



Two of Abp. Rummel's closest aides detail desegregation

By Dr. Charles Nolan
Contributing

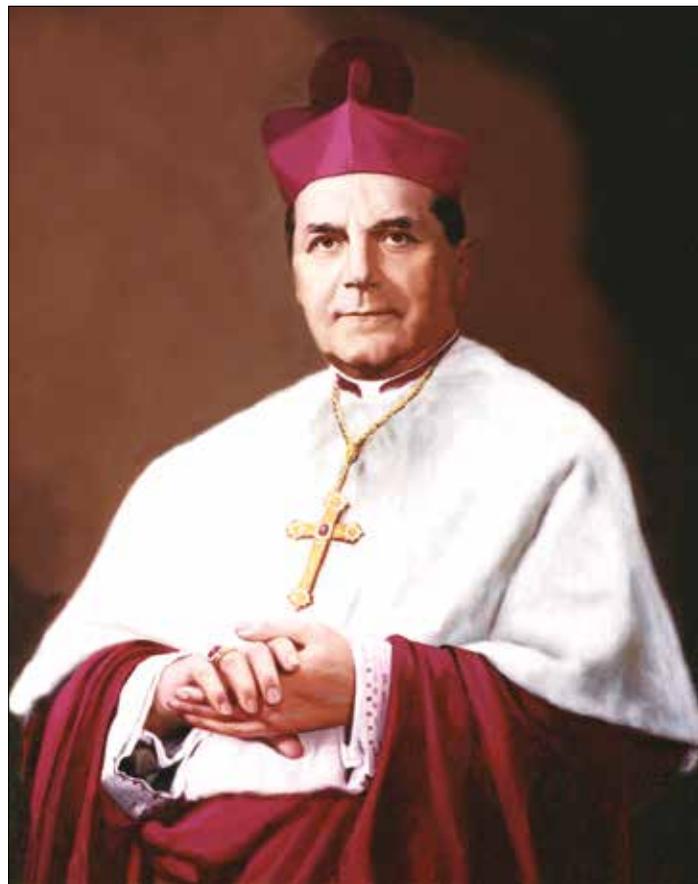
Archbishop Joseph Rummel labored patiently for more than a quarter-century to create a community atmosphere conducive to full racial equality and to foster the growth of church organizations, facilities and activities among African-American Catholics and, eventually, to achieve the integration of Catholic parishes, schools, organizations and institutions.

In 1939 at Archbishop Rummel's urging, Xavier University of Louisiana began a Catholic Action School for Negroes to address social, economic and moral issues and barriers facing the African-American community; more than 250 attended the first sessions.

In 1951, the archbishop established the archdiocese's first secondary school for African-American boys – St. Augustine High School.

Pivotal letter

On March 15, 1953, his pastoral letter, "Blessed are the Peacemakers," ordered the desegregation of all Catholic parish activities and organizations. He suspended all Catholic services at Jesuit Bend Mission (1955-58) after an



File Photo | CLARION HERALD

Archbishop Joseph Rummel was the Archdiocese of New Orleans' ninth archbishop and a leader of local desegregation efforts.

African-American priest was prevented from celebrating Mass there.

In his pastoral letter of Feb. 11, 1956, he declared racial segregation morally wrong and sinful. On March 27, 1962, working closely

with Archbishop John Cody and key clergy and lay advisors, he ordered all Catholic schools within the archdiocese desegregated, leading to international news stories of confrontations with the local self-proclaimed Asso-

ciation of Catholic laymen and vocal segregationists.

In two 1980 interviews, Msgr. Charles Plache and Bishop Joseph Vath of the Diocese of Birmingham reflected on the years they worked closely with Archbishop Joseph Rummel. Msgr. Plache was chancellor under Archbishop Rummel, and Bishop Vath served as his secretary.

The taped interviews provide a previously untold story – a personal portrait of the archbishop's fundamental approach to and implementation of desegregation in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. They spoke with great affection for the archbishop, whom they called, among themselves, "The Boss," and whom Bishop Vath looked upon as a father.

The two recalled Archbishop Rummel's long, measured approach to desegregation.

"He who goes slowly, goes sanely, and he who goes sanely, goes far," the archbishop often repeated.

He indeed proceeded slowly.

"Archbishop Rummel enunciated the principles on the segregation issue, and then took a long time in implementing them," Bishop Vath said. "Looking back on it historically, that was good, because the archbishop was allowing change to take place. After making such a strong statement, the archbishop was wise and prudent enough not to force it down people's throats before they were able to reflect on it."

All deserve respect

Amid the slow pace of progress, some denounced the archbishop as a Yankee, communist and the like. Some African Americans criticized him for not pushing forward more quickly. Archbishop Rummel, how-

ever, stuck to his prudent pace.

The archbishop's approach to segregation was grounded in his respect for all people.

"In his presence and with them, (African Americans) did not feel like they were below anybody else. That's how he treated them," recalled Bishop Vath.

"The archbishop's interest was in respect for every man, and that was the whole thing," added Msgr. Plache. "When he first came here, he did not move fast to do away with segregation. He did visitations and anytime he saw such things as signs saying this room is for colored only, he would say to take them out. He established a number of still existing black parishes here and elsewhere."

Even-handed listener

The two observed that Archbishop Rummel was extremely interested in seeing that the rights of all people were addressed.

"Every chance he had, he would sponsor, push and implement work for social justice," Bishop Vath said. "This went deeper than the race issue. He was very taken up in the labor union movement."

He defended the rights of sugar cane workers, spoke out on the need for a just wage, spoke out on proposed right-to-work laws and urged people to vote for bond issues to build public schools, both urban and rural.

"He loved to hear about the late Martin Luther King," Bishop Vath said.

"He was very interested in Martin Luther King's interest in non-violence. The archbishop (then blind) had me read everything I could on King's adaptation of Mahatma Gandhi's principles. He loved that. He had

See ABP. RUMMEL page 53 ▶



Dominican Friars
PROVINCE OF ST. MARTIN DE PORRES



The Dominican Friars of the Province of St. Martin de Porres offer their prayers and profound best wishes to the City of New Orleans on the 300th anniversary of its founding. Dominican Fathers and Brothers have been blessed to serve in the Archdiocese of New Orleans since 1901, preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the salvation of souls in the Southern United States.

Laudare • Benedicere • Praedicare
To Praise, To Bless, To Preach

DOMINICAN PROVINCE OF ST. MARTIN DE PORRES
1421 N. CAUSEWAY BLVD., METAIRIE, LA 70001
(504) 837-2129 | WWW.OP SOUTH.ORG