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## Our Apostolate With Blacks

By Sylvester Perterka, C.M.  
USA Eastern Province

One might suspect that in speaking about our *Apostolate with Blacks* that we begin telling the story about various Vincentian Ministries throughout the United States that have a primary focus today in the Black community. To have such a start would be incomplete and only tell a small part of our Vincentian story. If we want the whole story we need to look at our history and our spirit. Our Vincentian Spirit is such that we cannot and should not attempt to speak of individuals or local houses as our Apostolate with Blacks. As Vincentians in the United States we have had two primary focuses, service to the poor ("to preach the gospel to the poor he has sent me...") and formation of the clergy. It is within these two broad parameters that we should speak of our Apostolate with Blacks. Within these two broad parameters all Vincentians have been called in some sense to our Apostolate with Blacks. It is also from this starting point that we must recognize our past and present failures.

James Weldon Johnson in his song, "*Lift Every Voice and Sing*" tells the story of the Black Experience here in the United States.<sup>1</sup> When talking about our Vincentian Apostolate with Blacks we need to listen with an open heart and mind to these powerful poetic words that tell a story:

**"Stoney the road we trod  
Bitter the chast'ning rod  
Felt in the day when hope  
Unborn had died...."**

These words could be used not only to describe the Black experience in America, but also to describe the Black experience with the Catholic Church and with our Vincentian Community in particular.

If we are to speak of our Apostolate with Blacks we cannot and should not sugarcoat our historical lack of response. We cannot sugarcoat our historical lack of response to the spiritual needs of Blacks in the United States. We cannot sugarcoat our lack of moral response to issues that Blacks have had to overcome here in the United States. Neither can we gloss over our failure to respond to the unjust physical and human conditions that Blacks have faced throughout the centuries in the United States. Unfortunately today, because of the effects of racism, many of these conditions and situations still persist. Oh, there is no

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<sup>1</sup>"Lift Every Voice and Sing" is considered the African American National Anthem.

doubt when dealing with justice, when dealing with the response of the Church, when dealing with the response of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States, African Americans can cry out: "Stoney the Road We Trod." Ouch!

It would be wonderful to speak of all the significant and sometimes heroic individual efforts confreres have made in working within the Black Community. Certainly, individual and collective efforts have been made, but those efforts would just be a small part of the total Vincentian story. In speaking about our "Apostolate with Blacks" we need first to use the "*Sankofa Principle*" which means that one must look back before going forward.<sup>2</sup> Secondly we, the Congregation of the Mission in the United States, need to have our toes stepped on.<sup>3</sup> In other words, we need to recognize our failures both past and present in our Apostolate with Blacks.

If we look back, and we must, we see that our earliest Apostolate with Blacks was as slave owners. In the 1820s we, the Congregation of the Mission, owned slaves in Missouri and later in Louisiana. In fact, Rev. Joseph Rosati, C.M., who would later become Bishop of St. Louis, was one of the Vincentians responsible for acquiring slaves to help run our seminary. Was this the beginning of our Apostolate with Blacks in the United States? Ouch! In the 1840s we began divesting ourselves of slaves, but we did not grant freedom to these faithful servants but instead sold them to "Catholic Slaveholders," as if that made it moral. We continued to own some slaves in Missouri until the beginning of the Civil War. While Blacks worked in our seminaries, parishes and houses doing menial tasks, there is little evidence of our seeking to evangelize Blacks at this time. To baptize Blacks would be to recognize Blacks as fully human and then we would have to grant freedom. So, at this time, despite all the benefits we reaped from the labor of our Black slaves we accepted the twisted racist thinking of the time and did nothing to evangelize Blacks. Ouch!

Shortly after the Civil War, at the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1866, Archbishop Spalding of Baltimore spoke of the four million freed slaves and urged the Catholic Church to respond. He wrote: "It is a golden opportunity for reaping a harvest of souls, which neglected may not return."<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, there was little response by the Catholic Church. Greater efforts were made by

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<sup>2</sup>The Sankofa principle is named after an African American bird that can turn its head around to see where it has been in order to know where it must go. This principle asserts that we must look back at where we've been to have a clear idea of where we are going.

<sup>3</sup>To "have your toes stepped on" is an idiom used in the Black Church when preaching. It basically means that what is being preached is going to hit home, and the word will convict us.

<sup>4</sup> Davis, Cyprian, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1991) 116.

religious orders to reach out to the many new European immigrants while ignoring the freed Blacks. So even though we benefited directly from the work and efforts of those Blacks we enslaved, our Community, at this time made no evangelizing efforts at reaping this great harvest of souls. We had other priorities. Ouch!

Any objective study of our Apostolate with Blacks throughout our history in the United States, would find a stifling silence and a cowardly compliance with past racist policies of both Church and State. Yes, it could be argued that there were Vincentians who made heroic efforts, but as provinces and as a Community in the United States we sinned by our silence. Where was the moral outrage at the racism in the cities and towns where we, as Vincentians, lived and served? Where was the moral outcry for justice from our seminaries and universities during the Civil Rights Movement? Where was our positive Vincentian response to Martin Luther King's letter from the Birmingham jail calling on the Church to stand up and speak out against injustice? These unanswered questions are a part of our sad history in our Apostolate with Blacks.

