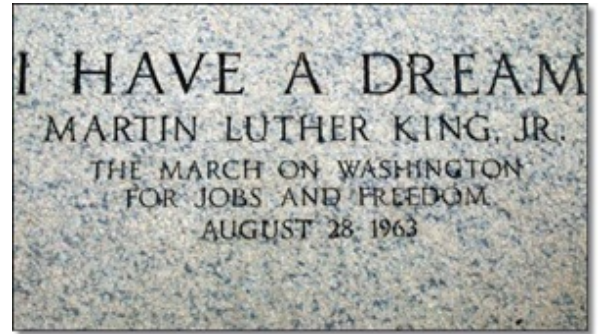


SEPTEMBER 1963 “THE QUIET INTEGRATION” IN HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA



On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – during the “March on Washington” for justice and desegregation – delivered his immortal **“I Have a Dream”** speech.

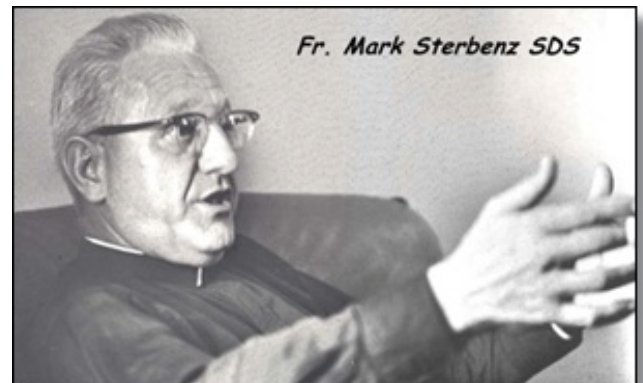
And just days later, on September 3, 1963, a “quiet integration” – a reverse integration – was taking place at St. Joseph’s in Huntsville, Alabama – a Catholic parish and school served by Salvatorian priests, Sisters and Brothers.



Elsewhere in Alabama, state troopers lined the entrances to public schools in Birmingham, Mobile, and Tuskegee, fulfilling then-Governor George Wallace’s pledge to resist integration. News media followed their every move and there was violence and tension everywhere in the state. But on the morning of St. Joseph’s integration, when a dozen white grade school students began taking classes alongside their 100 African-American

classmates, there was no fanfare; there were no photographers or reporters present to record this “history in the making” moment. It just happened – quietly and calmly.

Fr. Mark Sterbenz SDS, the pastor, said, “All we’re doing is teaching religion ... to whites, to blacks, to anybody who comes. It’s living the gospel, plain and simple.” Teachers, students, and parents had supported the move. The population of Huntsville had doubled five times since 1952 because Redstone Arsenal, a government testing lab for rockets and missiles, was drawing about 4,000 people into the city each month.



Many were white Catholics moving down from the north, and they were looking for a good Catholic school for their children. It didn’t matter to them that St. Joseph’s, the closest school to Redstone, was all-black. They wanted their kids to learn – and what a better way to learn the gospel lesson about overcoming prejudice than by living it daily side-by-side – with no color barriers at all.



St. Joseph’s Parish had begun in 1952 by the Salvatorians for the African-American Catholics in Huntsville. The school opened a few years later in 1956 with just forty-eight students. The parish developed, not only in its buildings and school organizations, but also in extending its service to the people. The ministries provided by the Salvatorian priests, Sisters and Brothers were not limited by race or parish boundaries. Father Mark was also celebrating Mass in Redstone Arsenal’s military chapel. The Sisters joined a

staff of lay volunteers at the Arsenal to teach religious studies to teens every Saturday. And since there was no Catholic high school in Huntsville, a way needed to be found to meet the needs for religious instruction to the city's high-school-aged Catholics. This was accomplished by developing a broad city-wide CCD program. The Sisters also visited in the homes of students to continue and extend their initial classroom contacts.



To new teachers at St. Joseph's who had come from the north, Fr. Mark would pass along advice he had heard from an experienced southern pastor: "Keep your mouth closed and your eyes open for a long time. Then you'll learn as well as teach." They all learned much about southern attitudes and customs from the African-American parishioners at St. Joe's, many of whom had learned to read from the Sisters only later in their adult years.



Going to St. Joseph's School had its price as well its rewards, as some of the first white families learned. Some business owners who sent their children to St. Joseph's lost some of their customers. Some neighborhood families refused to allow their children to associate with the white students who attended the school. Some adults lost friends who disagreed with their values. One parishioner said, "Losing that kind of friend isn't so bad!" Yet despite the hardships the school initially faced, the number of white students doubled by the end of the very first school year. By the time school opened again in September 1964, additional classrooms and a cafeteria had been added to the school, and a new church was opened. And just a year later, the church already had to be enlarged.

enthusiasm for their church. But when the parish organized a charity event in May 1964, people from all over the city – blacks and whites – came to help out. With the proceeds, the parish was able to offer immunizations to any child within the parish boundaries, whether they were parish members or not. It turned out that forty percent of the African-American children near the parish had never received any immunizations before, and the infant mortality rate in that part of the city had been thirty percent higher than the national average. By 1966, the efforts of St. Joseph Parish's outreach programs prompted the city to open a Baby Wellness and Immunization Clinic near the parish. Funds poured in, not

These early steps towards quiet integration didn't always go smoothly for all of the African-American parishioners either. Some resisted the movement towards greater integration. Some lost





only from the city itself, but from various industries and private citizens in the area. The clinic was able to expand its services to the mothers as well as the babies. A large wooden garage on the church property was turned into a “general store” for the poorer neighbors. People donated clothing which could be purchased at low cost by those in need.

The lessons of integration were not lost on the children. One day, all the students and teachers were invited by the local movie theater to see the film “My Fair Lady.” As the younger children walked to the theater, as was their custom, they walked two-by-two and hand-in-hand – boy or girl, black or white, it didn’t matter. As they neared the theater, one of the youngsters, who had a real awareness of the world around him, said, “Hey, what if people are thinking we are marching to integrate the movies?” They both laughed. One of the white boys, later recounting that day’s events to his mother, noted, “My friend has a dark arm.”

In the Spring of 1964, as the addition to the school building was being built by white carpenters from outside the city where segregation was still the rule, one of the men asked Fr. Mark if integration really worked. Fr. Mark told him to look around at what he was seeing every day – children of both races playing together, studying together, eating together, and even fighting together, just like school children everywhere. The man said, “I guess it does!”



Sources:

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“My Friend Has a Dark Arm” / The Catholic Digest, April 1969.

“St. Joseph’s School - Now Holy Family - Became Integrated Early, Quietly” by Mike Marshall Huntsville Times / September 20, 2003.