

## Action for Interracial Understanding Part of Our History

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Waldemar Roebuck (on the left) at Convention

Most people will agree that the subject of Race is topical. We have an African American as the presumptive Democratic nominee for president. And just yesterday I watched a segment on CNN called *Race In America*. It should be noted here, for future readers, that when one writes of Race today, the presumption is that it is about relation between “blacks” and “whites.”

But, is the topic of race relevant to the SFO at this time in our history? There are good reasons that argue both for and against its relevancy. The “against”, of course, is that there are not that many African American who are members of our Order. (The why is apart from the object of this article) The “for” reason, and I believe this strongly, is that, as an Order, we are called to accept all people as equal under God; our own Rule testifies to this: we trust “in the divine seed in everyone.” (Rule 2:19) And - who can prejudge the divine seed? A third reason that could be mention is that we, as Franciscans, are sensitive to the diversity of culture – we had a whole Quinquennial Congress dedicated to Multiculturalism last year, (2007).

With this article, I plan to not address race relations. You are probably thinking, thank goodness. However, I will present that we did, as an Order, addressed this “challenge,” in the past - part of our SFO (Third Order) history

“The Color Question” was a topic addressed at a National Executive Board Meeting held in Cleveland, Ohio, in August, 1938. The dialogue was related to: how to respond to the situation in which white

members complained about the presence of “Negroes” at their fraternity meetings, and, how should the question of “Negroes” at a convention be addressed: some hotels did not allow them room accommodations. Here are excerpts taken from the meeting dialogue. Board Chairman Fr. Thomas Grassman, O.F.M. Conv., stated, “We must more aggressively come out for the equality of all in sight of God and because of the immortal soul.” When the topic of a separate convention was offered, Secretary Maximus Poppy, OFM, argued, “That amounts to Jim Crow...” Fr. Max ended the discussion with “...any members who feel that they cannot subscribe to this policy [of equal accommodations] are free to remain from the convention. Thus liberty is safeguarded, and the principle, even though we lose their good will.”<sup>1</sup>

This “Color” dilemma resurfaced in the planning of the 1947 Quinquennial Congress held at the Netherland Plaza Hotel in Cincinnati, Ohio. “The question relative to our Colored delegates was then raised, since the Netherland Plaza Hotel refused to house them. A Friar [not named] said that he had made arrangements with the Manse Hotel, a Colored Business men’s hotel...Arrangements were also to be made to reserve a special dining room in the Netherland Plaza Hotel and to designate it as the Convention dining room. The Colored delegates could eat freely here with our white delegates. This was necessitated by the fact that the hotel management declared that the Colored could not eat in the public dining room of the hotel, nor perhaps in any of the adjacent White restaurants.”<sup>2</sup> That is “the way it was.”

The Action for Interracial Understanding (AIU) began as an apostolate for the Third Order in 1963, a year prior to the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. It was a program designed to educate members on race relations, and to encourage them to participate in non-violent demonstrations in support of Civil Rights. “Our apostolate, ‘Action for Interracial Understanding,’ certainly needs paramount attention in all fraternities. Good race relations must be a concern of every tertiary. No tertiary can close his eyes and ears to the tremendous problem. Love of God and love of neighbor demands that you involve your self in helping Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and other minority

<sup>1</sup> Wicks, William H., *A History of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States, Volume I (1917 – 1942)*, Barbo Carlson Printing, Lindsborg, KS, 2007, 247- 249

<sup>2</sup> Minutes of Special Executive Board Meeting, January 1947



Waldemar Roebuck with Robert Fenton, Director of AIU

groups in obtaining a true recognition of their dignity as sons of God and your brothers in Christ. This is no time to wring your hands. It is a time of action.”<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that many Tertiaries participated in the famous 1963 Washington march.

Although the apostolate was motivated by the “African American” Civil Rights movement, all minority groups were included. Robert Fenton was the first Executive Director. Waldemar Roebuck, who later became president of the North American Federation (the national SFO organization at the time), was very much involved in the AIU apostolate.

It is also noted here that the 1963 St. Francis Peace Medal was awarded to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In a letter of gratitude addressed to the Executive Secretary of the Third Order, Dr. King wrote: “This is a rather belated note again to thank you and the Third Order of St. Francis for honoring me in such a significant way with our St. Francis Peace Medal. It is an honor that I will cherish as long as the cords of memory shall lengthen. In a real sense, your desire to bestow upon me this distinguished award was expressive of two important points. On the one hand it expressed the new and vital willingness of the Christian church to take a concrete step in the direction of identifying with the struggle for racial justice in our nation. Since I happen to be a Protestant, the awarding of the St. Francis Peace Medal expresses the new ecumenical concern that is now greatly alive in both Protestant and Catholic circles. So I am convinced that your generous gesture toward me will go a long, long way toward bringing about new levels of fellowship for all Christians, a move so nobly initiated by Pope John, and

it will give those of us engaged in this difficult, yet challenging struggle for freedom and justice the consoling awareness of the support of the church.”<sup>4</sup> During those days, for some of the general population - and even for some Third Order members, Dr. King was not a welcomed choice for the Third Order St. Francis Peace Award.

The Action for Racial Understanding apostolate extended, into the seventies. It was, in a sense, an “early days” Multicultural Committee.

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<sup>3</sup> *Franciscan Herald and Forum*, August 1963, 226

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<sup>4</sup> *Franciscan Herald and Forum*, March 1964, 66