

Race and 'a very white movement'

By SOLI SALGADO

When Lincoln Rice joined the Catholic Worker movement about 20 years ago in Milwaukee, his experience, in one sense, was basically the same as someone who joined 20 years before him: a white person joining a white movement, as he describes it.

Dedicated to social justice work, the Catholic Worker — co-founded by Dorothy Day in 1933 — is a collection of more than 200 communities throughout the U.S., all of which vary in their work to combat poverty, environmental degradation, and war, among other social ills.

But while the movement is highly critical of the country's economic culture, it largely fails to act on the connection between poverty and racism, says Rice, who wrote *Healing the Racial Divide: A Catholic Racial Justice Framework Inspired by Dr. Arthur Falls*.

Catholic Worker already has the tools and theology that would allow it to address racial justice, he said, but "in its history, it lacks passion" for this cause.

"For reasons often having to do with the fact that [the Catholic Worker is] a very white movement, it very rarely applies the same notions of social responsibility and love for your neighbor to race the same way the Catholic Worker applies those notions to war and economics," Rice said.

He added that this critique is not unique to the Catholic Worker, but is applicable to most Catholic organizations, theologians, religious and laity.

Economics and racial discrimination are intertwined, he said, noting that the unemployment rate at the height of the recession was 9 percent, but a striking 18 percent among African-Americans. Today, the rate is 4.6 percent for the white population and 9.5 percent for the black population, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

While as a country we've made strides against blatant racism, Rice said, those unemployment numbers are proportional to the 1940s: Following World War II, black unemployment was double that of white unemployment.



—Courtesy of Karen House Catholic Worker

Jenny Truax, a member of St. Louis' Karen House Catholic Worker community, holds a sign surrounded by fellow Catholic Workers at an Oct. 11 march in St. Louis.

Without addressing race, Catholic organizations cannot adequately address poverty, as it affects access to education, good housing and health care, and clean criminal records, Rice said.

"With race, we have to realize we're novices," Rice said. "The Catholic Worker needs to sit with this question a bit longer, because it's not as simple as just going out to another protest."

He pointed to Arthur Falls, a black man who founded the first Chicago Catholic Worker in 1936. Falls, who died in 2000, is an example of someone who effectively challenged the church's stance on racial discrimination, Rice said.

Though best known for convincing Day to include a black worker in the organization's masthead in 1933, Falls was also instrumental in integrating Western Springs, a white suburb of Chicago that forbade him and his wife to move there. When his father died, his home parish refused to allow his burial on its property until Falls threatened that his father would not have a Christian burial at all. Falls set up afterschool remedial programs for black students who attended inadequate schools, offering stipends to those who

had to sacrifice work to attend.

He also worked to integrate medical schools, such as Northwestern University. And to ensure they had somewhere to work, Falls, with nine fellow physicians, sued Chicago's hospitals — including almost every Catholic one — in 1961 for excluding black patients and doctors. By 1964, the hospitals were integrated.

If you're right, you don't always lose, Falls would repeatedly tell people.

"He was very involved in trying to make the church stand up for itself and live up to its principles, and he saw that the Catholic Worker did that," said Rosalie Riegler, who interviewed Falls at length in 1988 for her book *Voices From the Catholic Worker*.

He would hold discussions called "clarifications of thought" — still a central part of the movement's philosophy, Riegler said — where he would invite both black and white, Catholic and non-Catholic people to talk about the role of the laity and justice in the church.

To illustrate how racism contradicts church teaching, Falls would contrast the concept of the "mystical" body of Christ to the "mythical."

"Catholics who practiced racism or

did nothing to prevent racism were believers in the heresy of the 'mythical' body of Christ, which they imagined was composed of only white Catholics," Rice said. Falls "wanted to take it to another level, like racism isn't simply a sin, but it's something that bordered on heresy, because it's trying to exclude a whole group of people from a meaningful existence — not only in society, but in our church."

Though the church no longer forces black people to go to the end of the line for confession and has integrated its institutions alongside society, Rice said the typically rigid Eurocentric format of most Catholic churches can be exclusionary in itself.

Falls was critical of Chicago having a so-called black church in the 1930s, because it became an excuse for Catholics not to reach out. He told Riegler that while racism was a white problem, the church regarded black Catholics as a missionary problem.

This attitude, Rice said, is not too different today.

"When there's a black church for black Catholics, it easily becomes an excuse upon us for racism," Rice said. "If you want to hear Gospel songs, go there. If you want to hear talks on

racial justice, that church is the expert on it. We don't need to have anything here on that."

"Blatant racism" may now be shunned, he added, but the Catholic Worker — like most organizations and Catholics in general — needs to acknowledge the "cultural blindness" it shares with the general public.

"In one sense, the movement often likes to see itself as countercultural, and to some extent, it is," Rice said. "But the same things that are waking up the greater portion of the American public to the issues of race and racism are the same things that affect Catholic Workers."

He said that viral videos of police brutality toward unarmed black men, for example, have recently garnered national attention to a reality that is nothing new for the black community.

The death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., further convinced members of St. Louis' Karen House Catholic Worker community where they stand in the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Both Riegle and Rice noted that the St. Louis community is a great example of an organization taking initiative in addressing racial issues.

Jenny Truax, a member of Karen House, said her community began explicit anti-racism work a few years ago. Noting that the Karen House community has been 98 percent white over its 38 years of existence, she said its first step was to take a critical look at internal practices and structures for "seeds of racism": how its volun-

teering, fundraising or community members might be "unwittingly replicating white superiority through a white savior or charity model." The community analyzed the power dynamics that might affect that.

"It's not something that has an 'end point' where we can say, 'Yes, we are perfect allies, or anti-racists!'" Truax told *NCR* in an email. "It's more of an attitude of openness, of admitting our own racism individually and collectively, and a willingness to make changes."

Truax said community members were on the streets during the Ferguson uprising, tending to the tear-gassed and helping behind the scenes, organizing, marching and trying to mobilize the cause. They held local "Racism 101" educational workshops.

In March, Karen House also organized the "Midwest Faith Resistance Retreat: A Catholic Worker Anti-Racism Workshop," an intensive two days devoted to addressing discrimination.

Rice, who attended the retreat, said it was helpful for self-examination, for finding weaknesses in their own communities and attitudes.

"No one likes to look at themselves and see they're not pulling their own weight," he said.

While Rice suggested paying particular attention to drug laws that disproportionately target African-Americans, Riegle said police militarization is another issue organizations could address. She also pointed to the community in Kalamazoo, Mich., that created afterschool programs in its

poorer neighborhoods.

Truax recommended learning about oppression and getting organized as congregations, families or groups to take action to support the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

At the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' annual Spring General Assembly in St. Louis June 10, Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., delivered a statement on race relations. He asked that the "rich cultural diversity of our local communities be woven together in charity, hospitality and service to one another."

"A violent, sorrowful history of racial injustice, accompanied by a lack of educational, employment, and housing opportunities, has destroyed communities and broken down families, especially those who live in distressed urban communities," Kurtz said.

He recommended that the Catholic community pray for peace, study the church's social teaching, make an effort to encounter racially diverse people, create a welcoming environment within parishes, and respect local law enforcement.

Falls recommended persistent patience: "Hammering at [a] closed and bolted door is not a pleasant pastime, and yet the only way that the doors would be opened was constantly to hammer them. ... [There is a] necessity for an unrelenting attack on discrimination wherever it is found."

If you're right, you don't always lose.