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## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCHES I

*Rev. Albert T. Mollegan, S.T.M., D.D.\**

### THE NEW CRISIS IN THE SOUTH

At the outset, I should like to indicate briefly the roots of my concern about race relations in the South. They are of interest not because they are mine but because there are a goodly number of Southerners like me. Basically my concern stems from the Christian Revelation. The Incarnate Son of God died for man and for each person individually. Both segregationist and segregated, both the white and the Negro, are ones for whom Christ died. Less basically but of real importance is a commitment to Natural Law equalitarianism as it was held by many of our nation's founding fathers. Equalitarianism seeks to actualize the highest degree of equality before the law and equality of opportunity which is possible for a human society at any particular period of its history.

Lastly, I love the South and its people. The South has inherited and partially preserved a particular kind of personal, organic human community which seems to me to be very valuable. This human organic community remains less secularized than the East and continues within the ethos of the biblical tradition and the churches, varied as is the understanding of the Bible and the life of the southern churches and sects.

These three allegiances do not give us who hold them specific solutions to the southern racial problems. Rather they constitute a system of living tensions which seem to me to promise day by day solutions to the problems of desegregating southern society. Whatever other forces are at work, Christian southern equalitarianism will play the most important final role because it is conciliatory and realistic with some protection against self-righteousness.

The South has entered into its third great crisis in regard to the racial problem. The racial problem is fundamentally the problem of the status of the Negro. Crisis is used here in the modern sense of the word. It is that "change in a disease which indicates whether the result is to be recovery or death." (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 3rd edition.) The South has suffered in a special way from a continuing disease in its race relations. This grievous sickness is by no means entirely of its own making. Three phases of the malady have been distinguished by my colleague, the Rev. John Q. Beckwith in his lectures, *The Race Problem and the South*.

The first racial crisis of the South can be understood as beginning with the breakdown of the North-South compromise. It began about 1850 and

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continued until the election of Hayes in 1876. In this crisis period, slavery was abolished leaving the South with an insoluble problem and very little sympathy or help from outside itself. A brief plateau-period, roughly from 1877 to the late 1890's, saw the best white-negro relationship that the South has ever known. In the last decade of last century, however, many forces combined to promulgate and use the doctrine of white supremacy to drive a wedge between the poor white and the Negro and to weaken the power of the Populist movement and of all similar trends in American political life. It was in this period, which was terminated by the Supreme Court decision of 1954, that the pattern of legal and almost complete social segregation of the Negro arose together with the disfranchisement of the Negro. Toward the end of this seventy year period, many of the southern states made a great effort to save segregation under "the separate but equal" principle which they believed to be sanctioned by the Supreme Court. Their disillusionment on May 17, 1954, marks the beginning of the third crisis which has both good and terrible possibilities. The Rev. Mr. Beckwith did not overstate the terrible possibilities when over a year ago he wrote:

We are in a precarious balance just now. To upset it may be catastrophic. It is possible that the whole cumulative process may grind to a complete stop. I can see the deep South completely intransigent — at whatever cost to herself, her children, and to her world, — refusing categorically to integrate her schools because of her deep conviction that segregation is right. I can see other instances like Little Rock, with stalemate and deadlock such as obtain in that unhappy region, the length and breadth of Dixie, with every schoolhouse having its quota of men armed with guns and tanks and tear gas. This is no exaggeration — indeed it may be no more than a cold and accurate appraisal of the strength of Southern race feeling.<sup>1</sup>

New forms of "stalemate and deadlock" have appeared since that statement was made, but the basic mood of the South is perhaps even more intransigent. The Commonwealth of Virginia has found what promises to be the most invulnerable form of maintaining the segregation of schools in its recalcitrant areas, namely, the abandonment of the public school system. It is highly likely that Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and large sections of the other southern states will follow the leadership of Southside, Virginia in actual or virtual abolition of public schools. The Warren County High School in Front Royal, Virginia may be used to illustrate the kind of southern recalcitrance which informs the Virginia minimum surrender to desegregation. Before the Supreme Court decision, Front Royal had relatively good race relations based on the segregated model with some qualifications occasioned by industrialization and an influx of non-southern persons. Negroes, for instance, were members of a labor union in a local industry. The Federal Court order to begin desegregation, however, caused a bitter reaction. The high school was closed during the first semester and about 70% of its students attended a hastily improvised private high school, the others mostly finding a place in already existent schools, public or private.