While we speak of this Apostolate, I suggest that we need to question our moral conscience and ask ourselves if we have really been open to an Apostolate with Blacks. If through our long history of Vincentian formation there have been only three African Americans who have joined the ranks of Vincentians as priests or brothers with final vows,<sup>5</sup> does that not speak volumes about our Apostolate with Blacks? Ouch! While there are many factors that we can use to explain these paltry numbers, it still remains a sad commentary on our desire to work with Blacks. While we speak of our Apostolate with Blacks we must also look at our seminaries as institutions and beacons of hope when it comes to the development of theological perspectives. It can be argued very strongly that racism is the greatest sin America faces, yet our Vincentian seminaries and universities have remained coldly silent in regard to a theological response to racism as it ravaged our society.

In our Vincentian seminaries very little theological emphasis was placed on race. We certainly studied issues of justice; but how can we study justice and fail to adequately consider racism? We studied Liberation Theology to help us understand the gospel and justice; but our study was limited to Third World Liberation. It is always easier to deal with justice "out there" when it concerns others, rather than focusing here where it necessarily would involve us. This is not to argue against the great value of understanding Third World Liberation Theology as it forces us to focus on justice; however, we must question our fear of focusing on issues of race and our reluctance in confronting racism as highlighted by Black Liberation theologians. Simply told, we refused, with all

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<sup>5</sup>These three African American Vincentians have become members within the last 30 years.

our expertise in formation of clergy, to deal with racism as a theological issue. If we refused to acknowledge in our seminaries and universities the impact of racism as a critical theological issue and if we refused to seriously discuss Black Liberation Theology how can we seriously talk about our Apostolate with Blacks. Ouch!

All our works: parishes, hospitals, universities, novena and mission bands could be asked what we have done or failed to do historically in these works to alleviate racism and promote our Apostolate with Blacks. It is only when we see the connection in our heart and in our Vincentian spirit that we realize it is not just a confrere or two who has an Apostolate with Blacks, but each Vincentian is called by our charism to reach out and be connected in all our ministries to our Apostolate with Blacks. If we do such soul searching we will no doubt cry out:

**Stoney the road we trod  
Bitter the chast'ning rod**

There is, of course, the other side of our story in dealing with our Apostolate with Blacks. There have been individual confreres who throughout our history have spoken out against slavery and against racism. There have been houses in our provinces that have been blessed by the "faith experience" of Blacks in their ministry and in their community. There have been positive responses by houses and individual confreres to minister with Blacks. In the past, we have been asked to take on parishes that were exclusively Black,<sup>6</sup> and even though we have rarely sought to study and understand the Black culture our response has been genuine and generous. Since the Civil Rights Movement we have taken on a number of new Apostolates in the Black Community. As the demographics of our cities have changed, we have been faithful in staffing parishes that have changed from white to black in a few short years. In these areas our Vincentian Community has genuinely sought to be both responsive to needs and inclusive in our ministries. Our universities could certainly celebrate its "urban plunges" as efforts to sensitize a handful of students to both the plight and effects of urban poverty and racism. This experience also helps those few students to understand better the power of faith and prayer when working with the faith-filled Black community. Our universities could celebrate a new sensitivity to ethnic diversity and the gifts different cultures bring to an academic world.

As Vincentians we could celebrate our missions outside the United States as positive indicators of our desire to be in ministry with Blacks. As United States Vincentians we could celebrate the generous response of many confreres throughout the United States to volunteer to serve in various parts of Africa. As Vincentians from the United States we could celebrate the Midwest Province's

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<sup>6</sup>St. Mary's in Greensboro, North Carolina would be one example.

presence in its Seminary in Kenya. We could celebrate the appointment of an African American Vincentian as the Vocation Director and Head of the Office of African American Ministry in Los Angeles. We could celebrate the Eastern Province's establishment of a committee to study racism within our province. As Vincentians we could celebrate the establishment of a Center for Social Justice at St. John's University. We could also celebrate what every Vincentian house in a predominantly Black neighborhood is doing to promote social justice and racial healing. These are but a few of the many Vincentian efforts we are working on presently. Each house and each confrere should have a story to tell about our efforts in this regard. We certainly, without a doubt, celebrate many glowing examples of good work by individuals or houses in our Apostolate with Blacks.

But, this is one confrere who does not believe our "*Apostolate with Blacks*" is about a particular parish, program, or person. No! Our *Apostolate with Blacks* is about all of us Vincentians past, present and future. Our *Apostolate With Blacks* involves, as every work and ministry should, the charism of St. Vincent. Our *Apostolate With Blacks* involves each and every Vincentian priest and brother in the United States no matter what his ministry. So, hopefully, James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing" describes not just the plight and hope of the African American, but it also describes the plight and hope and dreams of every confrere in regard to our *Apostolate With Blacks*. Listen!

***"Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us  
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun  
Let us march on `til victory is won"***

I believe that for us to march on in our "*Apostolate With Blacks*" we must acknowledge our past sins: the owning of slaves, the silent sins of racism throughout our history here in the United States. Only then can we link arm and arm with our Black brothers and sisters, only then can we honestly begin to speak about our *Apostolate with Blacks*. Only then can we hope to "*March on `til victory is won*. Amen, Amen, Amen.