend Frank E. Fortkamp.