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1 BECKWITH, THE RACE PROBLEM AND THE SOUTH 42 (1957).

When the high school was reopened for the second semester by court order only twenty-one negro students were finally enrolled and taught in buildings equipped for over a thousand pupils. The local labor union supported the private segregated schools.

Feeling runs high against Governor Almond. He had first championed Senator Byrd's "massive resistance" policy. Later he supported the limited surrender advocated by the Perrow Commission. Front Royal segregationist strongly opposed him as the commencement speaker for the private segregated school although the opposition was finally over-ruled. He has become the object of incredible vituperation from the adamant segregationist groups.

White children whose families were inclined toward their return to the desegregated school were under such great social pressure that none enrolled for the second semester although many may next year.

The County Superintendent of Schools, who has publically been optimistic about reopening next year, has lost many teachers and may lose over half of his high school teaching staff as well as some of his lower school principals and assistant principals. Since the new state law permits local authorities to allocate school funds on a thirty day rather than an annual basis, this exodus of teachers may become fairly widespread. Economic insecurity will drive teachers out of Virginia. A petition is being circulated to sell the high school property in accordance with recent Virginia legislation.

Whatever the outcome of this particular community's crisis, it expresses the depth of the problem. The year has brought serious injury to secondary education, a threat to public education itself, and a deep wounding of the tissue of human community with violence always an imminent possibility. In large areas of the South, we shall be fortunate to do as well as Front Royal.

Virginia's limited surrender, reluctant but realistic, is led by, and made possible only by, the new strategists who seek to maintain segregation. It is, of course, supported by desegregationist forces. This "surrender" only yields indefensible territory in order to continue the war. The Perrow Commission's recommendations have been passed, with some revision, by the narrowest of margins in the State Legislature. They make possible local desegregation but also what amounts to abandonment of public schools. In segregationist areas, a skeletal public school system may be maintained by state funds and attended only by negroes. Local funds may go for tuition grants to students who attend segregated private "non-sectarian" schools. It is ironic that the new legislation should discriminate against religious schools but it gives Negroes religious company as the victims of injustice. A case may be made for public support of schools for all and no public support of those who prefer private schools. But no case can be made at all for tuition grants which are limited to students who attend "non-sectarian" private schools.

The history of Virginia's resistance to desegregation has made it abundantly clear that the issue is finally phrased as "desegregation or no public schools". Evasions and self-inflicted sufferings cannot finally prevail against these hard alternatives. Four "deep-south" states and many areas of other southern states seem prepared to abolish the public school system rather than to permit even token desegregation. Borderline states, North Carolina

and perhaps Florida, as well as sections of Virginia have made progress and will continue to do so in an orderly and peaceful fashion. Such constructive suggestions as follow will apply to them as well as the "massive resistance" states and areas.

First, Dean O'Meara is right, it seems to me, in calling for congressional action. It would be good if there were also relevant presidential leadership and action. Neither of these actions needs to be coercive but the South must feel the moral weight of a unified government's disapproval of segregated public schools. Southerners are still able to delude themselves into believing that a misguided Supreme Court has only reluctant and verbal support from Congress and the President. An area of congressional action which promises usefulness in promoting desegregation is federal aid to education. Enhanced support for school areas willing to undertake pioneering desegregation will be far more helpful than economic penalties for resisting areas. While desegregation will ultimately mean less expensive public schools, it is a simple fact that immediately it will increase the cost tremendously if educational standards are to be maintained. This is true because large areas of the South cannot afford equal and good education for all their children. They have provided fairly good education for white pupils and very poor education for many Negroes. A white group with overwhelming political, social and economic power will educate well only its own children if it has severely limited economic resources. Desegregation does not escape the financial problem that was posed by the outlawed "separate but equal" principle.

Secondly, federal courts must and will continue to act as they are used by those who seek desegregation. Such action will drive "massive resistance" areas to abandon their public schools entirely. Two questions arise as this process continues. These questions can only be answered finally by statesmen and lawyers. Can anything be done under present law or by new legislation to prevent complete or virtual abolition of public schools? Will it be wise to do it if it is possible? It seems more than probable that "massive resistance" areas will be best turned toward desegregation by their self-inflicted economic and educational wounds.

