



Bp. Perry brought love, unity during desegregation

By Beth Donze
Clarion Herald

When the disturbing images of Los Angeles' Watts race riots made their way around the world in the summer of 1965, the Vatican took note.

A concerned Pope Paul VI urged the American Catholic Church to appoint a black bishop – the nation's first in the 20th century – ultimately tapping Society of the Divine Word Father Harold R. Perry for the job.

The 48-year-old native of Lake Charles was appointed as the auxiliary bishop of New Orleans on Sept. 29, 1965, and formally installed by Archbishop Philip Hannan on Jan. 6, 1966.

The geographical location of Bishop Perry's episcopacy was no coincidence: Not only was New Orleans the city with the South's largest Catholic population; it also was the center of some of the nation's most bitter racial disputes.

For example, when Archbishop Hannan's predecessor, Archbishop Joseph Rummel, ordered the integration of parochial schools in 1962, some local Catholics protested so violently that three of them were excommunicated.

One of the excommunicants would later tell Time magazine that Bishop Perry's consecration into the episcopacy a couple of years later was "another reason why God will destroy the Vatican." Bishop Perry's appointment was also marred by picketing Catholics standing outside St. Louis Cathedral during his ordination Mass.

Entered seminary at 13

Bishop Perry's upbringing, in stark contrast, was characterized by tolerance. The 1916-born Harold and his five siblings were taught to resist prejudice from an early age by their parents Josephine, a homemaker, and Frank, a rice mill worker.

"They taught us not to resent white people," said Bishop Perry in an interview, recalling that when he and his siblings felt the sting of racial discrimination, his parents would caution them to "be sure that there is no prejudice on your part."

Bishop Perry entered St. Augustine Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, at age 13, taking his vows as a Society of Divine Word member in 1938. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1944, becoming one of only



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Bishop Harold Perry, foreground, prays as picketers outside St. Louis Cathedral protest his installation as auxiliary bishop of New Orleans in 1966. Bishop Perry, a native of Lake Charles and a seminarian who studied at St. Augustine Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, was a priest of the Society of the Divine Word. He was the nation's first black bishop of the 20th century.

First black religious superior

Father Perry served on the National Catholic Council for Interracial Justice, founded in 1960; was national chaplain of the Knights and Ladies of St. Peter Claver; and took part, along with 250 prominent religious leaders, in a 1963 White House conference on civil rights at the invitation of President John F. Kennedy. That same year, Father Perry became the first African-American cleric to deliver the opening prayer of the U.S. Congress.

In 1964, Father Perry was appointed the provincial superior of the Southern Province of the Society of Divine Word, becoming the first African-American to serve as a major religious superior.

Bishop Perry, while recognizing the significance of his appointment, said it was a religious appointment, not a civil rights one.

"My religious work comes first," he said. "I feel that the greatest contribution I can make to raise the dignity of my people is being a good religious bishop and fulfilling my office to the utmost of my ability."

Within a few years, however, Bishop Perry was using his position to speak out on behalf of civil rights issues more assertively. In the fall of 1968, he told an interviewer in New Zealand that African-Americans "have made all the gains we can from a liberal approach; the methods used in the future must be radical."

Perry also stated that until the United States began spending more federal funds to combat racism, there was little hope for "appreciable change in the near future."

Locally, Bishop Perry served as pastor of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus

25 black Catholic priests nationwide.

Over the next 14 years, Father Perry served parishes in Louisiana, Arkansas and Mississippi, a highlight of which was the 1952 founding of the African-American parish of St. Joseph in Broussard, Louisiana.

After being named rector of his alma mater, St. Augustine Seminary, in 1958, Father Perry became more active in the civil rights movement, always refusing to take part in more confrontational methods of protest.

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