It will be of great use, also, if the desegregationist groups, the N.A.A.C.P. for instance, will press first for application of the law in the areas which will choose to keep their public schools at the cost of obedience to court orders. I, for one, can see little to be gained by driving Prince Edward County, Virginia, to abandon public schools this year. I realize, of course, that recent court orders have been necessary in the light of previous suits and decisions. There are, however, many similar areas where forces for the maintenance of the public schools may be able to develop decisive strength in a relatively short time if they do not have to work in a situation which is under immediate pressure by law suits and court decisions.

Thirdly, a potentially powerful influence toward desegregation is that of industry itself. Whether individual industrialists are for, against, or indifferent to, desegregation, industry needs good public education for its employees' children because they want the quality of employees on every level who themselves want their children educated and who will move geographi-

cally to get it. Industry's attitude still needs expression and public attention. A community which abolishes its public schools should know the economic consequences of its decision. Concrete studies of the economic consequences and informed predictions about the price of resistance cannot have too much publicity. Concerted pressure by industries can be encouraged. Both informed predictions and business pressures have helped in Virginia and the latter may be determinative for Little Rock.

Finally, I turn to one of the most tragic aspects of the southern crisis, the breakdown of communication in regard to the problem. Everyone in the South acknowledges this breakdown and it is widely bewailed by desegregationists. It exists not only between Negroes and whites but between white persons and white groups who disagree, and among disagreeing Negroes. Loss of real communication is evident in two ways and in three kinds of context.

One way in which no communication is evident is in the shouting debate. Even though the dialogue continues for hours, no one hears the other side. A typical argument between whites who disagree moves in a few steps to accusations of Fascism directed to the segregationist and of Communism directed to the desegregationist. No argument against a white supporter of the Supreme Court decision ever neglects the final trump card, "Would you want your daughter to marry a Negro?" I have wrestled with the problem of answering that question for thirty years. The best I can do is to look puzzled and ask, "Is he Roman Catholic, Protestant or Jew?"

The collision of absolutist positions unveils the depth of the fear and hate which is always present in the South. Violence lies under the thin surface of order and peace which becomes transparent for moments in the name-calling debate. Because fear and hate destroy community, they destroy communication which both presupposes and engenders community.

The second way in which loss of communication is evident is in the icy silence that has descended upon the South — icy silence in regard to discussion among those who disagree. Far too many persons will speak about race relationships only when they are certain that their hearers are in agreement with them. Southern clergymen in many different denominations have reported the wall of ice between them and their congregations wherever race relations are at stake.

The loss of communication can be seen in three contexts. First, it shows itself in the group which has some sort of real power, the group which formulates policy for some official body. It may occur by simply weeding out disagreement or by open warfare within the group. It may occur by reason of a quiet despair which regards communication as hopeless.

Secondly, the loss of communication is evident in the fact that the interracial fellowships and the meetings they sponsor have dwindled perceptibly in numbers and general support throughout the South. Where they do exist there is much to be learned about how much misunderstanding exists. The desegregationist learns, for instance, that many responsible southern leaders of massive resistance are afraid only of sudden and massive integration. They, on their part, learn that we are deeply aware of the disaster that would occur in most of the South with immediate and wholesale integration. One church

group has found that its members can come close to agreeing and cooperating on a desegregation policy that is determined to maintain high educational and moral standards.

Thirdly, there is the general context of informal conversation where persons meet together simply as social or recreational groups. The icy silence is almost universal here.

From all of this, one simple truth can be seen. The South must talk race-relations again. The preceding period was one in which the best strategy was for negroes and whites to meet on the basis of common interests with no mention of race problems. Now the race conflict must be faced squarely, self-consciously and specifically. Only by a titanic effort can human communication be re-established between Negro and white, desegregationist and segregationist. It is still true that the average southern white person has known only the less cultured Negro who works as a menial laborer. The cultured, competent negro professional or business family is cut off from white relationships almost entirely.

It is in the re-establishing of communication that the churches may play their greatest role. In a very real way the federal state bears the prophetic role in the South while the churches, presupposing the state's role, labor at priestly and pastoral reconciliation. The Incarnate Son was not only "more than a prophet," he was High Priest and the Good Shepherd.